

Book Reviews

Manav Ratti. *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature.* New York: Routledge, 2013. (Hardcover) 242 pp. \$145.00; (paperback) 242 pp. \$54.95.

The publication of Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* is timely—auspicious even. The association of Western modernity with secularism, as well as the seeming opposition between secularism and religion, have both recently come under scrutiny. The effort to re-think secular conditions in the West and East becomes a point of departure in *The Postsecular Imagination*, highlighting the disjuncture between majoritarian secularism in service of the nation, and everyday indigenous secular relations and practices on the ground. He conceptualizes the “postsecular” to define the in-between aspects of a “non-secular secularism, a non-religious religion.” Looking to the postsecular imagination in literature, Ratti analyzes mostly Anglophone novels published from 1980 to 2010 that reflect the “multireligious nature of India and Sri Lanka, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and animism,” with a focus on the works of diasporic authors—Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, Allan Sealy—and one Indian author, Mahasweta Devi.

Ratti situates his intervention in the larger debates on secularism, drawing scholars such as Akeel Bilgrami, William Connolly, Jurgen Habermas, Ashis Nandy, Vincent Pecora, and Charles Taylor into conversation with postcolonial authors. Contra the conventional assumption that secularism is necessarily associated with modernity and reason—whereas religion is a backward relic of the past—Ratti argues that secularism often refers to the dominance of majoritarian religions at the cost of minority ones. As such, religion comes to be associated with *minoritized religion*, often Islam, in both Europe and India. By examining the limits of secularism in India and Sri Lanka, Ratti shows how state secularism fails to safeguard minoritarian perspectives. Instead, secularism is instrumentalized to facilitate nationalist chauvinism, communalism, polarization, violence, and

disenchantment. Despite these failures, the ideology of secularism persists, serving as an “immanent frame” through which secularism becomes equated with modernity, freedom, and individual liberty.

His book identifies the need to question secularism as an ideology; to make visible how belief facilitates the ideology’s naturalization; to undo the dichotomy of the secular West versus a non-secular East; and to locate the ethical and enchanted aspects of religion without resorting to religion as such. Toward this, Ratti describes the postsecular imagination as a way of framing secularism that offers the ethical, imaginative, and generative intensities of religious thought (xix), without serving the interests of nationalist chauvinism. In postcolonial literature, Ratti suggests, authors grapple with how they might “retain the best features of state secularism while also preserving the inspiring, generative, imaginative features of religious thought and practice, such as faith, awe, wonder, transcendence.” With postsecularism as one of the “destinies” of postcolonialism, Ratti argues that “literature stands as a forum where new conceptions of secularism and religion can emerge, gesturing to ethics that grow from individual and cultural memories of secular, religious, and national violence, combined with the hope of a better future for all” (7).

Postcolonial literature thus marks crisis and affirmation, locating the plight of the minoritized while generating a sense of enchantment and ethics through aesthetic choices. Due to their transnational orientation, diasporic writers challenge the prominence of nation-states in Western and Eastern contexts. These writers often avoid ideologies of secularism on both sides while voicing “avowedly secular” politics. Drawing from multiple perspectives, the works analyzed by Ratti represent singular human decisions, choices, and risks taken without a guarantee regarding the fixity of the state. In aesthetically formulating non-normative possibilities for expression and ethics, this literature generates epistemic change that might affect civil society.

What links the stylistically diverse works in this study is their orientation to “the postsecular,” unveiling the prevalence of the postsecular imagination in postcolonial South Asian literature. In original and incisive readings, Ratti compares Ondaatje’s reverential and admiring approach to Rushdie’s irreverent and ironic one in representing experiences of enchantment and minority experience. Ratti’s analysis of Sealy, Baldwin, and Devi focuses on the writers’ nuanced approaches to representing minority positions without presenting an anti-nationalist perspective. The postsecular imagination emerges as a feature of an aspirational discourse of secularism that works toward “a unifying peaceful coexistence,” and “seeks to accommodate religious difference for the sake of national unity and peace” (10), while translating across secular and religious modes.

Ratti's well-researched and theoretically sophisticated work contributes to debates regarding secularism by providing a critical vocabulary mediating between the secular and religious. The methods of reading employed take on very fundamental questions concerning literature and writing. How might literature capture that which is resistant to representation such as "secular beliefs"? What role does the representation of affect play in generating a conceptual language that expresses and imagines the critique of secularism in religion? What is the relationship between the ethical, aesthetic, and political? Ordinarily, such questions' vast, ambitious, urgent, and open nature might compromise the core argument in a work. In Ratti's major intervention, however, they remind the reader that no author can conclusively have the final word, yet scholars must *believe* these questions are worth pursuing.

Joining works by Amardeep Singh, Neelam Srivastava, Priya Kumar, and Toral Gajrawala that explore postcolonial literature's role in representing secularism and its attendant issues of caste, inequality, and religion as they are represented in South Asian literature, Ratti's compelling book promises to provoke further scholarship that takes up in a similar vein. Scholars and students of postcolonial and diasporic literary study as well as religious studies will find the concept of the postsecular imagination provocative and suggestive in its demand to go beyond conventional dichotomous formulations. Literary scholars who are unfamiliar with the works or postcolonial theory will be drawn by the sensitive and nuanced readings to read the works themselves. Finally, engaging "the ethical turn," Ratti renews the theoretical bases of postcolonial literary studies, putting it in conversation with South Asian Studies.

Works cited

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