



The postsecular imagination: postcolonialism, religion and literature

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To cite this article: Vedita Cowaloosur (2015) The postsecular imagination: postcolonialism, religion and literature, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 51:4, 493-494, DOI: [10.1080/17449855.2015.1046587](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1046587)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1046587>



Published online: 26 May 2015.



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“overshadowed the literature produced by writers living in India”, it is very disappointing to find that none of the essays engages with this bias (xviii).

The scope and ambition of this volume initially appeared to be its greatest merit. However, the book tries to cover so many different themes, topics, theoretical perspectives and texts that it loses sight of its purpose. This general lack of clarity is not helped by the fact that the style and quality of the essays varies enormously, and should have been subjected to far greater levels of editorial scrutiny.

Reference

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1046585>

The postsecular imagination: postcolonialism, religion and literature, by Manav Ratti, New York and London, Routledge, 2013, 270 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 4154 8097 0

In January 2015, a print advertisement issued by the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on the occasion of the 66th anniversary of the Indian Republic omitted the words “Socialist” and “Secular” while quoting from the preamble of the Indian Constitution. This rekindled the debates that set secularism against religion in India. There is nothing new in these debates. They are ongoing, and have remained unresolved, since the conception of the very idea of India. This is one of the reasons why *The Postsecular Imagination* is such a welcome, and long overdue, book. It offers a vision that moves beyond the dichotomies of secularism versus religion and explores their alternatives.

Daring, fine and nuanced, Manav Ratti’s book is probably the first monograph of its kind to raise important questions that probe the potentials and limits of both religious and secular thought in India. He offers “the postsecular”, caught in a double bind between religion and secularism, as a substitute. “The postsecular”, to quote Ratti, “neither proselytizes secularism nor sentimentalizes religion” (xxi). Instead, as it emerges from his analysis, the postsecular preserves the best aspects of both religion and secularism, while siding with neither. With a sweep that encompasses literature from India and Sri Lanka, Ratti reads contemporary writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Allan Sealy, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Mahasweta Devi as upholding and representing postsecular affirmative values, in the ways that they negotiate instances of violence, communalism, partition and majoritarianism (which often mark the failures of both religion and secularism) through love, friendship, a sense of community and hybridity.

Ratti centres his discussions around one novel in each of his seven core chapters (except in the last two chapters where, in one case, he reads Rushdie’s post-fatwa

books together, and in the other analyses Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* alongside Devi's novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha"). In each case, his meticulous analysis of the context and politics enriches his reading of the text. In fact, one of the fortes of this impressive and scrupulously researched book is its interdisciplinarity, and the way that Ratti moves between the lenses of social and cultural criticism, political theory and literary criticism, to flesh out how it is in literature that the work of the postsecular is actually taking shape. The coda, though succinct, is powerful, and attests to the newness and provocativeness of these thoughts in the Indian and Sri Lankan context.

The book also deserves praise for the author's involvement with the project at more than just the literary and theoretical levels. This is reflected in the stories and anecdotes that Ratti reproduces, as well as in the style of writing. The photographs that precede each chapter (taken by the author) are both illustrations of, and apt commentaries on, the content that he discusses in the accompanying chapters. One of the greatest achievements of the book is perhaps the way in which it raises uncomfortable questions about the significance of certain values that we do not question (such as the desirability of secularism, or the enchantment of religion), and forces us to rethink and rework those values. The book remains, to borrow a sentence from the author, "not a manifesto for a new beginning; it is a courageous and modest imagining of how to make a difference" (210): Ratti's book is a compelling demonstration of this imagining.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1046587>

Natural disasters and Victorian empire: famines, fevers and the literary cultures of South Asia, by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 218 pp., £50.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 1370 0112 2

Different shades of green: African literature, environmental justice, and political ecology, by Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2014, 214 pp., \$27.50 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 8139 3606 2

In *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire*, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee begins his exploration of imperialist representations of disasters, such as famines and epidemic diseases, in 19th-century India with a discussion of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The hurricane, he argues, acted as an apocalyptic moment of revelation, laying bare the systematic inequality and structural racism underpinning US society. Indeed, Katrina could be said to have exposed the way in which New Orleans was in a certain sense *already* a disaster zone before the storm hit. As Mukherjee shows, much of the post-hurricane scholarly literature has drawn attention to the structural violence that was perpetrated on the poorest sections of the city in the decades leading up to Katrina, including infrastructural negligence and the destruction of affordable housing stock. Over the same period, the area was rendered increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events by the slow violence of environmental degradation, not least that