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## ***The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature***

Manav Ratti (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

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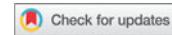
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## Book Review

ROGER McNAMARA

*The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature*,  
Manav Ratti (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

*The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* by Manav Ratti, published in 2013, joins the debate over whether secularism can protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in India that have been threatened since the Hindu Right won the national elections in the 1990s. The victory of the Hindu nationalists indicated the failure of secular nationalism—the dominant cultural ideology that promoted “unity in diversity” since India’s independence in 1947—and underscored the belief that India is a Hindu nation. Within this conversation over secularism’s relevance, *The Postsecular Imagination* is the latest in a series of publications within literary studies that include Aamir Mufti’s *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (2007), Neelam Srivastava’s *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel* (2007), and Priya Kumar’s *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film* (2008).

At the same time, *The Postsecular Imagination* also shifts the conversation in two significant directions. First, Ratti’s text expands the framework to include Sri Lanka. That nation went through a protracted civil war from the 1980s to 2009 between the state (which claimed to represent the Sinhala-Buddhist majority) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (which claimed to represent the Tamil minority). The comparative framework allows the reader to compare and contrast how writers deal with similar problems experienced by religious and ethnic communities in both states. Hence, the conundrum over the relationship between majorities and minorities is no longer an Indian problem, but a South Asian phenomenon.

Second, Ratti’s text also participates in recent debates within the Western academy over the relevance of postsecularism. Although the term “postsecular” has been used in the Radical Orthodoxy movement in theology since the 1990s, it was popularized in other disciplines when Jürgen Habermas deployed the word to describe contemporary Western societies that must rethink their Christian heritage and secular culture in order to

accommodate immigrant populations that come from diverse cultural backgrounds. In order to develop different aspects of postsecularism, Ratti draws on scholars from diverse disciplines, including Jacques Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari from Philosophy, William Connelly from Political Science, Saba Mahmood from Anthropology, and Gayatri Spivak from literary studies, among others. In deploying the ideas of these theorists, Ratti brings a different perspective to the debate over secularism's relevance in South Asia. At the same time, because *The Postsecular Imagination* explores the crisis of the secular state in South Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, it helps rethink the relationship between majorities and minorities in Western Europe and North America in a post-9/11 world.

*The Postsecular Imagination* consists of a preface, an introduction, seven chapters, and a coda that explore the novels and short stories of six authors living in South Asia or of South Asian origin. Four of these seven chapters are central to the text's core argument, and focus on the works of Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie. There is one chapter each on Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*, another chapter on Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, and a final chapter that examines Rushdie's post-*Satanic Verses* works with an emphasis on how they have been shaped by the *fatwa* against him. Interspersed between these four chapters are three shorter chapters: one on I. Allan Sealy's *The Everest Hotel*, another on Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*, and a final chapter on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*. Ratti is able to integrate the works of these six writers through the concept of the postsecular.

While there are multiple definitions of the postsecular, very broadly defined, it asserts that secularism has failed to balance the interests of majority and minority populations, and that the separation of church and state has reduced religion to a question of choice, not a conviction, in the private sphere. Thus, proponents of secularism fail to acknowledge that millions of people have a tremendous amount of "faith" in religion. Furthermore, they fail to realize that religion can be a powerful resource to promote social harmony. At the same time, postsecularism also acknowledges that religion cannot be uncritically embraced, especially when it turns to fundamentalism that rejects any role of rationality and reason. In addition, religion can be deeply imbricated in social hierarchies that perpetuate inequality. Thus, postsecularism is highly ambivalent towards secularism and religion, recognizing the need for both, while not having complete confidence in either. One sees this reticence in Ratti's definition of postsecularism: "The task then is to explore secular alternatives to secularism: ones that can gesture to the inspiring features of religious thought, without the violence that can attach itself to religion. The paradox thus becomes to find a non-secular secularism, a non-religious

religion” (xx). At the same time, Ratti also makes a distinctive contribution to postsecularism as a concept. For Ratti, the postsecular involves the act of “secularizing” ideologies such as religion, secularism, modernity, patriarchy, and so on, with the objective of recognizing that they are not transcendental or timeless entities. Instead, they are cultural objects and social structures produced in this world that must be critiqued and revised in order to promote social harmony and equality. For Ratti, literature becomes a powerful vehicle to explore the postsecular because the imagination undermines “the ideological oppositions between secularism and religion, for in its ability to represent a multiplicity of voices and in its acceptance and juxtaposition of contradictory and conflicting perspectives, it can represent, imagine, and pursue a rich array of possibilities” (xxi).

The chapters of *The Postsecular Imagination* follow through with Ratti’s claim—secularizing the ideologies of religion and secularism by breaking down their opposition to each other to reveal multiple perspectives that help reimagine future possibilities to promote equality and harmony. Some of these secularizing approaches include reinterpreting religion as an aesthetic, endorsing affective (as opposed to national) communities, and turning to idiosyncratic interpretations of religion. For example, in the chapters on Ondaatje’s novels, Ratti explores how these texts secularize religious art and architecture by stripping them of their religious doctrines. Instead, it is the aesthetics of religious art and architecture that inculcate a sense of awe or promote peace. Thus, in *The English Patient*, while the religious content of Italian churches and the Sikh temples is minimized, they still promote a sense of wonder in the characters, as well as the readers. Similarly, in *Anil’s Ghost*, Ratti demonstrates how the Buddhist statue at the novel’s conclusion comes to represent the merging of Hinduism and the various strands of Buddhism, creating a hybrid, and a “secular” Buddhism that undermines Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

The postsecular, however, can also be envisioned through affective structures that challenge the exclusionary attitudes embedded within national or religious communities. Ratti examines this resistance to the ideologies of nationalism and religion through interracial/religious relationships such as the friendship between a Catholic nun and a separatist (*The Everest Hotel*), the romance between a white Canadian nurse and Indian Sikh sapper (*The English Patient*), or the tenderness between a subaltern and a forensic anthropologist from the diaspora (*Anil’s Ghost*). National belonging can also be displaced by the affective power of non-normative communities. Thus, a fragile “transnational” community consisting of the Sikh sapper, the Canadian nurse, an anonymous “English” patient, and an Italian-Canadian thief develops in a shelled monastery in Italy and becomes a critique of the hyper-nationalism in Europe during World War II in *The English Patient*.

Another means through which the postsecular challenges the transcendent is through personal and idiosyncratic interpretations of religion. While the chapter on *Anil's Ghost* touches on this through its reinterpretation of Buddhism, this idea is most effectively developed in Ratti's chapters on Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* and Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The Baldwin chapter foregrounds how women reinterpret Sikhism to assert their own autonomy but also examines how women use non-religious means (the interplay of critique and experience) to secularize patriarchy by recognizing it to be a man-made institution that can be questioned. Similarly, the chapter on *The Satanic Verses* explores Rushdie's own personal vision of Islam. On the one hand, Islam is racialized (and hence secularized) because it comes to represent the racial and ethnic Other—the South Asian Muslim—in the United Kingdom. On the other hand, Rushdie challenges Islam by questioning whether it is open to self-critique.

While these explorations of the postsecular certainly invite us to reimagine the political conundrums of the contemporary moment, *The Postsecular Imagination* also directly engages current politics. This is more obvious in the chapters on *Anil's Ghost* (that focuses on human rights in Sri Lanka) and on Rushdie's novels (that explore the *fatwa* and its consequences); however, Ratti is able to draw out the subtle political implications in other chapters, as well. Thus, the chapter on *The English Patient* reveals how the novel's focus on a Sikh sapper criticizing the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki becomes a meditation on the Sikh separatist movement and the hijacking and destruction of an Air India plane that flew out of Canada in 1985. Similarly, the chapter on Baldwin's *The Body Remembers* examines how the text's exploration of Sikhism during India's Partition becomes a critique of Indian secularism that failed to protect Sikhs during the 1984 riots after the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

While the final chapter of *The Postsecular Imagination* on Ghosh's and Devi's texts could have been developed further, the first six chapters rigorously analyze the literary texts by Ondaatje, Sealy, Baldwin, and Rushdie. By bringing these texts into dialogue with the recent theoretical work on postsecularism, Ratti is able to produce insightful readings that not only challenge rigid religious, racial, and national categories that dominate our modern world but also provides hope that we can imagine an array of identities and practices that can circumvent them.

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