

*The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion and Literature*

Manav Ratti

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The legacies, potentials, and pitfalls of the “secular,” and their on-going implications within global and (trans)national distributions of power and ideological critique occupy an increasingly vital role within the postcolonial humanities today. As we continue to witness around us the long-term ravages of a “West [that] is now everywhere ... in structures and in minds” (xi), to use Ashis Nandy’s memorable phrasing, the urgency of this debate can never be overestimated. Its presence bears heavily upon a crucial Derridean demand of twenty-first-century critical thought: namely, that exegesis occupies itself with, and respects, a certain ontology of the “ought to” (*il faudrait*). This exhortation is, in many ways, as subjective as it is onerous. The questions postcolonialist scholarship *ought to* be addressing today as a matter of imminence, especially at a juncture which Wendy Brown has marked as “an era of profound political disorientation”—one that requires ever more vigilant modes of “how we navigate within the tattered narratives of modernity” (Brown 3)—are repeatedly the topic of debate and conversation.

Manav Ratti’s critique of the secular and his address of the “postsecular” in *The Postsecular Imagination* situate themselves with distinction amid the field’s most fraught but inevitable cultural-political urgencies. The book’s assessment of the secular inheritance (and its pitfalls) of the West, India and Sri Lanka is informed, complex and broad-ranging. Its merits lie in the relational approach through which Ratti explores discourses of the secular in terms of their fraught affinities with manifestations of nationalism and religion within the geopolitical realities broached in the book. While it identifies and critiques the forms of entrenchment and essentialist practice evinced by religious, nationalist and secularist discourse, Ratti’s purview is an affirmative one that does not easily succumb to any facile disillusionment with the postcolonial world. On the contrary, it raises the stakes of both scholarly and literary interventions in order to extricate from them a distinct realm of possibility: an “imagination” that draws upon the historical and immanent resources of both religious and secular ethics precisely as a means of resisting their totalistic appropriations. Writing within contexts haunted by difficult historical bequeathals, Ratti chooses to broach—and not without the courage and foresight required to do so—the question of a renewed “need for faith, awe, wonder, and transcendence”: one that will not, however, have to assimilate itself within “the political and ideological constraints of nationalism, secularism, and religion” (xx).

In the wake of the ongoing necessity identified by Brown for an “emancipation of history (and the present) from a progressive narrative and the dispossession of political principles and truths from solid epistemological and ontological grounds,” Ratti’s recourse to belief touches on a timely and sensitive juncture for postcolonialist thought. His arguments place the “need for faith, awe, wonder, and transcendence” in tension with those secular agendas that are often overdetermined by entrenched discursive motivations—a stance that leads him to an intelligent extrapolation of the postsecular as a “commitment to faith and belief” that can, however, adequately function outside the exclusivist circuits of secularist, religious and nationalist ideology (xx). First, the “post” in the “postsecular,” Ratti suggests, “signals a form of commitment that risks moving beyond the ‘secular,’ defined in this context as ‘unbelieving,’ without falling prey to the ideology of the secular that defines such belief as irrational, intolerant and unmodern” (18). Secondly, by drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, William Connolly and others, Ratti seeks in the postsecular a mode of perception that “can dislodge the self-rationalizing authority created by religion ... or national-cultural assemblages,” reflecting in the process on Derrida’s own consideration of a “faith without dogma” as well as Connolly’s “non-theistic faith” (20).

What Ratti’s scholarship extracts from this three-pronged problematic of (secularist / religious / nationalist) entrenchment is a postsecular vista that sees the latter as—in his term—a “negotiated” positioning (21). Ratti’s postsecular “does not represent a return to religion, especially not in postcolonial nation states where the combination of religion and nationalism continues to be explosive and often violent. The postsecular can be a critique of secularism and religion, but it cannot lead us back to the religious, and certainly not to the violence undertaken in the name of religion or secularism” (21). From this *point de départ*, Ratti then locates the literary as in itself an indispensable discursive space (and cultural-political paradigm) wherein the postsecular manifests as a productive subtraction from the quandaries, agendas, and binaristic perceptions historically accrued around both religious and secular discourse. Ratti’s readings in this sense are both theoretically nimble and insightful in the way they chart the ‘postsecular’ voice of the novel. As he observes in his commentary on Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* in the book’s fifth chapter, the postsecularism of these novels lies in their ‘affirmation of affect: of friendship, of love’ (160). Ratti’s purview is effective in showing how the novel’s “diasporic location” impacts its potential to forward the postsecular inscription as a means of “challeng[ing] the binary oppositions of majority-minority and religious-secular” (25). As he points out in his discussion of “aestheticization” (53), the aesthetic of fiction not only operates to secularise the religious institution, but also spawns in the process forms of agency wherein “beauty becomes a kind of religion, provoking religion-like feelings such as awe and enchantment.” But Ratti’s study reaches beyond this dynamic to explore the myriad

potentialities of a postsecular literary aesthetic: not least that of the text as hospitable space, one that opens up its own creative resources to energise the affirmation of postsecular affect, pointing towards its own capacity, to quote his own words, “as a forum *for* [its] affirmation” (160).

It is in this context that Ratti’s extensive readings of Michael Ondaatje’s and Salman Rushdie’s work, together with his commentaries on the work of Shauna Singh Baldwin, Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh and Allan Sealy, seek to tease out those interstitial modes of narration that, amongst other facets, “challenge notions of a ‘secular’ west by venturing into those borderline areas that question received orthodoxies” (25). Ratti insists that such quests can themselves operate *within*, rather than in spite of, the realm of belief. The literary embraces this realm in the recognition that “enchantment is not the provision of religion alone,” and that the political can itself be fruitfully approached even “while acknowledging the dimensions of religion” (xxi). Ratti contemplates whether the choice elements of secularism may be retained in tandem with the productive characteristics of religious thought and practice—advancing in turn the space of the literary “as a forum where new conceptions of secularism and religion can emerge” (7). Can non-essentialist inflections of the secular be embraced, “ones that can gesture to the inspiring features of religious thought, without the violence that can attach itself to religion”?, Ratti asks (xx).

These are questions that Ratti’s critique faces with a nuanced, vibrant and stylistically elegant scholarship of possibility: one that is further informed by the author’s rigorous knowledge of the geopolitical realities and physical locations (in India, Europe, Sri Lanka and further afield) that he has experienced and visited. The salient question of a postsecular “enchantment,” a concern that resonates creatively throughout Ratti’s work, is never unwittingly re-absorbed or reified within the structures of religious or nationalist orthodoxy. Recognising the importance of the transnational/translational dynamic of postcoloniality broached by Homi Bhabha, Ratti hones the translational ethos as a pivotal calling of the postsecular literary: the latter’s ability, in his words, to preserve the great ethical elements of Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and other faiths, “but then translate them into thoroughly worldly, contingent situations, ones that emerge from a minority position like that of the Anglo-Indians or the real challenges and struggles of women’s experiences” (3). Through this translational ethos, Ratti’s thought evinces a readiness to sift amid the thick veils of both religious and national-political metanarrative to identify those nodes of belief that can replenish our shared humanity as much as the exegetical ethos of postcolonialist thought itself. The concerns of a postsecular imagination can now inform the latter’s fate, its inexorable bond to the *il faudrait*, as “the risk of affirming an affirmation,” an onus and exhortation to aspire and “imagine through and beyond the divides of secularism, religion, ethnicity, nation and culture” (209). In this crucial sense, Ratti’s work stands out in the field as an

indispensable way forward.

Works Cited

Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.

Brown, Wendy. *Politics Out of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.