

THE POSTSECULAR IMAGINATION – POSTCOLONIALISM, RELIGION, AND LITERATURE

Author: Manav Ratti

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“A book is not shut in by its contours, is not walled-up as in a fortress. It asks nothing better than to exist outside itself, or to let you exist in it. In short, the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside”. (Poulet, 1969: 54)

The above quotation, which illustrates the essence of phenomenological criticism, is an appropriate introduction to the new book by Manav Ratti. From this perspective, the best relationship established between a book and its reader stands for a dissolution of boundaries, an empathetic understanding by the critic of the *I* positions emerging from the written texts.

In *The Postsecular Imagination – Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* Manav Ratti achieves this level of comprehension of the literary texts he explores. With the avowed purpose to demonstrate the necessity of a new paradigm, *the postsecular imagination*, the author focuses on South-Asian literature namely writers originating in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Ratti constructs his study showing that the literary text can offer “insights into thinking through the limits of secularism and religion” (xix). He believes that literary productions are not to be viewed solely as fantasy exercises but that they should be perceived as vital instruments for the improvement of social mechanisms.

The book comprises seven investigative chapters focusing on Anglophone works by Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Allan Sealy, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Gosh (all sharing a diasporic position from where they experience two cultural and national perspectives) and Mahasweta Devi (whose translated work was selected for the author’s unique writing viewpoint illustrating the situation of indigenous Indian tribals against the backdrop of the Indian nation-state). *The Postsecular Imagination...* analyses themes such as communalism, violence, identity, nationalism in South-Asia and maintains that the turmoil and problems of social and historical events illustrated in the literary texts is not only an exercise in

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fictional representation but “an experimental space” (4) from where we might extract solutions for real-life conflicts.

Manav Ratti forwards the idea that in the literary productions of the above-mentioned writers we can identify a mechanism through which they *secularize* certain religious values and “then translate them into thoroughly worldly, contingent situations, ones that emerge from a minority position” (3). Ratti’s literary analyses not only support his contention but also prove a deep understanding of the space from where the authors write, one under the sign of Bhabha’s “third space”. From the in-betweenness of their diasporic situation, the writers construct their narratives in an attempt to mediate between religion and secularism or their respective dual social situation of minority-majority.

The Postsecular Imagination – Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature directs our attention yet again towards the need of a new theoretical tool that can represent the realities of a world fraught with conflicts resulting from the collision of extreme religious or secular archetypes. Although the book refers to the South-Asian setting, the fact that most of the authors analysed by Ratti embody a diasporic identity, which grants them a global feature, allows me to suggest that this study should be considered by scholars interested in other (literary) spaces as well.

Now more than ever, even in Europe, we are confronted with an increased alertness to the binary opposition religion(s)-secularism and the dangers of their extremist interpretations. Ratti offers *postsecularism* as a solution to “the violence, inequalities, and injustices pursued in the name of religion, nation, and secularism” (31).

Many critical voices can be heard today announcing the failure of European multiculturalism in view of the increase of religious extremist acts. One might say we are witnessing the birth of a readjusted standpoint for Europe as it is harboring more and more immigrants escaping the violence of their Oriental homelands. One solution to a better management of this new paradigm could be *postsecularism*, “as a search for values that can retain the best features of religion and secularism” (209).

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