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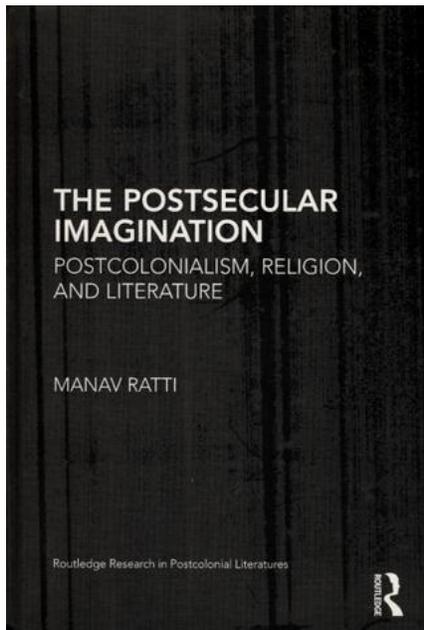
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## In search of faith

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*Written evocatively, this book is an inter-disciplinary work useful to those interested in literary-criticism, post-colonialism and socio-political theory*

*The Postsecular Imagination* is a scholarly attempt to resuscitate enchantment in this world. Given the unforgiving rationalism of the modern-secular state, and the violence of organised religion, Manav Ratti deems the binary of religion versus secularism as having practically failed and as being conceptually inadequate. The book then is a search for an imagination that is beyond these binaries. In search of awe, wonder and transcendence in the dehumanising politics of modernity, Ratti finds an answer in the literary and the aesthetic. Using the Anglophone novels of Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, Allan Sealy and the translated works of Mahasweta Devi, the author tries to approach a discourse that combines religion and secularism, and in doing so, goes well beyond the two. He

analyses themes of violence, communalism, partition and identity in novels such as *The English Patient*, *The Everest Hotel*, *Anil's Ghost*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Hungry Tide*, etc. as literary explorations that represent a postsecular reflexivity.

Within the spectrum of postsecular discourse, the author takes a balanced, centrist position. At one end of the spectrum is Habermas' postsecular that merely adds a twist to the conventional liberal-secular discourse, by partially accommodating the 'religious' in the political, so as to make more space for tolerance. While at the other is Saba Mahmood with her incessant disavowal of secular principles and her unremitting critique of the imperialism of liberal secular rationality. Ratti's postsecular imagination falls between these two poles. The book will find the liberal discourse of tolerance, legal rights, and liberties, as necessary but not sufficient. His understanding of the postsecular 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 nonsecular secularism, a non-religious religion. It is this broad sense that I denote by the term 'postsecular'".

In the context of the troubling Rajasthan High Court judgment criminalising Santhara (the Jain practice of voluntarily starving to death) by equating it with suicide, this book deserves to be closely read, in text and in spirit. The dehumanising-humanism of liberalism renders faith as irrational, tearing the fabric beyond recognition. The rupture between a Jain imagination of Santhara and the juridical understanding of suicide has rendered both these worlds strange to each other. The language of rights does not understand the language of Jain *ahimsa* where the withdrawal from food is a transcendental self-cleansing. Such an *askesis* is superstition to the secular. This is where the postsecular enters, as a possible bridge between suicide and Santhara. Of particular interest in this context will be Ratti's reading of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the chapter 'The Parting of Arabian Sea' concerning a peasant girl Ayesha who receives instructions from the Imam in her dreams, and leads a group of villagers to walk across the Arabian Sea all the way to Mecca, while Mirza Saeed, a modern secular landowner is repelled by their superstition and warns them of death by drowning. But, typical of Rushdie's style, the Arabian Sea miraculously parts, to which Ratti suggests "The devices of magical realism are a recuperative devotion toward the exigencies of worldliness". In Ratti's affective reading of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, the deserts of North Africa become a metaphor for a location that escapes cartographies, and demarcations of nation and religion disappear. The desert becomes a space of escape and constant erasure, an abode of faith while the rest of the world is absorbed in trade, commerce and greed. But I believe the postsecular imagination, in general, has to be guarded from two potential misappropriations: on the one hand is the religious right-wing; while on the other, this postsecular view of religion must not become an excuse to justify stripping religion from its cultural, institutional and historical locations, rendering it as a 'commodity', like yoga or Buddhism has become, to be assimilated into the all engulfing pop-culture.

To conclude, the book suggests that the literary and the aesthetic is perhaps the last abode of a postsecular imagination. An imagination that straddles a narrow path *as if* balancing on a tightrope, negotiating its way out of the violence of organised religion, failed state-secularism and the disenchanted philosophical secularism surrounding it. This 207-page book, divided into seven chapters, written evocatively, is an inter-disciplinary work useful to those interested in literary-criticism, post-colonialism and socio-political theory.

*The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion and Literature*; Manav Ratti, Routledge

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