The World in a Grain of Sand: Postcolonial Literature and Radical Universalism by Nivedita Majumdar (review)

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Book Reviews

Nivedita Majumdar. *The World in a Grain of Sand: Postcolonial Literature and Radical Universalism*. Verso, 2021. Pp. xi, 225. CAD $39.95.

In recent years there have been increasing efforts to consider the contemporary relevance of postcolonial theory and its relationship to subaltern studies, Indigenous studies, the fields of world literature and ecocriticism. Nivedita Majumdar's *The World in a Grain of Sand: Postcolonial Literature and Radical Universalism* is one such ambitious effort from Verso, which also published Priyamvada Gopal's ground breaking *Insurgent Empire* in 2019. Majumdar's book highlights the larger conceptual pitfalls that pervade postcolonial theory and determines how they may be overcome using the radical political attentiveness that Gopal reintroduced to historicism; it is a timely and useful intervention. Majumdar demonstrates that such radicalism is often missing in prominent postcolonial literary criticism and powerfully redresses this oversight using a distinctly Marxist lens for her sharp literary analyses.

Majumdar opens the monograph by recognizing the evolution and increasingly wide applications of postcolonial theory beyond English studies and considering the central concerns of postcolonial theory and the challenges with which it must contend in the social sciences and cultural studies. The foremost of these challenges, she argues, is the tendency to read postcolonial literature from the global South as local, parochial, and separate from the universal. Instead, she proposes a "radical universalism" which is "rooted in local realities but also capable of unearthing the needs, conflicts, and desires that stretch across cultures and time" (11). By analysing key postcolonial texts and identifying the limitations of renowned critical and theoretical works, she demonstrates how attention to patriarchal and capitalist structures can help resist the exoticized localism that pervades the postcolonial literary and critical canon.

The book is divided into two sections. The first, "A Grain of Sand," reveals the weaknesses in current postcolonial theory which often obfuscate the complexity of political conflict in the global South and fail to recognize the systemic pervasion of oppressive structures and the agency of those that resist them. Majumdar argues that such texts inadvertently homogenize the global South instead of recognizing the heterogeneity of the places that make up this geography and thereby become complicit in the very Orientalist framing that they intend to critique. The first chapter engages with questions of political

agency through the lens of gender using Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and the writings of Gayatri Spivak, Ranajit Guha, Homi Bhabha, and Fredric Jameson. Majumdar demonstrates how postcolonial readings have not quite acknowledged the radicalism or the agency that underlies the political commitments of women, in particular, who do not exist comfortably within the grand narratives of the so-called nation. While not radical in its claim, this is a useful analysis that critiques some of the most influential postcolonial theorists and joins a crowded conversation within the field conducted by critics like Aijaz Ahmad, Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry and others who call for materialist engagements with postcolonialism.

Majumdar then engages with these questions of gender to demonstrate how Rabindranath Tagore's internationally renowned text *The Home and the World* (1916) replicates the culturally essentialist frameworks that were of Tagore's own political ideology. This argument would have benefitted from engaging with contemporary work that has recognized the limitations of Tagore's politics and his fictional representations of Indian nationalism that Majumdar examines.[1] Instead, she offers the Bengali writer Saratchandra Chattopadhyay as better representing women's interiority and its allied political engagement in a way that is not subsumed into patriarchal formulations of the nation. This is a generative reading and makes a pertinent call for further engagement with Chattopadhyay's works. The third and fourth chapters examine how postcolonial theorists become implicated in Orientalist debates regarding subaltern agency and in a conservative neoliberal logic. Majumdar makes these arguments using Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000), Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014), and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013). In Majumdar's assessment, the danger lies in the obfuscation of the politics of the global South. Instead, Majumdar argues, "radical universalism" can be achieved by recognizing the heterogeneity of political, social, and economic histories and conditions, and finding identification without conflation.

While the former section dealt extensively with the inadequate depictions of Naxalite ideology and the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, the second section, "The World in the Grain," engages with texts that, according to Majumdar, get this "radical universalism" right. These seem to be texts that do not lose focus on the material realities of postcolonial bodies in a bid to portray culturalist ideas of the nation, of which both postcolonial and Indigenous studies are guilty (134–36). Instead, Majumdar makes a strong case that postcolonial ecocriticism and a text like Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha* (1989) better recognize the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation that persist in local spaces and through which subaltern postcolonial people are oppressed.

The final two chapters return to questions of nationalism, the so-called third world, and the arguments of Jameson, Partha Chatterjee, Aijaz Ahmed, and others. These chapters provide essential readings of Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* (1997; trans. 2000) and Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992). The penultimate chapter carries out sympathetic readings of the novels' depictions of occupation, of the distinctions between displacement and homesickness and living in occupation, and of the relationship between cultural rootedness and difference. Yet this argument would have been bolstered by engaging with theories of transnationalism. The book itself could benefit from a more elaborate theoretical excavation of "radical universalism," for which this chapter would have provided a good basis. It leads into the final chapter, devoted to A. Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997). Using nuanced close readings of his novel, Majumdar makes the case that Sivanandan's text "elevates the subjective and experiential dimensions of agency" (196). She invokes Sivanandan's own political activism as a key part of his ability to depict "complex historical phenomena" in literature without either cultural essentialism or a condemnation of politically radical action (196). It serves as a useful closing chapter for a book that allows its author to step into a conversation regarding the foundational frameworks of postcolonial theories and emphasize the need to explicitly recognize the material conditions and lived realities of "subaltern subjectivity" (196) rather than simply maintaining culturally essentialist formulations of postcolonial communities.

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Notes

1 See, for instance, Banerji's *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century*; Bhattacharya and Renganathan's *The Politics and Reception of Rabindranath Tagore's Drama*; De's "Decolonizing Universality"; Goyal's "On Transnational Analogy"; Sengupta, Roy, and Purkayastha's *Towards Freedom*; and Tuteja and Chakraborty's *Tagore and Nationalism*.

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Jessica Gaitán Johannesson. *The Nerves and their Endings: Essays on Crisis and Response*. Scribe, 2022. Pp. 3–184, GBP £9.99.

Jessica Gaitán Johannesson's incisive, introspective essay anthology, *The Nerves and their Endings*, was published at a particularly pressing global moment. The year Johannesson's collection was released, the United Nation's annual Conference of the Parties (COP) summit on climate change took place against the backdrop of extreme expressions of this crisis, from the record number of wildfires and heatwaves in the United Kingdom and Europe (the highest in recent history) to the Horn of Africa drought, the most protracted of its kind that continues to threaten food security in the region. The world was also dealing with the continued fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought into sharp relief the asymmetrical affordances of health and valuation of lives across international borders. "The climate crisis is an illness of severed connections, on a colossal and intimate scale," Johannesson writes (22); this contemplation of connections translates formally onto the page, with Johanesson interspersing each essay with anecdotal reflections on the roots of her relationship with her body and the land, which map onto broader provocations about the ties between individual and planetary health, of relationality and responsibility.

These political reckonings are rooted in personal introspections, a formal but also deeply visceral and embodied narrative gesture that drives Johanneson's writing. Johannesson comes to view her body as a barometer, or perhaps even a cipher, for environmental degradation, though this is not simply a metaphorical gesture; she remains attuned to its material resonances. Her personal experiences with an eating disorder open up a broader set of questions about the cultural ecology of food and legacies of colonial resource extraction. Planetary and individual health become enmeshed, as the body is in many ways "disciplined" through lifestyle changes (21). She places the relationship between the individual and the collective, between the private body and the body politic, under scrutiny. But who does the burden of