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Insurgent Forms

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Insurgent Imaginations is an exemplary exploration of the distinctive resources of literature and film for reconfiguring the relationship between particular communities and the universalizing transregional systems that threaten to overdetermine or even dissolve them. In particular, the book stands as an especially broad-minded contribution to the rapidly expanding scholarship on literary left internationalism: the system of institutions, community of artists, and corpus of works that emerged from world anticolonialism and socialism, both state-sponsored and oppositional. As Majumder shows, by contrast with the world literature produced by capitalist globalization, which is as transnational as capital itself, internationalist world literature "insisted on national sovereignty and self-determination" in the cultural sphere (ix).

Much of the work in this field so far has been concerned with the institutional and media history of the internationalist artistic system, seeking to map and periodize its organizations, congresses, periodicals, and major figures and sites in the multipolar twentieth century. Scholars have sought to establish the contingency of world culture as we know it by documenting the alternatives to be found at the Communist University for Toilers of the East in Moscow, the Tashkent Film Festival, the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, *Lotus* in Cairo and Beirut, Foreign Languages Press in Beijing, and other watershed sites of cultural internationalism.[1] Majumder's book, like several other recent monographs and collective projects, uses the resources of genre history and intellectual history to establish a similarly transregional vision of internationalist aesthetics and poetics, without simply imagining it as the diffusion of socialist realism into the Third World.[2] As a scholar of Persianate poetics, my own interest has been in the ways that certain traditional forms – the ghazal, or the type of poetic gathering known as the musha'irah – came to constitute a transregional idiom for literary functionaries from the Soviet East and committed writers from Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and parts of South Asia (Hodgkin 2023). But in the wider decolonizing world, there was no clear association between radical politics and resistance to the homogenization of

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cultural forms. Rather, as Erich Auerbach suggests in his famous 1952 essay "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," Western and communist patterns of globalization often functioned as mere subsets of a single Europeanizing threat to the worldwide diversity of cultural forms (2-3).

For a general reader who associated sovereignty symbolically with resistance to the globalizing power of Western cultural forms, most of the works discussed in *Insurgent Imaginations* might seem like signs of domination rather than insurgency. Readings of Tagore and Mao in the opening chapter of *Insurgent Imaginations* chart a more flexible, dialectical approach to the liberatory potential of both indigenous and foreign literary forms, but the chapter focuses on their more general reflections, bearing an uncertain relationship to each figure's literary praxis (whether in their own verse or in the fluctuating formal preferences promulgated by the post-1948 Chinese state literary bureaucracy). A concern with literary form underwrites every subsequent chapter, as the book tracks the circulation and transformation of genres and styles such as memoir, *testimonio*, *Cinema Novo*, the essay, the short story, people's theater, the protest novel, and various satirical genres. The book is deeply attentive to the local contexts in which these forms first emerged, and how their meanings change in other contexts, but it is no accident that these are all exemplary cultural forms of modernity, and their appearance in South Asia in almost every case is in part a legacy of colonialism. In a few instances, Majumder notes the indigeneity of a particular form, but usually, as in the carnivals and Indian popular and classical music that intrude on the jazz parties of the postcolonial elite in Mrinal Sen's film *Calcutta 71* (101), these forms are incorporated into the matrix of an imported Western form. Majumder emphasizes the transformative effects that these inset genres have on the rhetorical functioning of the works that contain them, and these demonstrations thus contribute powerfully to his disruption of the center-periphery model of literary modernity. I do not downplay the power of this argument, and this essay will be partly concerned with the book's challenge to the "influence is power" symbolic system of cultural nationalism. Still, realist novels and films with inset indigenous forms follow the logic of modern formal heteroglossia described by Bakhtin. That is, the modernity of the novel and film consists partly in their formal omnivorism, which permits them to incorporate, if not domesticate, any "local" meaning-making systems. (The most significant exception is a superb discussion of the structuring role of Bengali *jatra* in Utbal Dutt's agitprop plays (127), which this essay is intended to complement and extend.)

In the anticolonial liberation struggles of the 20th century, it was not uncommon to identify "sovereignty and self-determination" in the cultural sphere with the use of non-Western forms variously designated as local, traditional, indigenous, autochthonous, or national. This is the meaning of the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress slogan "Proletarian in content, national in form" (and its more ubiquitous successor "national in form, socialist in content"). As my own work shows, some non-Western literary forms and modes of literary

sociability did lend their rhetorical force to revolutionary messages, and even fitfully carved out a zone for lateral internationalism among "Eastern" writers, unmediated by Moscow. But at the scale of the entire colonial and decolonizing world, this ostensible enshrinement of national form as indispensable coincided with, and likely contributed to, the marginalization or subordination of non-Western genre systems in left committed literature that is visible in most of the works discussed by Majumder. "National in form" often meant the incorporation of non-Western classical or folk forms into the structuring matrix of a realist novel or an opera house, whether in the mode of oriental arabesque (Castillo) or more meaningfully (as in the cases discussed by Majumder). In the Soviet context, the durability of the Western developmentalist hierarchy of cultural forms, and its capacity to withstand a declared state preference for indigenization, was an unavoidable consequence of the reality that the Soviet Union was as semicolonial as it was anticolonial: the power to promote and demote works and writers, and to set curriculum for schools and literary training programs, was concentrated among Russians and other Soviet Europeans.

At later stages and in the wider decolonizing world, the influence of Soviet aesthetics magnified this formal Eurocentrism, as did the economics of colonial and postcolonial media environments. The contribution of anticolonial literary organizations to the production of a European-style literary profession and market sits uneasily alongside those organizations' declared commitment to resisting the Western imperial monoculture. We can see this balancing act at work in the various mission statements of the Soviet-backed Afro-Asian Writers' Association from the Cold War years. The general declaration approved by the 1975 Symposium on Literature and the New Generations in Manila, for example, stated that "writers in Asia and Africa should, on the one hand, seek to present the progressive elements in their cultural heritage and on the other, seek to enrich their literature by the incorporation of contemporary experience and technique." By the same token, they should seek "to enlarge the field of publication, of printing and of distribution, and at the same time to safeguard literary traditions and oral literature which our peoples have transmitted from generation to generation" (204). Notable here is the implicit parallel between technologies of mass media and "contemporary" (read: formally realist and modernist) literary technique. The widespread use of European literary forms by non-Western committed writers reflects the widespread conception of those forms as indispensable *techne* for national and class self-strengthening, which was by midcentury a longstanding assumption among anticolonial activists. A couple of generations before Lukács, plenty of Ottoman novelists already treated the plotting conventions of realist fiction as a unique toolkit for the analysis of their societies and of the world system. For newspaper editors and textbook writers in societies with more stylized prose idioms (and certainly for the Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary modernizers most familiar to me), the pursuit of a more transparently communicative idiom through translation and

imitation of European texts was an eminently practical matter, which only became more urgent for the 20th-century socialists who produced exhortations and insurgency field manuals intended for comprehension and use by newly literate peasants (Steven). In this respect, the clichéd communist analogy between the writer's pen and the automatic rifle was not mere self-aggrandizement, but the correct identification of literary forms as technologies with varying degrees of usefulness in particular situations.

The writers and filmmakers who appear in *Insurgent Imaginations* are more concerned with the efficacy of their communicative forms than in an atavistic sense that certain forms belong to certain peoples. A politically radical variant of realist cinema could meet the Bengali masses on their actual (rather than mythical) cultural terrain – and, as a non-regional form, it was relatively portable to like-minded communities elsewhere in the internationalist arena. However, at least among the 20th-century literary agitators of Turco-Persian West and Central Asia whom I study, there was an undeniable tendency to underestimate the comprehensibility and currency among lower-class and illiterate populations of many non-European verbal art forms, especially those that could not easily be called "folk" forms. Whether in Turkey or the Soviet East, several generations of reformist educators, cultural bureaucrats, and critics presumed the obscurity and non-communicativeness of Persianate poetics as a matter of course.

We know that this assumption was incorrect because of extensive contemporaneous evidence of the widespread enjoyment and discussion of classical poetry by uneducated rural and urban populations, including even the exceptionally difficult Persian poet Bedil of Delhi. Culture planners made this false assumption based on their own tastes, training, and patterns of cultural consumption, which were highly abnormal in their own generations, but which they would make normative for the generations that followed by means of universal vernacular state education. With this transition, mass mobilization states discarded certain locally-used rhetorical repertories (in the cases that I study, the rich idiom of classical Arabic rhetoric) that could have given whole populations a sense of ownership over revolutionary transformations, and the ability to shape those transformations without learning a completely new protocol of political speech.

I emphasize (and perhaps belabor) the political possibilities that receded with the genre amnesia of midcentury socialist and anticolonialist poetics because I believe that Majumder's proposed "peripheral aesthetics" can only gain in depth when we attend to the rhetorical and conceptual resources for revolution that were and still are available in non-Western literary forms. Majumder contrasts Western Romantic and Modernist attempts "to articulate the private and the sensuous as distinctly separate from the social and the political," along with a corresponding "disavowal of history," with the peripheral artist's keen awareness that individual consciousness is mutually constituted with the collective and the historical (36-38). Majumder illustrates

this consciousness of "deep time" with examples from film and film theory (Alexander Dovzhenko, Mrinal Sen, Glauber Rocha, Haile Gerima) to emphasize that even here, in "the most 'modern' of representational media," peripheral projects of representation entail not "the individual rejection of history but precisely its opposite" (36). This is a powerful point, but it may underplay the difference between a gestural appeal to the past and the more profound short-circuit that takes place when an artist activates the resources for the present that are preserved in cultural forms born outside of the logic of imperial modernity.

The potential role of local forms in imagining and instigating insurgency is most visible in the revolutionary cultures of the 19th and early 20th centuries, in the generations before the ubiquity of such forms in committed literature diminished. I will conclude this piece by considering an episode in the early history of that transition, a moment of early poetic reception from Indian pan-Islamic solidarity into post-1917 Muslim anticolonial radicalism in the southeast borderlands of the former Russian Empire.[3] In structural terms, the examined text resembles most of those discussed by Majumder—a Persianate-form poem adapted to be embedded in a play structured and staged in a European manner. Even so, the historical strata of political meaning-making that enter the play with the poem go deep, and far afield from Western poetics.

In 1921 or 1922, the Bukharan intellectual and political agitator 'Abd al-Ra'uf Fitrat, then a cabinet minister in the Bukharan People's Republic established with Red Army support, wrote an Uzbek-language play entitled *The Indian Revolutionaries* (*Hind Ikhtilolchilari*), set in Lahore and in the northwest frontier region of Yaghistan, that dramatizes Indian efforts to expel the British. In the course of a fruitless attempt by a group of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh revolutionaries to persuade a local sufi notable to join their cause, a Hindu member of the delegation recites a poem "by Dr. Iqbal of Punjab," whose recitation "before a gathering of ten thousand people […] brought the people's blood to a boil. After the ten thousand people who came to the gathering had heard this poem, they ran to the government post, saying, 'let us die for freedom.'" He explains that the power of the poem to persuade, and the fact that the British "said nothing to the poet who had brought ten thousand people's blood to a boil," shows that emancipation from imperial rule is more achievable than the notable might think (61). The poem that he recites, in a Turkic folk barmoq meter punctuated with free verse for rhetorical effect, is indeed a loose adaptation of an Urdu tarkib-band (a metrically Persianate strophic form that alternates between short embedded ghazals and rhyming distiches) by the major poet and intellectual Muhammad Iqbal. Iqbal, who composed the poem in 1911 on the occasion of the Italian capture of Tripoli from the Ottomans during the Libyan War, did recite it before a crowd at the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore the following year, although it instigated not an armed revolt but a flood of donations for the medical care of wounded Ottoman troops during the First Balkan War. Fitrat's description and

translation of the poem do not mention Tripoli, the Balkans, or Islam, making it a text of Eastern anticolonialism more generally.

Given the non-autonomous, functional model of poetry as rhetoric that we see here practiced by Iqbal and celebrated by Fitrat, it may come as a surprise that this is a mystical vision poem. In generic terms, it reenacts the Islamic topos of the mi'raj, the Prophet Muhammad's nighttime ascent through the heavens, previously recounted in numerous classical poems, and deployed in several of Iqbal's other poems, both short and long, as his counterpart to the Romantic topos of the reverie.[4] In Iqbal's first stanza, the speaker turns away from a decrepit world whose rules are incomprehensible to him ("niẓām-i kuhnah-yi 'ālam se āshnā nah huvā": here Iqbal writes within the complaint genre of the hasb-i hal), rising in the first transitional distich with the guidance of angels to an audience with the Prophet himself. The second and third stanzas constitute an exchange between the Prophet and the poet-speaker, in an idiom rich with the conventional images of Persianate mysticism. The Prophet, addressing the speaker as "the nightingale of the Hijaz," whose song melts the flower buds and whose heart is "drunken from the cup of [God's] nearness" ("kahā ḥuẓūr ne ai 'andalīb-i bāgh-i ḥijāz/ kalī kalī hai tirī garmī-i navā se gudāz// hameshah sarkhvush-i jām-i valā hai dil terā"), challenges him: what can he bring as a worthy gift from "the worldly garden" ("bāgh-i jahān")? That is, the prophetic voice acknowledges the legitimate divine origin of the poet's intoxication, while reinforcing the division between the dependent worldly and the sovereign divine sphere. The speaker answers the Prophet's challenge by presenting a goblet of "the blood of Tripoli's martyrs" ("Ṭarābulus ke shahīdoṉ kā hai lahū is meṉ") with the assertion that "what is here cannot be found even in Paradise" ("jo chīz is meṉ hai jannat meṉ bhī nahīṉ miltī" (Iqbāl, 218).

In his answer to the Prophet, Iqbal's speaker concedes that "satisfaction cannot be found in this world" ("dahr men āsūdagī nahīṉ miltī"—the word *dahr* more precisely suggests worldly temporality). But in the final lines, human struggle becomes an arena for worldly action that completes the divine project as it cannot complete itself, challenging the enclosed self-sufficiency of the mystical system of signs. Fitrat, who writes in a society trembling on the verge between the enforced Islamic norms of the Bukharan Emirate (overthrown 1920) and the enforced atheism that followed its integration into the Soviet Union (completed 1924), deemphasizes the specifically Islamic content of the poem (it is, after all, recited by a Hindu character), while playing up the challenge to God, who becomes the speaker's direct interlocutor in place of the Prophet Muhammad. Following the initial complaint of the injustice of the world, the body of Fitrat's poem reads as follows:

> May you meet with none of the various captivities and humiliations
> That led straight up to the throne of God.
> God asked me about the state of those lands of ours:
> "What have you brought me as a gift from there?," He said.

I said, "There is not one thing there worthy to give you as a gift
One word, one deed, one thing!
But I
Have brought a little bottle with one drop of blood inside,
I've brought a very precious souvenir.
Its like can't be found in your treasury, or as far as you fly.
You have never made the like of this.
This sacred blood, o God!
At the swords of tyrants, on the path of freedom
It fell from the body of a youth, created by you and martyred!
Take it!.. Preserve it!

Uchratmayin hech bir turli tutqinliqgha, khörliqgha,
Olib bordi tuppa töghri Haq takhtining oldigha.
Haq mendan shul yerimizning hollarini söradi:
"Menga ondin tortuq qilib nelar keturding?!" dedi.
Dedim: "Onda yöqdir sira senga tortuq qilghudek
Bir söz, bir ish, bir narsa!..
Biroq men
Bir kichkina shisha ichra bir tomchi qon keturdim,
Köp baholi bir armughon keturdim.
Bunday sening khazinangda, uchmoghingda topilmas.
Yaratmading sira buning eshini.
Bu muqaddas qon, ey Haq!
Zolimlarning qilichi-da erk, ozodliq yölinda
Shahid tushgan bir yigitning yarasindan tomghandir!
Ol!.. Saqla! (61)

While this is not an anti-religious work, the dialogue takes place against a backdrop of divine superfluity (not to say obliviousness and negligence). It should be no surprise that within the next two years, during his Moscow exile after the Soviet state purged excessively independent-minded revolutionaries from the Bukharan government, Fitrat would write another play about the revolt of Satan against God ("Shaytonning Tangriga isyoni," 1924). The atmosphere of confrontation is heightened by the removal of all the conventional Persianate mystical signifiers (nightingale, garden, wine) that Iqbal uses to create a space of apophatic encounter. This is in line with Fitrat's poetics of reverie, which comes even closer than Iqbal to the scenario of non-autonomous worldly literary subjectivity proposed by Majumder. The poet is brought into confrontation with God by the political suffering ("captivities and humiliations") imposed on him. We get a glimpse of something that might, under different circumstances, have taken on a visionary scale comparable to the god-building or cosmism pursued at the same time by Russian Proletkult thinkers, but within an Islamicate cosmological framework.

As Adeeb Khalid notes in his discussion of Fitrat's play, by the time it was staged in 1923, "many of Fitrat's hopes had already been dashed," particularly on the Indian front of Eastern revolution (273). The Bolsheviks' foreclosure of the decentralized diversity of revolutionary scenarios in the East resulted in the dissolution of the Bukharan People's Republic, and in

subsequent decades, a corresponding renunciation of entire arsenals of resources for revolutionary thought and speech that could not be fit into European frameworks of literary training. In 1926, Fitrat published a manual for young Uzbek writers that included Arabo-Persian meters, genres, and rhetorical terminology – but no subsequent Soviet Uzbek literary manual would include any of these (Hodgkin 2024, 212-213). This was a grievous loss for revolutionaries, not only of persuasive tools but also of imaginative horizons.[5] In a world where those forms are still a significant presence in the mass culture of large populations, circulating on the radio and social media and sung at demonstrations, Majumder's sense of the layered temporalities of revolutionary culture is very helpful indeed.

Notes

[1] A preliminary bibliography of this quickly-expanding field would include Lee; Halim; Mahler; Yoon; Vanhove; Djagalov; and Salazkina. Here and below, the bibliography is more extensive than would be usual for a forum piece, because Majumder's scholarly engagements in the book point primarily in other directions than this corpus, to which it is nonetheless an extremely helpful contribution.

[2] Glaser and Lee; Popescu; Volland; Ertürk; and two special issues of Comparative Literature Studies: 59 (3), "The Cultures of Global Post/Socialisms"; and 61 (2), "Communist World Poetics."

[3] This episode is sketched out by Khalid, who calls it "a wonderful moment of intertextuality that deserves much greater development than is possible here" (269, n. 36). My brief discussion follows the direction sketched by Khalid. For Urdu transliteration clarifications, I would like to thank Qasim Chattha.

[4] The most famous instance in Iqbal's oeuvre is his long, narrative Javednamah (1932). On the mi'raj in literature and art, see Gruber. On the reverie in Romanticism (which certainly provides a secondary generic toolkit for Iqbal's approach to poetic subjectivity), see Raymond.

[5] As in the agitprop plays of Dutt discussed by Majumder, in early Soviet Uzbekistan, agitational playwrights continued to make use of those folk performance forms that with fewer evident connections to the classical literary tradition; see Roosien (forthcoming), ch. 4.

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