

## **Accessing the Brinks: World Literature, Peripheral Internationalism, Subalternity, and Religion**

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With his pathbreaking book *Insurgent Imaginations*, Auritro Majumder has shifted the paradigm of world literature away from its Western focus by showing how writers, intellectuals, filmmakers, and dramatists across Asia, Latin America, and Africa have drawn upon and conversed with each other's works rather than primarily drawing upon or responding to those from the West. Through this shift, Majumder designates South-South influence and production as "peripheral internationalism," with "peripheral" signaling the non-West and "internationalism" signaling the writers' universal vision, including as global solidarity for social justice. "Peripheral" indicates not only writers outside the West, but also those in the peripheries of the West that seek freedom from oppression. These groups include African Americans in the US, with Majumder showing the influence of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) on Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008).

Innovatively, adeptly, and rigorously probing the inseparable workings of history, politics, capital, and literary form, Majumder has developed a model of literary production and criticism that rethinks imperial-colonial binaries such as center-periphery and colonizer-colonized.<sup>1</sup> The last two binaries can be perpetuated by models of world literature that ignore the postcolonial condition that produces the Orientalist notion of "world literature," as if world literature supplants postcolonial literature and is freed of its politics. It is not that the legacies of colonialism, the reaches of neocolonialism, or the workings of the capitalist world-system have disappeared, as much as some forces in the West have sought to depoliticize literature and "world literature." It is within ongoing combined and uneven development that Majumder states the writers in his study have been "marginalizing the center and placing the periphery in a new center."<sup>2</sup>

While inverting the center-periphery relation could reproduce the binary and privilege a new center, Majumder's phrase can be read with some irony, reflecting the irony and allegory in the peripheral writings he analyzes. This irony suggests that the periphery is a "periphery" within the imperial worldview of "center-periphery"; "peripheral" writing can be for-itself and its own internationalist vision rather than writing only for-the-center and serving its hegemonies. But do the peripheries have peripheries? How do peripheries attend to the writers and worldviews on their own peripheries? Or is there sufficient irony to "periphery," such that accessibility and visibility are important for international solidarity? Peripheral internationalism risks affirmation – of solidarity, humanism, internationalism. In attending to the diversities within itself, could there be an *intersectional periphery*, one that acknowledges peripheral internationalist writers who write from and about at least doubly marginalized positions, such as those across gender, caste, and religion, and must thus construct forms for their own visions of solidarity, understanding, and belonging? Given Majumder's model of peripheral writing as resistant to its own national elites, we can consider the closing lines of the poem "Avva's Stack of Grief," by the Telugu Dalit feminist and activist poet Jupaka Subhadra. "Avva" is grandmother in the Telugu language. The title of this poem in Telugu, transliterated to English, is "mā avva dukkhālni dunnī pōsukunna tokkudubanda." "Phallu" is the loose end of a sari:

My avva, she's a coarse-slab at the doorway that  
 heaped sorrow as a stack of history  
 tightening the phallu round her waist,  
     my avva is a question,  
 flashing a sickle in her hand.  
     May the languages be doomed! They never accessed  
     the brinks where my avva wandered.<sup>3</sup>

How writers and their literary form can write about subalternity – perhaps accessing the brinks – is seen in Majumder's focus on subaltern internationalism through his reading of Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades* (2010) and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" (1978, 1981). Majumder insightfully argues that "internationalist writing is best described as speculative attempts," which he explains are "'encounters,' by writers to come to terms with the myriad ways in which subaltern individuals and communities articulate totality" (158). Do the "myriad ways" of the subaltern articulation of totality in turn require myriad ways – including speculation, encounter – for understanding such totality? How do the literary forms of peripheral internationalist writing about the subaltern relate to the forms of scholarly writings seeking to "understand" (including studying the processes of understanding) the subaltern? Ranajit Guha in his article "Chandra's Death" takes us to a Bengali village in 1849. The young Chandra dies from medicine given by her sister to abort an unwanted pregnancy. The colonial court classified the "case" as a "murder," registering Chandra's

sister's and mother's tears as confessions of guilt. According to Guha, the court "assimilate[d] the order of the depositions before us to another order, namely law and order, to select only one of all the possible relations that their content has to their expression and designate that relation – that particular connotation – as the truth of an event already classified as crime."<sup>4</sup> The forms of law of course constantly transform, with varying positive and negative effects, historical experience into their own codes. Among the key elements in Guha's example are the colonial context and its power of form (and form of power) to so thoroughly determine – and neglect – the subjectivities and cultural nuances of Chandra, her sister, and her mother.

We can also consider another example of the seeming incomprehensibility of the subaltern. On May 5, 1993 in the city of Kolkata, Birendra Chakrabarti – known as Balak Brahmachari, leader of the Santan Dal religious sect – died. Balak Brahmachari's followers, however, believed their guru was still alive and that he had entered a spiritual state of *samadhi*, from which he would eventually awaken. They placed his body on ice slabs in the sect's headquarters. On June 30, 5,000 policemen entered the premises and removed the guru's body, using tear gas against the sect followers, who wielded acid bulbs, knives, and makeshift weapons. The police took the body to a crematorium, where final rites were performed by Balak Brahmachari's brother. Analyzing this case, Partha Chatterjee argues that "in resisting the modernizing project that is imposed on them [by national elites and the state], the subaltern classes also embark on a path of internal transformation."<sup>5</sup> This transformation echoes the "diachronic contestations and formations" (182) that Majumder wisely highlights as the long histories (or even histories) of peripheral writing. Chatterjee concludes that "in carrying out their pedagogical mission in political society, the educators – enlightened people like us – might also succeed in educating themselves."<sup>6</sup>

With unknowability in mind, I wonder how Majumder would consider the illegibility and untranslatability of subaltern forms of faith and belief that resist understanding by the elite classes, whether in India or in Euro-America. In her long story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha," Mahasweta Devi tells the story of the progressive Hindu journalist Puran Sahay, who travels to the remote tribal village of Pirtha to draw national attention to its drought. He also seeks to investigate sightings in the village of a pterodactyl – an "unearthly terror", a "monstrous shadow."<sup>7</sup> The eponymous pterodactyl appears in the form of a drawing on the wall of a cave by the tribal child Bikhia. It also appears one night in Puran's room, leaving Puran "witnessing his own futility."<sup>8</sup> As his time in the village unfolds, Puran must learn to unlearn his worldviews in an attempt to understand those of the tribals. The story's narrator states, "How can he [Puran] have faith in their faith?"<sup>9</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that "for the modern Indian the pterodactyl is an empirical impossibility. For the modern tribal Indian the pterodactyl is the soul of the ancestors" (204). Like Senanayak in "Draupadi," Puran can be read as a figure of the postcolonial intellectual who must unlearn in order to learn, especially as Puran is driven by ethical impulse,

perhaps even some justice for the tribals. Like the “mixed formal structures” (158) Majumder analyzes in “Draupadi,” “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” also combines several forms: reportage, travelogue, fiction, realism, magical realism, and even that of a quasi-Bildungsroman through Puran’s processes of intellectual and ethical growth in learning to unlearn. But what of the persistently unrepresentable? Does subaltern faith stand to the dominant as the periphery does to the world? In Arundhati Roy’s words, “How do you negotiate justice in a society, like the Indian, where people live in several centuries simultaneously? Everybody does not live in the market economy.”<sup>10</sup>

How do writers and critics understand subaltern faith when the world has inherited the long histories and violence of “religion”? Is the “world” in world literature similar to the “world” in world religions? European imperialism and colonization constructed the category of “religion,” which has informed the Orientalist construction of “world religions.” The idea of “world religions” emerged, as Tomoko Masuzawa has argued, alongside Europe’s reimagining of itself as “the West.”<sup>11</sup> Among recent studies of Hinduism’s invention as a “religion” is Anustup Basu’s *Hindutva as Political Monotheism* (2020), in which Basu vigorously shows how a singular “Hinduism” occludes the many diverse strands of Hindu beliefs and practices – including how the Hindu nationalist imagination is itself Orientalist and Eurocentric.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the various mechanisms by which the Orientalist and imperial imaginations have constructed “Sikhism” have been powerfully analyzed by Arvind-Pal Mandair, not least in his classic *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (2009).<sup>13</sup> My own work on postcolonial postsecularism has sought to understand how postcolonial writers, among them Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, Shauna Singh Baldwin, and Meena Alexander, resist the monolithic formation of “religions” such as Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism.<sup>14</sup> Within their literary works, movement through material violence and catastrophe – including Partition, civil war, majoritarianism, communalism, which have also shaped the writers – allows construction of modes of affirmation, which I locate primarily in the aesthetic. These writers risk some affirmation as they negotiate between secularism (both political and philosophical) and religion. Postsecularism explores how writers search for values by affirming select aspects of religion (such as faith and enchantment) and political secularism (such as equality of and nondiscrimination toward religions). In their highly experimental, exploratory gestures, these writers innovate literary form and use mixed forms – such as Rushdie’s combination in *The Satanic Verses* of magical realism with medieval bhakti poetry – as they explore the (im)possibilities of faith while resisting the violence of religion and the crises of secularism, all under the edge of the postcolonial political.

I have assembled here a diverse set of examples and theoretical formations, perhaps mirroring the heterogeneity of literary forms, histories, and material circumstances of peripheral writers affirming an internationalist vision, an international justice. I suspect Auritro Majumder would aver that the

similarities across theorizations of the peripheral, subalternity, literary form, and religion-secularism show these theorizations' historical situatedness in the capitalist world-system with its unequal developments and impacts. *Insurgent Imaginations* also strikes me as similar to Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (2006), in which Gandhi shows the shared anti-imperial commitments of peoples across India and Britain at the end of the nineteenth-century. From the angel of history to the line of flight – for peripheral writers, toward the international, toward justice – is the risk of imagining a better future. As Arundhati Roy has stated, “I would not write a novel that is just about marginalised people or just about one single thing. To me, it's the attempt to construct a universe.”<sup>15</sup>

*Insurgent Imaginations* appears on the terrain of a wide range of critical works that have analyzed world literature's Euro-American and Anglophone biases and imperial-colonial origins, including Robert Young's “Postcolonial Remains” (2012), Emily Apter's *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), Aamir Mufti's *Forget English: Orientalisms and World Literature* (2016), and Baidik Bhattacharya's *Postcolonial Writing in the Era of World Literature* (2018) and *Colonialism, World Literature and the Making of the Modern Culture of Letters* (2024).<sup>16</sup> Francesca Orsini in her article “Against Minoritization: Five Strategies for World Literature” (2024) offers the following strategies for a more inclusive world literature: to focus on curiosity, not mastery; relay translation can create visibility for minoritized literatures; a strong political interest can recognize the political context of literatures; to cultivate a multilingual sensibility; and to consider literatures that are beyond born translated.<sup>17</sup> Orsini's strategies read similarly to “diversity” initiatives in Western institutions, including universities and corporations, that aspire to recognize and accommodate difference, such as across race, religion, national origin, and language. The symptoms might be different in literatures and institutions, but the causes are similar: historically produced and carefully preserved, protected, and interconnected systems and solidarities such as Euro-American supremacy, Anglophone supremacy, and white supremacy. This is consonant with Majumder's argument that “the metropolitan conception of the (third) world has to – and can only – be substantiated, augmented, and made autonomous through the exclusive forms available to the metropole” (183). Supremacy's biases, as about race, religion, nations, language, and class, can be ignored by power, privilege, and the presumption of supremacy's entitlement to material and psychological comfort. But these biases are especially brought to the forefront in the aftermath of material crises and conflicts, such as 9/11, Charlottesville, Brexit, the murders of George Floyd and Brian Thompson, and by certain groups seeking refuge and asylum. As Majumder argues, while the “idiom of democratic socialism” has become mainstream in the US and UK, “in the imperial metropolises as elsewhere, the popular demand for economic redistribution and social dignity is endlessly confronted by forces that once seemed distant and foreign:

authoritarianism, the push for ironclad borders, cultural religious fundamentalism, deep systemic poverty and conflict” (198).

It is within the institutional, global, and cultural nexus of supremacy, crisis, and conflict that peripheral internationalist writing must breathe signs of life – but that life has always had its own centers of being, knowing, and writing, including, vitally, through *and as* its own histories of “diachronic contestations and formations” (182). Auritro Majumder’s erudite and considered book illuminates some of these ontologies, epistemologies, literary forms, and histories. As brilliant theoretical and critical scholarship, as rewarding reading, Majumder’s study embodies forms and features not unlike those of the literatures he analyzes: global, speculative, critical – and also humanist. The influence of Edward Said runs throughout *Insurgent Imaginations*, in not only the familiar terms of the oppositional intellectual, contrapuntal reading, and of secularism as non-identitarianism, but of the humanism that Said affirmed lay within *Orientalism*.<sup>18</sup> In advancing the notion of peripheral internationalism, Auritro Majumder has elegantly proliferated theoretically and methodologically rich translational, transformative, and adaptable possibilities, ones for understanding, among others, subalternity and its lifeworlds, institutional hegemony and exclusion, and capitalism and development – all shaping, and shaped by, the mutability of forms.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For my review of Majumder’s book, see Manav Ratti, *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery. Wasafiri*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2022, pp. 99-100.
- <sup>2</sup> Auritro Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*. Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. ix. All further quotations will be from this edition and will appear in parentheses in the body of the article.
- <sup>3</sup> K. Purushotham, translator and editor, *Black Lilies: Telugu Dalit Poetry*. Critical Quest, 2013, p. 38.
- <sup>4</sup> Ranajit Guha, “Chandra’s Death.” *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 141.
- <sup>5</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, p. 51.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>7</sup> Mahasweta Devi, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha.” In *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*, translated and introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Routledge, 1995, p. 95, p. 103.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- <sup>10</sup> Pavan Kumar Malreddy, “The Syntax of Everyday Injustice: A Conversation with Arundhati Roy.” *Wasafiri*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2021, p. 42. On September 18, 2024, the Government of India approved allocating ₹5 lakh to each tribal household in 63,000 tribal-majority villages to encourage homestay tourism. See Abhinay Lakshman, “Tribal homestays, farming on forest land are highlights of Centre’s fresh drive to develop ST villages.” *The Hindu*, September 18, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/cabinet-approves-pradhan-mantri-janjatiya-unnat-gram-abhiyan-sanctions-79156-crore-for-tribal-communities/article68655899.ece>

- <sup>11</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. University of Chicago Press, 2005, xiv.
- <sup>12</sup> Anustup Basu, *Hindutva as Political Monotheism*. Duke University Press, 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*. Columbia University Press, 2009.
- <sup>14</sup> Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature*. Routledge, 2013; “The Intersections of Postcolonialism, Postsecularism, and Literary Studies: Potentials, Limitations, Bibliographies.” In special issue, edited by Raji S. Soni, “Religion, Literature, and the State: Book Colloquia on Jaspreet Singh’s *Helium* and Manav Ratti’s *The Postsecular Imagination*,” *Sikh Formations*, vol. 18, no. 3-4, 2022, pp. 383-414; “Precarious Joy: Meena Alexander, Postsecularism, and *Bhakti* Poetry.” *Literature and Theology*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2024, pp. 181-189; “Theoretical Framings of the Postsecular.” *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, edited by Justin Beaumont, Routledge, 2018, pp. 111-123; “The Postsecular and the Postcolonial.” *Reading the Abrahamic Faiths: Rethinking Religion and Literature*, edited by Emma Mason, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 267-279; “Rethinking Postcolonialism through Postsecularism.” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 57-71.
- <sup>15</sup> Pavan Kumar Malreddy, “The Syntax of Everyday Injustice: A Conversation with Arundhati Roy.” *Wasafiri*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2021, p. 49.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert Young, “Postcolonial Remains.” *New Literary History*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2012, pp. 19-42; Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. Verso, 2013; Aamir Mufti, *Forget English: Orientalisms and World Literature*. Harvard University Press, 2016; Baidik Bhattacharya, *Postcolonial Writing in the Era of World Literature*. Routledge, 2018 and *Colonialism, World Literature and the Making of the Modern Culture of Letters*. Cambridge University Press, 2024.
- <sup>17</sup> Francesca Orsini, “Against Minoritization: Five Strategies for World Literature.” *Interventions*, DOI: 10.1080/1369801X.2024.2314277, March 4, 2024, pp. 4-17.
- <sup>18</sup> Anthony Alessandrini, “Humanism in Question: Fanon and Said.” *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Sangeeta Ray and Henry Schwarz, Blackwell, 2005, pp. 431-450.

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