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The Periphery Now: Response to Book Forum on *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*

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I

I feel honored to have my work, which I believed would be of little interest, engaged with such generosity. In this brief essay, I reflect on the issues raised by the contributors as well as the stakes of the periphery as I understand it.[1]

Capitalism, arguably, is entering a new phase of crisis. The post-1945 "liberal international order" (or "rules-based order"), and the post-1990s United States' unipolar hegemony are both in jeopardy. Witness the US-backed Israeli war in Gaza, termed a genocide by critics, Lebanon, and Iran; the Russia-Ukraine conflict; the trade war between China and the US; and efforts in the Global South to "de-dollarize" international banking. At the United Nations, as recently as in November 2024, the United States vetoed (for the fourth time) a unanimous Security Council resolution calling for ceasefire and humanitarian aid in Gaza; a month before, in October 2024, the US and Israel were the two countries found opposing a General Assembly resolution, on ending the decades-old embargo against Cuba, that passed by a margin of 187-2.

Alongside unpopular wars and sanctions, the liberal international order is further eroded by worsening domestic inequality and the rise of far-right forces in the "core" Western countries. Meanwhile, opinion is divided on the contradictory character of the BRICS association of emerging economies, founded in 2009 by Brazil, Russia, India, China, joined by South Africa (in 2010) and now comprising additional countries (Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the UAE), and whether the so-called BRICS+ lends a counterweight to the G7: the dominant coalition of the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom. The force fields shaping the contours of the present and the future are yet to be clearly articulated.

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The narrative of Western decline is seeping into literary circles too. The Indian-origin writer Amitav Ghosh, in his acceptance speech for the 2024 Erasmus Prize, recently observed that, "the centuries-long period of Western dominance is lurching towards its end. Whatever might be our opinions on the rights and wrongs of the current conflicts in Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen and Ukraine, it is now self-evident that it is no longer possible for the West to dictate solutions through force of arms, as it once did … [and] the West's structures of governance are now in danger of swerving disastrously off course" (Ghosh). Alongside the imperial West's capacity for superior "organized violence," its liberal-cosmopolitan description of the world is in question.

II

At a more unassuming level than international politics, world literature also appears to be shifting. Debates in the first two decades of the twenty-first century emphasized remapping the field along pluralist lines beyond the triumvirate of English, French, and German literatures. Even so, these took the centrality of the Western aesthetic and narrative conventions for granted more or less. While Marxist, postcolonial, and world-systems theory introduced useful analyses of capitalism, colonialism, and global trade, respectively, the non-West regions appeared mostly in the peripheral field of vision. This pattern is changing in recent years, evidenced by the interest in "the rest" on the latter's own terms: put differently, not only the key role of colonies and peripheries in the making of metropolitan world literature (Bhattacharya; Cleary; Mufti) but even more so the complex relationship among the so-called first, second, and the third worlds (Clark; Djagalov; Erturk; He; Hodgkin; Kalliney; Mahler; Popescu; Volland). To adapt the famous notion from Marx's *Capital*: the appearance of free exchange in the marketplace of ideas (liberal-cosmopolitan world literature) and the unfree (imperialized) conditions in which these ideas take shape are under renewed scrutiny.

Nonetheless, in the theoretical folds of the field, as Elinor Taylor opines, "certain Marxist positions and … Anglophone liberal formulations" nourish a "reified conception of world literature as *merely* the reflection of capitalism's dynamics of development" (3, original emphasis). The emphasis on "transnational cultural relations under capitalism," perhaps unwittingly, "reify the world of the capitalist imaginary by reducing all such relations analogically to trade, exchange and markets" (1). Furthermore, Taylor charges, "the literary worlds of twentieth-century internationalism" and "[t]he literary traditions … of communist writers and thinkers … [and] the radical movements of the century are held at some distance or even obscured" (1).

Arguably, the Marxist concept of relative autonomy nuances reified and reflective notions of literature and culture. Drawing on the late Katerina Clark's *Eurasia Without Borders* (2023), Taylor problematizes "simple configurations of the colony-metropole hierarchy" (2). She highlights the presence of European and

Anglophone writers alongside Asian ones in the interwar, Moscow-centered networks of international communism. British engagements decreased after the mid-1940s with some of its key protagonists "lost to retreat, defeat, exile or death," but in postwar Britain, Taylor invokes the case of the Welsh socialist critic and Cambridge professor, Raymond Williams, "who both engaged seriously and critically with interwar Marxist thinking on culture" (2). It is a salutary reminder (to the more identity-minded at least) that male, White writers and critics located within the imperial metropole also contributed to an anti-imperialist culture; this is further explored by a recent issue of the *Key Words* journal, on "Raymond Williams and World Literature," including mediations by Daniel Hartley, Sandeep Banerjee, Maria Elisa Cevasco, and others (Hartley).

Relatedly, the Marxist notions of open-ended, diachronic discourse and dialog might be usefully emphasized against the dominant Foucauldian understanding of closed, synchronic regimes of coloniality. Craig Brandist points to the shortcomings of "postcolonial readings of modern Indian literature based on Foucauldian assumptions" that lead to "a reflexive 'writing back' against a monolithic, or monological colonial discourse" (6). He proposes, "a complex and substantial conception of agency that recognises and negotiates the fragmented culture of the colonised and the internally divided culture of the West while reaching beyond both" (6). Notably, Brandist's own work re-illuminates for Anglophone scholarship the intellectual landscape of the pre-revolutionary Tsarist empire and the early Soviet Union. Drawing from the archive of early Soviet Indology, Brandist envisions an open and more transcultural version of Indian/postcolonial and Russian/Soviet encounters.

Some examples include the preeminent critic of the European novel, Mikhail Bakhtin, discussing "accounts of 'Indian wonders' [*indiiskie chudesa*]" in early modern Europe that reappear in François Rabelais' novelistic universe (8). "Despite his [Bakhtin's] overwhelming focus on the European novel," Brandist writes, "[t]here is nothing distinctly 'European' about the folkloric elements unearthed in Bakhtin's account of Mediaeval carnival, rather they are survivals from a common Afro-Eurasian substratum, or a universal humanism, that are retrieved and deliberately inserted in works of modern literature in order to democratise culture" (8). Other remarkable instances include the attention to Soviet researchers' insights on the Roma, "Indian (-origin) lower-caste" migrants to Europe, in the annals of "early Soviet nationality policy" that complicate easy notions of postcolonial upper-caste nationalism and diasporas (10). Further, "modern Indian philology" thrived at places such as "the Institute of World Literature in Moscow and the Institute of Oriental Studies in Leningrad … leading to some insights that anticipate … Dalit studies in the 1990s," complicating the infamous Marxist shibboleth, the "mechanical conception of caste" (10, 7). Admittedly, Soviet Indology met a calamitous end under the "emerging Stalinist system" in the 1937 Great Purge among others; nonetheless, some of its broader ideas percolated to Anglo-American contexts (6). Brandist contends that postcolonial theory surreptitiously incorporated the Soviet critique

of Indo-European philology and Western imperialism through the Palestinian-American critic, Edward Said.

Perhaps with this context in mind, Kevin Platt proposes, "a greater foregrounding of three, rather than one world in our present critical work" (14). Echoing Taylor above, he jettisons reified notions of "world literature … [as] a monolithic and perpetual shadow of a historically inevitable capitalist world system," and stresses alternate "projections of a world bound together not by capitalist empire and capitalist exchange but by anti-capitalist, anti-imperial struggle and socialist internationalist solidarity" (12, 14). This entails, "a more fully structured account of relationships of both collaboration and resistance between third and second world actors" (18). Platt advances that, more than its dependent relationship to the "first world," "the third world 'belongs' to the second, socialist world … held together by other forms of value, those of political affinity and cultural exchange" (15). This is a remarkable point, and not only for the reconfiguration of the second and the third worlds that disappeared in the last decade of the previous century. Like Brandist, the real significance of Platt's position lies in the retrofitting of the remnants for the present conjuncture.

In a welcome move, Platt highlights the literary-speculative rather than the economic-positivist connotations of the periphery. While no doubt "literary history inherited the term 'periphery' from world systems theory," there is another compelling lineage, "the master-bondsman dialectic of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*" (17, 16). In this regard, Platt invokes Georg Lukács, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and especially Fredric Jameson's "Third World Literature": "in the end, only the slave [bondsman] knows what reality and the resistance of matter really are" (Jameson 85 qtd. in Platt 17). Platt's redefinition of the bondsman departs from Lukács' proletariat and Spivak's third world subaltern by sublating both in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*. He extends the original Jamesonian thesis, postulating "the agency of third world socialism as a world in its own right, and as the only location from which emancipatory global politics can ultimately be enunciated" (18). Platt also suggests that "national allegory in a second-world socialist realist novel – in works by [Dmitri] Furmanov or [Boris] Polevoy" might "illuminate the power relations … of Soviet and eventually also Chinese … exchange with [the] third world" (18). Given these novels' circulation and multiple translations, including into non-metropolitan languages, this is an interesting question for scholarship.

Samuel Hodgkin's contribution on "the Soviet East" and "Persianate poetics" focalizes another aspect of the dialectic between revolutionary openings and their folding in the second and third worlds (21). Adducing the Soviet Uzbek stalwart, Abdurrauf Fitrat's adaptation of the Indian poet-philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal, Hodgkin provides a set of astute remarks on the minoritized, but by no means minor registers of "Eastern anticolonialism" (25). Hodgkin's invocation of the "transregional" unsettles the standard understanding of linguistic, aesthetic, formal exchange where "the nation" represents a distinct

unit (21). (A case in point is my own labelling of Iqbal as an Indian figure above: he is also claimed transregionally in Pakistan and Bangladesh and not merely by dominant nationalists, as the Bangladeshi Marxist critic Jatin Sarkar, himself a minority, wrote, "Ikbāl āmāder" or "Iqbal is ours".) Additionally, a recurring provincialism is the narrow focus on Europe-derived realist and modernist forms of verse and prose. Aijaz Ahmed raised both of these points in his scathing response to Fredric Jameson four decades ago (Ahmed).

Hodgkin provides an unexpected twist by tracing such tendencies to the 1930s Soviet paradigm of "national in form, socialist in content," continued through "Soviet Uzbek literary manual[s]" to the Cold War-era manifestos of the "Soviet-backed Afro-Asian Writers' Association" (22, 27, 23). He bemoans the "Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary modernizers," and later the "mass mobilization states [that] discarded certain locally-used rhetorical repertories," and, by way of contrast, underscores the ubiquity of the *ghazal* form, poetic gatherings such as the *mushairah*, and the "widespread enjoyment and discussion of classical poetry by uneducated rural and urban populations" (23, 24). Hodgkin muses that "some non-Western literary forms and modes of literary sociability did lend their rhetorical force to revolutionary messages" and that these, "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" (22, 24). Crucially, the deepening of "peripheral aesthetics" implies the recuperation of "non-Western forms variously designated as local, traditional, indigenous, autochthonous, or national" (24, 22). Further – and I note this in passing – Hodgkin's argument indicates the need to historicize world literature beyond Eurocentric conceptions.

The twin emphases on radical forms and universal humanism mark Philip Kaisary's reflections on peripheral aesthetics. Similar to Brandist above, Kaisary observes that "so-called 'European humanism' cannot be traced to Europe alone" (34). He identifies a "*rebel thrust* [that] operates on multiple registers but principally via … comparatist methodology, which connects marginalized cultural artefacts and materials generated within the peripheries of global capitalism" (31, original emphases). Kaisary curates a gallery of thinkers: Leon Trotsky, Ernst Bloch, Raymond Williams, Roberto Schwartz, Edward Said, Fredric Jameson, Naomi Klein, and Mark Fisher. He argues for the "revalorization of [the tradition of] cultural materialism," the "explanatory capacity of Western Marxism," and particularly the theory of combined and uneven development for insights on "aesthetic form" (32, 30). By contrast, Kaisary is skeptical about "post-critique" that abandons "historical criticism and surface-depth modes of reading and interpretation … [in the terms of] 'vulgar sociology'" (32). Arguably, these "recent depoliticizing theoretical trends" parallel "the commodification and monetization of cultural materials expressly hostile to capitalism" (32).

Kaisary cites the instance of the 1960s and 1970s Third Cinema for the latter, "a radical cinema of liberation and anti-imperialism that emerged in the

Third World and most especially in Latin America," that was subsequently incorporated by "a politically de-fanged 'World Cinema,' a marketing label … rather than a genre" (32, 33). Mediated by the entertainment industry in the "the core capitalist countries" – recall Criterion, Janus Films, the early Netflix – Third Cinema's belated acceptance paradoxically ensured that its "political aspirations … [were] to be regarded as outmoded" (33). Kaisary insightfully argues that not just radical texts or media, but also their conceptual accoutrements undergo similar admission procedures at the first world's check posts: initial suspicion, then avant-garde cooptation. The "critical work of retrieval" must avoid then, in Kaisary's words, "the terms of *naïveté* or mere wishful thinking … [and] misty-eyed romanticism as to the revolutionary capacities of art" (32).

Complementing Kaisary's Latin American perspective, Fabio Durão highlights the understudied Brazilian "São Paulo School of social theory and literary criticism," especially the critics Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwartz (38). Durão configures, through a striking industrial analogy, the academic barter between the core and the periphery. Conditioned by the latter's assumptions of inferiority and the neglect of "autochthonous concepts" – those generated by the São Paulo School for instance – there emerges a "*theoretical* dependency" (original emphasis); and, consequently, "new conceptual elaborations … are imported by marginal countries" (39). Durão describes the hierarchy as follows: "[peripheral] criticism processes [local texts] … thus producing consumer goods; literary theory … would fabricate durable goods; Theory … would correspond to capital goods, since it produces interpretative machines" (39). This insight can be further extrapolated from a single word, "fabricate": *fábricaçao* in Portuguese has a sense of manufacture, from *fábrica* or factory, that is stronger than the English "fabrication". Which is to say, the Anglo-American academy regularly fabricates, not just invents but manufactures, "Theory" (in the capital goods form of leading concepts) for the marginal academies to import.

Behind the lure of portability lurks the dangers of theoretical dependence. Durão compares my "peripheral internationalism" to Candido's and Schwartz's earlier elaboration of "[national] part and [global] whole," but warns against viewing the respective concepts "as either immediately compatible or ineluctably mutually exclusive" (38). He insists that "*Insurgent Imaginations* … as theory … could *not* be applied in the Brazilian context" (original emphasis), that "'internationalism' possesses a freshness of its own that is weakened when placed in the extensive and often sterile discussions on world literature," and further, "'internationalism' immediately presents itself as materialist counterpart to 'cosmopolitanism,' the inevitable conceptual underpinning of world literature" (39, 37). Some two decades ago, Timothy Brennan made a similar distinction between the terms internationalism and cosmopolitanism during the latter's heyday (Brennan). To summarize: if the concept of world literature is to be useful, it must resist the post-critical as well as the cosmopolitan. These edgy fabrications not only naturalize peripheral dependence but also undermine the critical

subject, causing, to borrow Durão's description, "a schizophrenic dissociation whereby the subject deals with itself as an untouchable object" (39).

Mrinmoy Pramanick illustrates a fascinating tapestry of translations, exchanges, and cultural imaginaries that locate South Asia, and Bengal in particular, as the locus. Going beyond the core-periphery binary, he underscores that "peripheral internationalism highlights an important reality and provides a framework for understanding the various Indian cultures with their cross-border experiences" (47). Some early examples include the travels of the Buddhist *Charyapada* (8-12th CE) from Bengal to Nepal; the language and literatures of Arabic Malayalam in Kerala (since 9th CE); and the adaptation of the Tamil Kamban *Ramayana* (*Ramavataram,* 12th CE) in Southeast Asia such as the Thai epic *Ramakien*. Sadly, these pre- and early modern worldlings are little-regarded in postcolonial literary scholarship; Pramanick cites the sociologist Vivek Chibber's comment to the effect that, "in the name of displacing Eurocentrism, postcolonial theory ends up resurrecting it with a ferocious intensity" (Chibber 291 qtd. in Pramanick 45). In the colonial/postcolonial periods of the 19th and 20th centuries, too, there emerged a plethora of translations of East and Southeast Asian literatures into Indian languages; the (comparative Asian) philological studies of Suniti Kumar Chatterji; vernacular travelogues; philosophical enquiries into pan-Asianism; and Marxism-inspired revolutionary culture that sought to localize the disparate contexts of national liberation in India, Bangladesh, Chile, Vietnam, Turkey and elsewhere. These lineages reanimate the "geo-cultural areas of the world understood as ex-colonies or global south," reorienting frameworks for a non-Euro-modernist world literature (48).

Like Hodgkin above, Pramanick traces the deep histories of peripheral internationalism; similarly, he problematizes the dominant conceptualization of the textual-literary, insisting that "most [Indian] literature has been produced in orality, with only a few written" (46). One might include here the transregional genres such as the *mangalkabya* that he cites, but also those of *jatra*, *gatha*, *qissa/keccha*, and *naksha*. Their respective developments testify to the thick fusing of indigenous and foreign cultural strata. Pramanick further observes, "different [linguistic, caste, ethnic, sectarian etc.] communities have their own different notion of *Desh* [a term difficult if not impossible to translate] and the world [*Biswa/Visva*]," which necessitates a supple awareness of the "multiple new centres of literature" that sometimes run parallel to one another, and at other times intersect (46, 45). As an example, he illustrates the counter-hegemonic Dalit Panther Movement in western India in the 1970s, which in turn refracted the Black Panthers as well as the Black Arts Movement, but also the interwar Bengali writer (much-translated and filmically adapted), Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, who, following the exemplar of Russian literature, posed the issue of Indian world literature as "the world of the oppressed" (46).

Finally, Manav Ratti's incisive piece draws on Subaltern Studies, arguably the preeminent South Asian export to the metropolitan academy, and the work

of Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The problematic of the "subaltern," Ratti contends, serves to complicate the growing tendency "to depoliticize [world] literature" and "ignore the postcolonial condition" (50). When "carefully preserved, protected, and interconnected systems and solidarities such as Euro-American supremacy, Anglophone supremacy, and white supremacy" readily if selectively "recognize and accommodate difference," such "'diversity' initiatives in Western institutions" ignore – no efface – underlying structures of domination and exploitation (54). Channeling Subaltern Studies, Ratti instead proposes a diachronic exploration of the myriad contestations over the "power of form (and form of power)" that co-produce literature, knowledge, and law in the postcolonial periphery (52).

Ratti highlights the "*intersectional periphery*" (original emphases) and "doubly marginalized positions, such as those across gender, caste, and religion," and asks how "literary forms … might relate to the forms of scholarly writings … [on] the subaltern" (51). Considering "the illegibility and untranslatability of subaltern forms of faith and belief," he avers that the "postcolonial intellectual … must unlearn in order to learn" (52). This is a welcome reminder of the Subalternist anti-positivist insistence, sometimes associated with Spivakian deconstruction in the academy but ultimately traceable to Maoist political practice in South Asia in the 1960s and 70s. Ratti conjoins such intellectual un-learning to the "postsecular" critique of "religion" – while earlier critics such as Talal Asad formulated influential accounts of the intersection between Orientalist knowledge and the stereotyping of Islam, Ratti extends the conversation in new directions, citing in addition the colonialist "invention" of Hinduism and Sikhism (53). Contrarily, he affirms the key role of "the aesthetic" and "mixed form" in enabling a postsecular criticism, invoking a range of Anglophone South Asian writers "who explore the (im)possibilities of faith while resisting the violence of religion and the crises of secularism" (53). In brief, Ratti urges a nuanced examination of the relationship between social form and literary form in South Asia, echoing if in a different register Roberto Schwartz (via Theodor Adorno and Antonio Candido) in his remarkable study of Brazilian literature.

III

How does the periphery figure in the present conjuncture, which is marked by the intersecting of capitalist economic crisis, the decline of Western political hegemony, and the unraveling of liberal-cosmopolitan culture? In this regard, two recent incidents in India, in their illustration of broader fault lines, and, particularly, of the shifting terms of literary-cultural discourse, appear to be quite instructive. I turn to this by way of conclusion.

One of the texts I wrote about at some length in *Insurgent Imaginations* was Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" (1978). Shortly after the book's publication, in 2021, the Delhi University, or more specifically its Oversight Committee, decided to remove "Draupadi" from the B.A. English Literature syllabus, along

with works by two other authors, Sukirtharani and Bama Faustina Soosairaj. The move was opposed by some faculty, including 15 members of the university's Academic Council, who saw it as interference in academic freedom. Initially, the university registrar defended the change to the media, describing it as a routine reshuffle hardly deserving comment, but then, once pressed by reporters, insinuated that Mahasweta's story "went against Indian culture and showed the military in a poor light" (Agrawal).

This incident highlights an issue in the teaching of the literary humanities evident not only in India but also elsewhere. Higher-education officials, policy-makers, politicians, and the media appear to be simultaneously quite indifferent to, and yet rather interested in what literature professors teach to their students. Such displays from the influential heights of society would ordinarily attest to the importance of literature as a social good, which would be a welcome thing, but they are also perverse given the curtailing of academic freedom in the universities and the concomitant devaluation of humanities research and teaching.

However, the episode illuminates not only bald censorship but something deeper, an emerging vision of "Indian culture" and a stringent refusal of anything that supposedly goes "against" it. This is a self-image preferred by the country's powerful middle-class who see themselves, and want to be seen by others both within the nation but beyond it too, in culturally authentic terms. The minor but vital role played here by higher-education institutions and especially administrators is telling. As managers charged with shaping learning outcomes for the students, the former rarely disavow the supposedly Western, liberal discourse of inclusivity and positive change. On the contrary, such values are embraced, or at least intoned, in ways that make counter-arguments difficult if not ineffective.

In the above case, for example, one argument advanced by the syllabus reform crusaders was that reading lists for the B.A. in English should include a range of voices rather than the same canonized authors for years on end. A second reason: that impressionable learners be given access to literature that promote the agency and the empowerment of Dalit (former untouchable-caste) women, rather than off-putting portrayals of violence perpetrated on them. Third, when protesting faculty claimed that two Dalit women authors, Sukirtharani and Bama, were being replaced, the logical rebuttal was that Mahasweta Devi was an upper-caste writer, and removing a text authored by her was justified on the grounds of diverse caste representation. In other words, the affair was an Indian version of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) if, paradoxically and unlike the West, deployed for nationalist ends.

A year later in 2022, another event occurred of even greater symbolic import. Nominated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, Draupadi Murmu became the first indigenous Adivasi (or Scheduled Tribe as per the official designation) woman president in India's history. It was simply a coincidence – if an ironic one, perhaps – that the president's first name, Draupadi, matched the fictional character, and that she, too, hailed from the

Santhal community. But Murmu, ex officio, would serve as the Supreme Commander of the Indian Armed Forces, which placed her at a vast remove from the other Draupadi, a communist guerrilla fighting the Indian state. A great deal of the discourse around Murmu's election zoomed in on her background; she symbolized, the story went, the empowering of previously-marginalized groups whose hour had arrived: women and Scheduled Tribes. The fate of Muslims and other minorities in this "new" diversity-friendly India, however, went unremarked.

These two episodes – Draupadi Murmu's election and the "Draupadi" controversy – provide an illuminating contrast if placed next to each other. Despite their varied functions, the universities, the government, and the military are quite interchangeable in this context. The election of the real-life politician and the censoring of the fictional one (militants, after all, should also be acknowledged as "politicians" if only to enliven the latter term) form dialectical if discontinuous counterparts of an allegorical representation. Both articulate the current status of the nation but in antithetical ways: namely, who can, and cannot be represented in the latter's institutions. Today, literary and cultural criticism might similarly attend to the contradictory aspects of peripheral incorporation into as well as undermining of the existing capitalist order.

Notes

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