

PERIPHERAL AESTHETICS

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Auritro Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 280pp, £75.00.

Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations* offers a fresh and provocative reworking of the concept of world literature. By examining a diverse archive that includes twentieth and twenty-first century fiction, non-fiction, theatre and film, the book uncovers an intricate network of connections fostered by art and activism across contexts like India, China, Latin America, the former Soviet Union and the United States. Majumder's argument is that such networks provide the ideal grounds for rethinking the meaning of world literature. If 'world literature' is all too often understood through a liberal discourse of post-national globalisation, then this book provides a strikingly different approach – by suggesting that the nation, far from being dead, is instead the grounds from which, paradoxically, a radical, *internationalist* vision and aesthetics emerge. Majumder chooses to study an 'understudied constellation of writers outside the "West"' (pix) that begins with Indian artists and intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, M.N. Roy, Mrinal Sen, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga, but then brings into view interactions and conversations with a whole host of figures from the decolonising periphery – from Mao Zedong in China to Glauber Rocha in Brazil. The remarkable ability of these figures to be rooted in particular domestic struggles, yet aligned with anti-colonial and revolutionary politics globally, has seldom been discussed as such within postcolonial literary studies. Through their stories, *Insurgent Imaginations* revitalises the study of world literature, while simultaneously sketching a politics of solidarity whose example is much needed in the present.

Majumder's central concept of 'peripheral internationalism' emerges from not only the artistic works considered in the book, but also his own reading practice that brings into focus moments of 'ideational exchange' (p85) and intertextual connection. The first chapter, for instance, offers a fascinating reading of a canonical figure – Rabindranath Tagore – by placing his 1907 *visva-sahitya* lectures on world literature in conversation with Mao's 1942 Yenan talks on art and literature. Tagore's lectures, Majumder argues, articulate not simply universalism but specifically a 'socialist universalism' (p4) that is aligned with the perspectives of Marx, Hegel and Vico. This is a new and striking perspective on Tagore, whose humanism is not typically seen as compatible with socialism. Mao's later discourse is then shown to be in dialogue with this socialist universalism, as it 'further clarifies the relation

between labour, consciousness and the creative imagination posed by Tagore' (p7). Subsequent chapters stage similar moments of interaction – between Third Cinema filmmakers from India and Latin America, between Arundhati Roy's nonfiction prose about contemporary Maoist insurgencies and the genre of the Latin American *testimonio*, between Adiga's fiction and the African American protest novel, and between the international discourse on Blackness and Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of the Naxalite movement, initiated by tribal agricultural workers and landless peasantry in India. But perhaps the most fascinating example of peripheral internationalism emerges through the story of Indian revolutionary M.N. Roy whose trajectory intersected with the Mexican, Soviet, Chinese and Indian revolutions of the early twentieth century, as well as with the Harlem Renaissance. Together, these hitherto little-discussed instances of ideational exchange speak to a rich internationalist tradition in the periphery that 'radiate[s] outward and downward ... embracing ever broader regions of the world, while capaciously incorporating the resistance of those below' (p19).

Drawing on the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwartz, Majumder outlines a new method of reading 'peripheral aesthetics'. 'Rather than venerating a small canon of postcolonial texts, all more or less divorced from context, this entails a rigorously historicised examination of diverse national literary traditions, their mediated autonomies, and their interconnectedness. Furthermore, instead of viewing these texts and contexts as unique or culturally irreducible, these are properly seen as interlinked instantiations of a literary world-system shaped by "capital and its advances" ...' (p26). Building on Trotsky, Majumder specifies that, 'the condition of possibility of peripheral aesthetics is combined and uneven development' (p27). 'Peripheral aesthetics,' he contends, 'not only arises out of unevenness but also, as a resisting impulse, seeks to abolish its conditions of emergence' (p27). This 'delineation of peripheral aesthetics recalls that proposed by Fredric Jameson' in 'Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism' (p28), which Majumder regards as 'the pioneering attempt' in the Anglo-American world 'at a systematic delineation of the relation between the world-system and peripheral literary cultures' (p28).

A key conceptual tool in this method of reading peripheral aesthetics is 'constellation' – a term derived from Walter Benjamin to refer to 'a mode of connecting phenomena to ideas' that leads to a 'reconfiguration' of both (p103). Thus, Majumder reads Mrinal Sen's 1972 film *Calcutta 71* – which 'relentlessly exposes the elite's betrayal of the masses' (p113) – as constellating and reconfiguring Bengali and English literary texts from the past and present that 'were responding to the idea of universal history' (p103). Meanwhile, the Bengali short story 'Draupadi' by Mahasweta Devi is constellated with Arundhati Roy's 2010 essay *Walking with the Comrades* – with both texts being 'damning condemnation[s] of the "democratic" Indian state' that highlight 'the challenges posed to hegemonic postcolonial nationalism by movements

from below' (p130). Finally, Adiga's *The White Tiger* is constellated with Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as well as with epistolary fiction and popular *tamasha* theatre in India. In a surprising new reading of this much-discussed Anglophone novel, Majumder calls attention to its 'simultaneous disavowal and appropriation of [the politics of] Naxalism' (p175), which the reader is previously introduced to through the Bengali works of Sen and Devi.

Given that India plays such a central role in the book, it is important to note that Majumder's choice of Indian artists and activists significantly complicates the picture of India that typically emerges from postcolonial literary scholarship. Rather than Gandhi, we focus on his contemporary M.N. Roy who 'saw Gandhian philosophy as articulating contradictory and competing tendencies: a broad prospect of humanist emancipation from below and archaic forms of conservatism and patriarchy' (p73). Instead of Satyajit Ray, we are introduced to one of his peers on the Left, Mrinal Sen, who found Ray's aesthetics wanting within the context of the growing political ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s (p93) and whose films push the 'new language for South Asian Third Cinema' –that Ray had helped create – to allegorical and political ends (p94). Figures like M.N. Roy and Mrinal Sen reveal the perspectives of Indian artists and intellectuals who saw themselves as engaged with opposing not just Western dominance but also the power of elites within India.

In the end, through the stories of these various internationalist figures *Insurgent Imaginations* recentres the notion of humanism, a concept that is sometimes regarded as unfashionable in current critical and theoretical discourse. For Majumder, 'humanism is at the heart of' peripheral internationalism. He notes, 'It is humanism that informs its principle of solidarity, animates each of its texts, and undergirds the constellation as a whole. In the words of Tagore's *visva-sahitya*, peripheral internationalism embraces the "union of its particular humanness with all humanity"' (p20). In a similar manner, the book 'mediate[s] between the particular and the universal' (p20) and reveals the ways in which the 'particular humanness' conveyed by writers and intellectuals from the periphery is especially illuminating of the 'worldly nature of creative work: of language and literature within the field of socio-historical relations' (p198-199). By offering this sort of mediation, *Insurgent Imaginations* places pressure on enduring academic and intellectual rigidities that characterise the field of English studies in general and the analysis of postcolonial and world literature in particular.

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