

Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures

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For those who study the link between the metropole and the colony or the idea of home in diasporic imaginings, the city has served as an important site of identity performance and exploration. Mohan's provocative study suggests that the village, both in its real and imagined manifestations, provides a strong counter narrative to the "urban cosmopolitanism" depicted in many popular South Asian Anglophone literary works (33). Mohan asks what it is about the city that has captured the imagination of so many postcolonial writers, from Salman Rushdie to Jhumpa Lahiri. Does this ubiquitous focus on cityscapes not portray postcoloniality as an anxious, melancholic, dislocated, and contradictory condition? The thesis of Mohan's book, that the village is a critical and modern site for agential change, aims to build a new literary-theoretical model for examining the postcolonial and Anglophone literatures of South Asia.

Mohan is well situated to critique "urban cosmopolitanism." Over the past few years, many scholars have commented on the linguistic biases of postcolonialism, biases that have contributed to a situation in which Anglophone or Francophone literatures are studied more systematically and critically than literatures being produced in modern indigenous languages of the South Asian and African (sub)continents. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been vociferous in his critique of such built-in predispositions within studies of postcolonial literatures. In his discussion of the dichotomy between the local and the global, he argues that "locality becomes measured by the degree of its distance from the metropolis of the Western world" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 25). Thus novels which purport to depict "local" life in modern African nations, according to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, are judged by the yardstick of linguistic cosmopolitanism. Mohan's study is a timely intervention in studies of Anglophone literature, because in *Utopias* she asks not whether the dichotomy in postcolonial literature is between languages of power and the "other" languages (formerly called vernaculars), but rather, why it is that within Anglophone literature there is a persistent return to the city as the site of reflections on postcolonial modernity. There is something unsettling and unsatisfactory about the persistently urban location of the postcolonial global citizen as she moves from one cityscape in the former colony to embrace life in another urban metropolis. Mohan is motivated by this trend to ask a different set of questions: Is the village "real," or is it a social construct? Is it static, dynamic, radical, or—to borrow from Nancy Fraser—is it a

“subaltern counterpublic” (67)? “Indeed,” Mohan asks, “can villages represent themselves?” (34). How does the rural function in South Asian indigenous languages and Anglophone literature?

The book is divided into five chapters, each of which focuses on novels that serve as flashpoints in furthering Mohan’s claim about the role the pastoral plays in reflecting counter-memories and counterpublics. Borrowing the concept of heterotopia from Michel Foucault’s published 1967 lecture, “Des espaces autres” (Of Other Spaces), Mohan goes to great pains to yoke Foucault’s conjoining of utopias and heterotopias to her own oeuvre in *Utopias*. This complicated epistemological foundation notwithstanding, the contribution this book makes to South Asian literary studies is significant, not to mention compelling in its comparative framework of analysis between India and Sri Lanka; its careful attention to works in both English and in translation; its holding in tension political and soteriological conceptions of imagining identity in South Asia; and, finally, the reconfiguring of the rural as a site of individual and collective action.

The first chapter focuses on Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* and animates the ideological impetus for the book. Bolstering her own reading of how the rural imaginary could reflect a revolutionary social and political framework, Mohan uses Gandhi’s perspective on the Indian village, seeing it as a powerful counterpoint to colonial modernity and Western civilization. Gandhi’s revisionist history did not see India’s path to freedom (*swaraj*) as developing linearly from rural to modern; as Mohan puts it, “the Gandhian village presents the locus of an important transformation in social thinking” (45). The rural imaginary, as Gandhi deployed it, served as the wellspring of civil disobedience on the one hand, and provided a fantastical (utopian) window through which to imagine the greatness of India’s past on the other. Although this past was undoubtedly Hindu, Gandhi’s utopian framework facilitated the recuperation of religious iconography for secular use and social reform.

If Gandhi valorized the village and regarded it as an important site of agential change and social transformation, Leonard Woolf’s *The Village in the Jungle*—the subject of Chapter Two—depicts a dystopic vision of rural life in Ceylon. Dystopia is the opposite of utopia, and the vision in the novel portends “a turning away from the . . . Buddhist utopia” championed by social reformers like Dharmapala in the early twentieth century (89). In Woolf’s work, the village becomes a symbol of modern “human struggle” in contradistinction to the jungle, which is seen as “a place of real hunger and thirst and danger” (63-64). Mohan argues that the rural is not imagined in Woolf’s novel as a bad or evil place; instead, village subjectivities have to negotiate the push and the pull of two different “ways of seeing” the world (72). The village and the jungle represent two different aspects of modernity, and while seemingly at cross-purposes, they in fact exist simultaneously within the textual space of the novel and the territorial space of the nation. As such, Mohan’s point that neither the village nor the jungle can simply be ignored is well taken.

Not all village utopias are harmoniously imagined, and the two works studied in Chapter Three, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and O.V. Vijayan's *Legends of Khasak* (1969; English trans. 1994), are exemplary in their discontent with the utopian vision of village life promulgated by Gandhi. Whereas Mohan identifies the rural imaginary of *Kanthapura* as an "allegorical homotopia. . . [where] a specific kind of dominant Hindu teleology" is presented as a model for incorporating diversity and difference, *Legends of Khasak* rejects outright the "Hindu *telos* for imagining a pan-Indian collectivity" (116). This chapter analyzes the longstanding influence of the Gandhian village model on several generations of Anglo-Indian and indigenous writings.

The later decades of Ceylonese writing—the subject of Chapter Four—witnesses a resurgence of Buddhist utopias and a complicated reading of Sinhalese modernity. Mohan highlights the work of Martin Wickramasinghe (*Gamperaliya*, 1944) and Punyakante Wijenaike (*The Waiting Earth*, 1966) to show that decolonization in Ceylon required a rejection of British domination through imagining an alternative paradigm of national belonging; this invariably took the form of a rural collectivity Buddhist in function and utopian in form. Mohan explains that Wickramasinghe and Wijenaike imagined the village "as the microcosm of a utopian nation-state connected to an explicitly Sinhala Buddhist history" (132). The strength of their works lies in the solutions they offer to the vexed "woman question" of nationalism, even if these resolutions are ultimately limited by ethnonationalism in Sri Lanka.

The book concludes with an interesting re-reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* as heterotopias, that is, as counter-sites of individual and collective memory, identity, and self-expression. In these novels, national identity is neither imaged as a utopia nor as a dystopia/homotopia, but rather, as a heterotopia. The ship is a microcosm of the colony according to Foucault, and it is this claim that Mohan echoes in her reading of Ghosh's and Ondaatje's novels. Mohan says that because much of the narrative action in both "occurs on boats and ships [. . .] quests and journeys form a central organizing principle" through which the passengers negotiate identity and difference (180). This chapter is significant for Mohan's overarching claim that the centredness of the postcolonial artist in "urban cosmopolitanism" is ultimately exclusionary and indifferent to the ways in which the "pastoral . . . remains a compelling springboard" in South Asian Anglophone and indigenous literatures (184). It is this absence that Mohan's project seeks to address, and it does so effectively.

Mohan should be lauded for her close and careful study of Indian and Sri Lankan literatures; her attentiveness to the historical flashpoints of war, civil disobedience, religious and ethnonationalist movements that animate literary production in the subcontinent; and her nuanced tracing of the influence of literary theories of modernism on the indigenous literatures of South Asia. Although this reader was not entirely convinced by the Foucauldian framework for the project, her work will be a welcome

addition to the field of South Asian studies and postcolonial studies. At times Mohan seems to stretch the grand canvas of (post)modernism to fit the very specific, localized kind of rural aesthetic that she underlines in her literary analyses. With the exception of the last chapter of the book, in which Mohan considers with sophistication the imagined village in world history, her theoretical framework interrupts an otherwise historically precise and engaging analysis.

Works Cited

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