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## Book Reviews

**On the Trail of the 'Ordinary' Saikat Majumdar, *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2013, pp.232**

The modernist project has long been theorized as a *tour de force* into the labyrinths of the hitherto unexplored, with its avowed territory being an excavation of the elusive and the buried. The period is characterized as one of heady experimentation and a journey into the unplumbed, whether in Woolf's investment in the "tunnelling process"<sup>1</sup> or in the Poundian injunction to "make it new."<sup>2</sup> In her oft-cited essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', Woolf constantly evokes the imagery of crashing, smashing and breaking,<sup>3</sup> to convey the self-avowedly iconoclastic thrust of modernist aesthetics, as with a certain hauteur she rejects the overtly factual fictional creations of the Edwardians.

Saikat Majumdar's *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire* is a significant intervention into this arena of modernist studies on two counts: one, because it takes us away from this high-adrenalin narrative of modernist 'heresy' and relocates its contribution in the quieter bylanes of its recovery of the quotidian, and second, because rather than collapsing this interest in the banal under the overall rubric of modernist art as eccentric, he finds it more fruitful to situate the focus on the banal against the backdrop of colonial modernity.

In keeping with his commitment to redress the under-theorized potentialities of the ordinary, Majumdar begins by casting Woolf as one of the most "insightful and polemical theorists of the banal"(14), both in her assertions of the myriad impressions that form the crux of daily existence and more particularly, in her recording of female boredom. However, the critic also remains aware of one of the defining ironies of high modernist aesthetics in the exhaustive and illuminating introduction to his book-on the one hand, its preoccupation with the fleeting, the

random, the transitory, where the mind becomes an "enormous eye" as imaged in Woolf's essay on 'Street Haunting'<sup>4</sup>, absorbing everything, it is implied, with undifferentiated voraciousness, inclusive of the routine, the mundane and the everyday, and yet modernism's pursuit of epiphanic moments, of moments of exaltation that would make undue investment in the everyday world equivalent to the unimaginative philistinism that would draw the ire of so many modernist writers, and would also signify a narrowing of their manifesto-driven aesthetic aspirations. As he says, "Quotidian details are often essential to flesh out the world of the novel and to produce the tangible immediacy without which realist narration, at least, cannot take place. But when such quotidian details define the limits of this fictional world, preventing aesthetic, psychic, or symbolic transcendence, that world, as Woolf implies, becomes dreary, predictable and banal."(10-11)

Majumdar makes the deployment of the banal more strategic and pointed by placing it within the framework of the colony-empire paradigm. He reads the colonial periphery's aspiring towards the metropolitan mother country as a playing out of the yearning to surmount the banal and indeed impoverished nature of its existence by casting the imperial centre in the role of the "Tabernacle" in Fanon's terminology<sup>5</sup>, the fount of bounteousness and fruition. The thesis he offers is that banality as a trope in the colonial context, "embodies a fractured relation to metropolitan modernity: at the same time, it remains perpetually animated by a desire to heal the fracture, to inhabit the transcendence the centre holds out as a promise."(12)

In foregrounding the trope of the banal, Majumdar also significantly re-draws the map of modernist studies that has generally configured modernist fiction as a topographical shift from the staid facticity of the objective world to the layered territory of the interior consciousness. Majumdar problematises these easy compartmentalizations by reminding us that much twentieth century fiction draws its sustenance from the realm of everyday experience.

The originality of his argument can be gauged from the fact that boredom in fiction has largely been read as a byproduct of lives of idleness and plenty, whereas Majumdar relocates it in the ambit of disenfranchisement. He traces the etymological roots of the word 'banal' to the history of serfdom and feudal service, thus iterating its connotations of repression and lack, and tying it to the politics of marginality. He emphasizes that his study finds its impetus in analyzing boredom "as a modern experience produced through socioeconomic conditions that are far removed from the glorified individualism and aristocracy of ennui."(23) Majumdar refers to the trope of ennui in Baudelaire but rightly regards that as a more individualistic position, articulating the self-conscious torpor of the aesthete as opposed to his own theorization of banality as related to the powerlessness of those on the peripheries. Extending the pivotal hinge of his argument that boredom and banality can be related to the condition of disempowerment, he mentions how many works registering women's protest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a response to the constricted and hemmed-in nature of women's lives. In fact, he suggests that Woolf's women-centered fictions trace their articulation of protest

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against the sterility of women's lives to this source. However, the gendered dimensions of the chosen trope of banality, though provocatively hinted at, do not form the core element of his enquiry.

Four writers form the heart of his study: **Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, Zoe Wicomb and Amit Chaudhari**, all belonging to nations where the grip of colonial hegemony has manifested itself, albeit in varied ways. Majumdar mentions how Wicomb and Chaudhari in particular embrace the banal at a time when the grand narratives of decolonization and postcolonial development were being fashioned. He points out that all four writers write from a position of distance to their place of origin and all except perhaps Mansfield (and she too, in many stories) find their fictional *raison d'être* in their native land. In the two late twentieth-century writers, the everyday becomes a space of articulation for the nagging deprivations that plague the lives of the local populace and this 'drama' plays itself out against the more spectacular politics of anti colonialism.

The chapter on Joyce primarily foregrounds the device of the epiphany. Majumdar reminds us that in Joyce's hands, the epiphany is to be read in contradistinction to the grand imperial narrative, where the foregrounding of the fragment is pitted against the totalizing historiographies of colonizing Europe. But warding off too celebratory a reading of Joyce's aesthetics of the fragment, Majumdar relocates the focus on the trivial and banal as Joyce's awareness of the gaping divide between metropolis and periphery: in Majumdar's own words, "the depressing contrast between the infinite potential of the metropolis and the paralytic nothingness of the periphery"(39)haunts many of Joyce's characters.

In the chapter on Mansfield, Majumdar comes back in part to a strain hinted at in the introduction, the notion of gendered boredom, arising out of the vacuity and repetitiveness of women's existence. But he ultimately situates the running substratum of tedium and incompleteness that lurks in her stories within the framework of the colonial condition, particularly in settler societies, suspended as they were between ties to the metropolitan centre on the one hand and a perceived distance from its privileges on the other. Beryl Fairfield in the 'Prelude' is cited an apt example of this dual axes of the narrative of unfulfilment. Within this colonial paradigm, he also evaluates Mansfield's attempt at ethnography in the *Urewera Notebook*, and places her documentation of the Maori presence within the tapestry of the picturesque and exotic. However he believes that, on closer reading, Mansfield's sensitivity to the fraught history of domination becomes palpable in moments of violence that threaten to erupt in many of her New Zealand stories such as 'Millie'. This strand of his argument is tellingly captured in the sub-heading 'Rupturing the Quotidian'.

The writings of Zoe Wicomb, a coloured writer from South Africa, offer Majumdar an opportunity to suggest that a view from the fringes often offers an alternately inflected adjunct to the overarching narratives of national history. Given South Africa's turbulent history, haunting tales of oppression and injustice have coalesced into the most prominent genre in South African literature, namely 'Protest

literature'. The embattled public sphere is foregrounded in such narratives; however in her collection of short stories *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, Wicomb though traversing the historically scarred time-scape of the 1950s to the 1980s, chooses to shift the lens and to chronicle the intimate nuances of daily existence. Though the events unfold against the more visible politics of anti-apartheid movement, Wicomb's site of protest is the lack of mobility faced by the blacks and coloureds on a day to day basis. Majumdar makes a crucial point when he argues that Wicomb's emphasis on the daily and the trivial, seen through the eyes of her female protagonist is also a reminder of "the differential empowerment within the racial groups oppressed by apartheid." (131) Majumdar traces Wicomb's detachment from macropolitics to her identity as a woman and as a coloured person, the latter implying an interstitial position that makes her more sceptical of totalizing narratives.

In the section on Amit Chaudhari, Majumdar deploys Jameson's much-contested hypotheses of third world literature as national allegory as a tentative tool to mark out much of the Anglophone fiction to come out of India in the 1980s and 1990s and to highlight how in these historically impelled novelistic allegories, the regionally specific and the minute is consigned to the margins.

Taking Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as the centerpiece of his argument, Majumdar dissects the postmodernist play and the formalistic daredevilry of these grand narratives as only a "frame to the historiographic conservatism at the heart of the genre" (142), in its nod to a Nehruvian 'stabilizing vision of a secular socialist India..' (143) While pointing to the homogenising thrust of such pan-Indian narratives, Majumdar lauds Chaudhari for foregrounding the provincial and familial. Majumdar draws attention to the metafictional commentary on the overdetermined classifications of the trivial versus noteworthy in Chaudhari's fiction. In his own epilogue, Majumdar again questions the falsifying nature of watertight compartmentalizations of the ordinary and the significant, by reiterating that history often unfolds in the marginal crevices of more spectacular events.

For so grounded a book, Majumdar remains rather noncommittal on one aspect-how while these writers find their fictional terrain in their local and native backdrops, thus creating a space for the peripheralized and silenced, they nevertheless do so from a comfortable distance from the challenges of daily existence in the colonies. Admittedly, in the introduction, he does comment on the "deeply ironic" (32) nature of the archaeologizing of the oppressive and debilitating tedium of life on the colonial margins by writers who have themselves been able to move away from it. However, he seems to scuttle the debate on the politics of location in the case of the four chosen writers, seeing the "move" as inevitable and indeed salutary for their artistic evolution.

Saikat Majumdar's book certainly takes its rightful place in a body of recent criticism that purports to look at modernism differently from its own self-mythologizing tendencies, and that explores the historically charged and insistent intersection between modernist and postcolonial studies. On a more personal

note, as a doctoral student researching in this area, his work has given me much to mull over. So, finally, in a conflation of the twin poles of Majumdar's theoretical configuration, in its anatomization of the under-researched resistant potentialities of the quotidian and 'ordinary', Majumdar's book stands as an invaluable and 'extraordinary' piece of scholarship.

#### References

- 1 Woolf, Virginia *Diary*, ii, 1923, p 272 in Elaine Showalter (intro) *Mrs Dalloway* 1992 London, Penguin, pp. xxix
- 2 qtd. in Gay, Peter *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* 2008, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., pp.4
- 3 qtd. in McHale, Brian and Randall Stevenson (eds) 2006 *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth Century Literatures in English*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp.62
- 4 Woolf, Virginia 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' in David Bradshaw (ed) *Selected Essays* 2008, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp.178
- 5 Fanon, Frantz *Black Skin, White Masks* 1986 London, Pluto Press, pp.23

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**Aruna Chakravarti, *Jorasanko*, Harper Collins, India, 2013, pp 406**

The novel whets your appetite for more. Primarily because everything in it satisfies the voyeur that exists essentially in each of us. Look at the canvas. The time : mid nineteenth century, a time that world over was full of rapid change as rigid traditions clashed with progressive ideas and reforms. The state : Bengal, known for its turbulent and rich political, social and cultural climate, and one most impacted by colonial rule. A family : the Tagores, one of the most celebrated for such literary giants as Rabindranath and successful bureaucrats as Satyendranath. And the complex web of relationships between various members of the Tagore household especially the Tagore siblings, their families and in particular, the chemistry between the brothers and their sisters in law.

The last aspect induces a sense of familiarity within the reader who would have encountered the characters in history books or read their writing. Accompanied almost simultaneously by the sense of shock at the realisation that there is so much that one has no clue of. What thus comes across right from the beginning till the very end is the tremendous research that must have gone into the making of the book; the clever, sensitive and subtle interweaving of fiction

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