



BOOK FORUM

Requiem for a Dream

Sandeep Banerjee 

McGill University
sandeep.banerjee@mcgill.ca

Keywords: decolonization; imagination; literature; utopia

Catastrophe

September 28, 2014. At Delhi's Rajiv Chowk metro station, a frenzied mob of Indians surround three African students. They begin to abuse them; they punch and hit them with belts and sticks. This recorded—and widely circulated—incident shows the African students seeking refuge in a police booth, but a policeman on duty (who appears to be from the Delhi Police force) does nothing to assist them. In a curious display of jingoistic nationalism, some of those gathered can also be heard (and seen) egging the mob on by chanting “Bharat Mata ki Jai” (“Victory to Mother India”).¹ This is just one (more) instance of racist violence faced by Africans living in India and points to the difficult relationship Indians—and India at large—have with racialized “others.”² And although this may seem a banal instance of “brown over black”³ racism, I draw on this incident for a different reason. This episode signals, in concrete terms, the demise of the abstract notion of “third world” or “Afro-Asian” solidarity that was premised upon and activated through what Auritro Majumder calls “peripheral internationalism,” itself an expression of the *insurgent imagination* called decolonization.

Lest we forget, it was less than a century ago that we lived in “a world divided into compartments,” where metropolitan states, through a complex of political

¹ Scroll Staff, “[Video] Cops Look On as Mob Attacks Black Men in Delhi Metro Station,” *Scroll.in*, September 30, 2014 (<https://scroll.in/article/681590/video-cops-look-on-as-mob-attacks-black-men-in-delhi-metro-station>).

² Sibaji Roychoudhury, “Racist Mob? No Worse Than What Africans Face Every Day in Delhi,” *Scroll.in*, October 2, 2014 (<https://scroll.in/article/681845/racist-mob-no-worse-than-what-africans-face-every-day-in-delhi>).

³ I borrow the phrase “brown over black” from the title of Antoniette Burton's book. See Antoinette M. Burton, *Brown Over Black: Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Citation* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2012).

domination, economic exploitation, and cultural control, ruled over the peripheral world consisting of the greater part of the earth's surface and of the majority of the earth's residents.⁴ The complex set of sociopolitical processes we call decolonization dismantled the colonial regimes in Ireland as well as Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, transforming the unequal world fashioned in the crucible of colonial-capitalist modernity into our contemporary world system of nominally equal territorialized nation-states. Although this is how it is remembered today—not entirely incorrectly, one should add—there is more to it than is captured by such historical first impressions. Decolonization, as I have argued elsewhere, is perhaps the only instance of the actualization—albeit a failed actualization—of the spirit of utopia.⁵ It was the project of collective dreaming “for a better way of being and living” and the concomitant “education of desire.”⁶ For several generations of the wretched of the earth, decolonization was a utopian ideal to unseat those who claimed for themselves the mantle of, to use Victor Kiernan's apt phrase, the lords of humankind.⁷ And unseat them they did, through the course of the twentieth century making it a truly radical century, especially from the vantage point of the twenty-first century.

“Insurgent imagination” and “peripheral internationalism” are the two luminous phrases and, indeed, concepts that Majumder offers up to his readers in his study. Peripheral internationalism is “a decolonizing vision challenging the unidirectional traffic of ideas from the metropolitan core to the peripheries.”⁸ Militating against “empirical and imperial reality,” it ekes out “specific conjunctures of the world as they are articulated in the text: namely, *how people felt, perceived, and ultimately imagined their connections to others.*”⁹ Much of the conceptual thrust of the claim (italicized previously) depends crucially on how we parse the word *people* in the statement. Because this claim is situated in the context of a “decolonizing impulse” of the colonial-capitalist world system, there is little doubt that the “people” in question are the formerly colonized, Frantz Fanon's “les damnés de la terre” who are known in the Anglophone world as the “wretched of the earth.” To say this another way, peripheral internationalism is a structure of feeling that enabled the wretched of the earth to imagine, and articulate, their subjectivities and their relation to one another and to the world at large.¹⁰ The decolonizing impulse was, and remains, the condition of

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington. (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 37–38.

⁵ See Sandeep Banerjee, *Space, Utopia and Indian Decolonization: Literary Pre-figurations of the Post-colony* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁶ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 1990), 6–8. Also see Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, vols. 1–3 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

⁷ See Victor G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: Black Man, Yellow Man, and White Man in an Age of Empire* (Boston: Little Brown, 1969).

⁸ Auritro Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 21.

⁹ Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations*; my emphasis.

¹⁰ For an elaboration of “structure of feeling,” see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35.

possibility of peripheral internationalism. And this is but a specific articulation of the principle of hope that Majumder terms “insurgent imagination.” But what’s in a name? That which we call the *spirit of utopia*, by another name would sound just as hopeful.

Dreamworlds

The literary field is a key locus for the articulation of utopian longings of a social formation as they manifest ideology in determinate and structured forms of signification. It is, thus, crucial for any project of collective dreaming. In the context of de/colonization, it was a key site where colonial and counter-colonial imaginaries “worked out” and posited possible worlds even as they jostled for hegemony. Colonial texts posited imagined geographies that reaffirmed the hierarchical vision and division of the world. Anticolonial texts, by reimagining the world in a counter-colonial register, performed a determinate negation on the colonial present. They engaged in the *utopian task* of reimagining the colony as a postcolony even as they performed the pedagogical task of providing an *aesthetic education* about it.

But while the literary field illuminates colonial and anticolonial imaginaries, it is not only—or simply—a locale for such a Manichean struggle. It is better understood as a site that illuminates a range of anticolonial visions or insurgent imaginations. It is therefore salutary to remember that although all counter-colonial imaginaries are utopian in their negation of colonialism, these can be, and often are, radically different from, and at times even incompatible with, one another. Indeed, the literary field offers imaginations of peripheral internationalism no doubt but also of other registers of the imaginative that are insurgent without being internationalist. In other words, the literary field presents not just visions of peripheral internationalism *but also of its others* such as parochial sectarianism and xenophobic nationalism. This is crucial to keep in mind, not least because they shape the reality of our present in crucial ways and cannot—should not—be wished away by simple-minded if well-intentioned statements such as “anticolonial nationalism is seldom narrow, sectarian or chauvinistic; it seeks instead to open the community of the globe.”¹¹

Let me illustrate my point with a couple of texts from South Asia that provide distinct—and divergent—conceptions of the Indian postcolony. The first, written by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the doyen of the Hindu Right, gestures toward a *blut und boden* imagination of the Indian nation and nationalism. He writes:

So to every Hindu, from the Santal to the Sadhu this Bharata bhumi [India] this Sindustan is at once a Pitribhu and a Punyabhū—fatherland and a holy land. That is why in the case of some of our Mohammedan or Christian countrymen ... [who] have inherited along with Hindus, a common Fatherland and a greater part of the wealth of a common culture—language, law, customs, folklore and history—are not and cannot be recognized as Hindus.

¹¹ Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 65.

For though Hindustan to them is Fatherland as to any other Hindu yet it is not to them a Holyland [sic] too. Their holyland [sic] is far off in Arabia or Palestine. Their mythology and Godmen, ideas and heroes are not the children of this soil. Consequently their names and their outlook smack of a foreign origin. Their love is divided.¹²

Savarkar, as is evident from the passage, fashions a distinct kind of insurgent imagination that is very far from any conception of peripheral internationalism. India here is a land of myth: a holy land and a fatherland, and its true inhabitants are those who acknowledge it as such, that is, the Hindus. Seeking to achieve a congruence between the categories of Indian and Hindu, Savarkar excludes some of its inhabitants from the space of India. In so doing, he *reduces India*, making it less than itself.

In contrast to this stands the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's imagination of the postcolony that is articulated in his poem (and song) called "bharot-tirtho" ("ভারততীর্থ"), which is typically rendered as "Pilgrimage to India" in English translations. I cite a part of it here because it offers a glimpse of an imagination of India suffused with the spirit of peripheral internationalism. Tagore writes:

No one knows at whose great call
Streams of humanity
In a mighty tide flowed who knows whence
To mingle in that sea.
Aryan and non-Aryan came,
Chinese, Dravidian,
Scythian, Hun, Mughal, Pathan
In body blent as one:
And now the West unfolds its doors,
The world bears bounty from its store—
Give and receive, merge and be merged:
None will excluded be
From India's ocean-shore of great humanity.¹³

Although a detailed engagement with the text is not possible here, I would like to highlight a few key aspects of the extract. Notice, foremost, how Tagore claims Indian-ness for people who come from beyond what is typically conceived of as India. Suggesting India is a "pilgrimage" for these people, he deploys the colonial enumerative modality to make difference visible (the "Chinese," "Scythian," "Hun," "Mughal," "Pathan") and signal the multiplicity of India. But in Tagore's hands, the enumerative modality is also transformed—it does not simply

¹² Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969), 113.

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, "Pilgrimage to India," in *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 200–01. For the Bengali text of the poem, see Rabindranath Tagore, "Bharot-tirtho" [ভারততীর্থ], in *Gitobitan* [গীতবিতান] (Calcutta: Vishwabharati, 1993), 251.

enumerate the different groups but gestures toward a concomitant unity that is underlined by the phrase “In body blent as one” (“এক দেহে হল লীন”). And this coherence is not simply an idea of “unity in diversity,” but one where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Unlike Savarkar, Tagore *stretches India* to make it more than itself and a metonym of the world. India here is a site of global processes of interaction among peoples, faiths, and ideas.

Present Imperfect, Future Tense

Theodor Adorno suggests that as far as the utopian dreams have been realized, “They all operate as though the best thing about them had been forgotten.”¹⁴ And this comment is salutary for thinking about the utopian project of decolonization. Across the postcolonial world, decolonization came to be seen as an *event* of the transfer of political power from white to darker hands. The sense of decolonization as a *process* that inaugurates the reanimation of the political, economic, and the cultural spheres of the colonized, leading to the breaking of the “mind-forg’d manacles”—of decolonizing the mind—was deemphasized. As a corollary, the insurgent imagination that was decolonization concretized into, and was understood through, the fantasy of horizontal comradeship that is the nation. And although postcolonial nation-states were fundamental to the decolonizing project, it also obfuscated what was perhaps the “best thing” about that world historical process: the imagination of a global order predicated on peripheral internationalism. The decolonizing imagination lost, or was made to lose, its character of insurgency and its sense of urgency to change the world. It became little other than a figuration of fantasy, or at best, nostalgia.

The world system engendered by colonialism, that is, the one and unequal world of metropolitan and peripheral spaces now turned into a concatenation of nominally equal nation-states structured by the boundary concept, was left untouched by the newly independent states. The insurgent imagination that underwrote decolonization was arrested and absorbed into the figure of the nation-state. The territorialized state space was coded with an affective charge and turned into a reified and quasi-mystical category. In this milieu, the postcolonial nation-state emerged as the sole arbiter of utopianism, now recoded as progress understood from a strictly statist perspective.

Nationalism, “that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors,” did indeed stop short, falter, and die away on the day independence was proclaimed.¹⁵ The first intimation of this was the violence directed by the colonized at one another. The Irish Civil War at the dawn of Irish independence, and the ethnic cleansing in British India at the cusp of the colonizer’s departure from South Asia are useful reminders of that history. As the mantle of imperial

¹⁴ Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, and Horst Kruger, “Something’s Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing,” in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 1.

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 203.

metropole passed on to the United States of America from the United Kingdom and France in a kind of modern *translatio imperii*, new modalities of domination and exploitation, ranging from coups and Napalm to debt bondage and outsourcing, were developed to keep the formerly colonized spaces nominally free (though at times not) but always very far from their decolonizing missions.

The postcolonial nation-states made, or were forced to make, peace with the depredations of capital. They incorporated the colonial ethic into their outlook and became, in effect, neocolonial formations. And this speaks, ultimately, to the failure of decolonization as an insurgent imagination actualized. There can perhaps be no better exemplar of this transformation than the incident in the Delhi metro with which I began this meditation: Indians—citizens of a country that has always been seen to be a leader of the “third world”—behaving like a lynch mob from the southern United States to chants of “Victory to Mother India.” Savarkar’s, not Tagore’s, idea of India has won the day. The dreamworld has metamorphosed into catastrophe.

The insurgent imagination called decolonization is now a historical memory of a failed utopia. And this interpellates us into Walter Benjamin’s angel of history.¹⁶ We are angels of history all—flung ahead in time, our faces necessarily turned toward the past where we perceive a catastrophe among a chain of historical events. Yet this figuration of catastrophe is also, at once, an image of what might have been. It remains with us in the shape, and name, of a desire. Perhaps one day we too will say, with the same confidence as Theocritus: “I shall sing a sweeter song tomorrow.”

Author biography. Sandeep Banerjee is Associate Professor of English at McGill University, Canada. He is the author of *Space, Utopia and Indian Decolonization: Literary Pre-figurations of the Postcolony* (Routledge, 2019). His articles have appeared (or will appear) in *Modern Asian Studies*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Utopian Studies*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, and *Mediations* in addition to several anthologies. A recipient of several prestigious grants, he is also a general editor of the *Routledge Series in the Cultures of the Global Cold War*.

¹⁶ See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253–67.

Cite this article: Banerjee, Sandeep. 2022. “Requiem for a Dream.” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, 399–404. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2022.11>