The World in a Grain of Sand: Postcolonial Literature and Radical Universalism by Nivedita Majumdar (review)

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When Fredric Jameson, at a 2012 lecture on postmodernism at the University of Helsinki, declared that "the resistance to universals is a struggle against hegemonic norms, which are thereby suppressive and exclusionary," he was not just condemning universalism as a colonial ideology, he was also endorsing the idea that universals can only be countered through an affirmation of 'cultural difference' as the guiding criterion for evaluating culture, identity, and history. Of course, this was not new or a novel revelation. Jameson was in fact echoing an idea that, since the early nineties, has been a defining feature in postcolonial theory, an idea canonized in the seminal postcolonial volume *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) through Bill Ashcroft's pronouncement; "universalism is a hegemonic European critical tool" (149). Nivedita Majumdar joins the ranks of a select group of critics including Vivek Chibber, Patrick Hogan, and Mukti Mangharam, who not just contest the postcolonial position that universalisms are colonial, but also find the affirmation of 'cultural difference' to be problematic and limiting.

Majumdar's recent book, *The World in a Grain of Sand: Postcolonial Literature and Radical Universalism* (2021), offers an interesting and fresh reading of contemporary debates in postcolonial studies surrounding the position of universalism within discourses of ethics, identity, and culture. She contends that ideas such as 'universality' and 'particularity' get commonly mischaracterized by most postcolonialists, who wrongly attribute the terms as binary oppositions. In this dualist configuration, she asserts, the former typically gets type-casted as an ideology rooted in Eurocentrism, and the latter is reduced to an "exotic and essentialized localism" (6). While providing an in-depth evaluation of the broader sociocultural implications of such mischaracterizations, she offers an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between universals and particulars, one that carefully avoids the pitfalls of mainstream postcolonial critique. The crux of her book is thus dedicated to the development of what she calls "radical universalism," "a universalism rooted in local realities but also capable of unearthing the needs, conflicts, and desires that stretch across cultures and time" (11). This alternative non-hegemonic universalism, she posits, is one that is recognized by Marx and championed by the "likes of Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral and C.L.R. James, a universalism steeped in the spirit of anti-colonialism and hostile to any whiff of exoticism" (12).

Majumdar's critique rests primarily on her close readings of a wide range of postcolonial works produced between the mid-twentieth century to the current

times. These works, that hail from different regions in the Global South including India, Sri Lanka, Palestine, and Egypt, become the main site for not just the development of an alternative outlook towards universalism, but also for the testing of the implications of such an outlook on a host of concerns involving issues of identity, gender, theorizations of indigeneity, the historicization of the past, and critiques of nationalism, internationalism, and neoliberalism. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Majumdar's study is its implication for literary reading practices. She notes that postcolonial texts are predominantly read through the lens of "radical difference," a position that gestures to a worldview where cultures are fundamentally and irreconcilably different. Finding 'radical difference' as inherently problematic due to its vulnerability to colonialist and orientalist cooption, she breaks away from the tradition of reading "difference in specificity, or singularity in concreteness" (11). Applying the lens of 'radical universalism,' in contrast, allows her to demonstrate how one can read a work as being simultaneously "anchored in cultural specificities, and rooted in concrete experiences, both collective and individual," and affirming of our shared humanity (11).

The guiding idea of Majumdar's book, one that inspires its title, is "World in a Grain of Sand," a phrase adopted from William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" which celebrates the cosmic nature of things that seem ordinary and commonplace such as a grain of sand, a wildflower or a caterpillar on a leaf. Blake's vision largely sets the tone of Majumdar's argument that "a grain of sand—the local" is contained in "the world—the universal" (12). In other words, she argues that the notions of universality and particularity must not be understood as mutually exclusive. Rather, they must be seen as ideas that intimately rely on each other for meaning. Majumdar organizes the content of *The World in a Grain of Sand* in two sections, Part One, "A Grain of Sand," and Part Two, "The World in the Grain." Part One features four chapters that look closely at a range of theoretical and literary works that are commonly considered canonical within postcolonial studies. The readings in this section broadly highlight the limitations of postcolonial critique, demonstrating how by making 'difference' a central criterion of cultural critique, postcolonial theorists and writers do not just mischaracterize 'universality,' they also end up affirming, rather than dismantling, colonial models of cultural essentialisms, thereby compromising the discipline's original goals of decolonization and anti-colonial critique. In Part Two, which includes three chapters, Majumdar draws attention to works that show "the promise of a radical universalism" (12). The literary and theoretical readings in this section point to "an alternative cultural project; one that avoids both the exoticism embedded in much of postcolonial studies and the parochial, conservative universalism associated with imperial ideologies" (12).

In chapter one, Majumdar focuses on issues of gender agency in a range of key

works by Ranajit Guha, Gayathri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, scholars who in the late 80s and 90s were largely responsible for organizing and institutionalizing the discipline of postcolonial studies. Characterizing their approach to gender politics as deeply conservative, she asserts that these scholars not only misrepresent the nature of women's agency but also end up advocating for positions that promote problematic gender essentialisms. She argues that in trying to recover the voice of the "gendered subaltern" in texts such as "Chandra's Death," "Draupadi," "Buvaneswari," and "The Commitment to Theory," these scholars make the mistake of conflating "women's acquiescence to patriarchy" as evidence of resistance and agency. And by doing so, Majumdar insists, Guha "comes perilously close to affirming the hoary idea of the feminine mystique," Spivak "reinserts a highly paternalistic, and hence patriarchal, view regarding . . . [a woman's] choices," and Bhabha "effaces" a women's "working-class-agency" (46).

In the next two chapters, Majumdar highlights the limitations of positions that espouse "radical difference." Taking up the question of agency in two canonical works of literature from/on South Asia, she argues that the implicit assumption of "radical difference" (found in such works) undermines any effort to recover marginalized agency or voice. For instance, in chapter two her reading of Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Home and the World* (1916) reveals that despite his advocacy of "common humanity," he remained a deeply conservative thinker who viewed culture through an essentializing East/West dichotomy; "common human. . . can be apprehended only through the prism of distinct civilizations" (55). While acknowledging that his writings exhibit empathy toward women and their struggles, she notes that such gestures are ultimately undermined as the "East-West dichotomy" in his political thought translates "into a masculine/feminine binary in his conception of women and their social role," making his ideas bound to "the confines of a liberal humanist patriarchy" (85). In chapter three, Majumdar turns to another canonical author, Michael Ondaatje, arguing that his project of recovering an alternative non-western political agency in the novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000) devolves into an affirmation of orientalist tropes due to its advocacy of "radical difference." In other words, she insists that the novel's core thesis that a western analytical lens cannot be applied to understand a non-western conflict such as the Sri Lankan civil war ends up affirming rather than contesting the Orientalist stereotype of the "inscrutable East" (89).

If chapters two and three highlight the problem with "radical difference," chapter four illustrates the dangers of mischaracterizing universalism in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) and Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014), famous novels that reject the exoticism of culture and parochialism but reinforce a 'neoliberalist' universalism that is devoid of any meaningful engagement with local ideas and issues. Majumdar notes both novels engage the history of the Naxalite movement in

India but fail to empathize with the political struggles of the movement or its revolutionary politics. By being dismissive of local politics as "extremist ideology" and by endorsing ideas such as "redemption can only come with a turning away from political struggle," these novels make clear that their commitment is not to ideals of radical universalism, but rather to the hollow multiculturalism found in neoliberalist "worldviews of upwardly mobile Anglophone middle class, a cosmopolitanism that is comfortably ensconced in the circuits of consumption" (15).

Part Two shifts focus to literary works that exemplify "radical universalisms." The chapters of this section highlight how writers can successfully evoke radical ideals of universalism to envision alternative spaces of political agency and solidarity for the marginalized. In chapter five, Majumdar discusses Mahasweta Devi's novella *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha* (1989), focusing on how the writer in exploring stories about tribal communities from Bengal and Bihar seamlessly preserves a focus on indigenous history while cultivating "a decided orientation in favor of grand narratives of emancipation" (142). Chapter six questions the mainstream vilification of nationalism in postcolonial theory and proposes the idea that conceptions of 'national' and the 'universal' are not always antagonistic. To this end, Majumdar finds Mourid Barghouti's memoir, *I Saw Ramallah* (1997) and Ahdaf Soueif's novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), Palestinian and Egyptian texts respectively, to be prominent examples of works that underscore the importance of a grass-root-national consciousness that is based on universal principles. The final chapter of the book turns to A. Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997), a novel that takes an intergenerational look at crucial moments in Sri Lanka's modern history including the civil war from the 1980s. Majumdar states that by narrating history sympathetically through the intimate life experiences of its subaltern characters, the novel evokes a radical universalism that steers away from the "narrative modes of nostalgia or exoticization" by empowering a people's history and highlighting history itself as a universal process (196).

Majumdar's voice is clearly an important addition to the ongoing conversation about universalism and its place in politics, history, and ethics. Her critiques of Guha, Spivak, and Bhabha, are both nuanced and original not only in highlighting how postcolonial theory misunderstands universalism but also in showing how the strategy of critiquing culture through 'radical difference,' an approach favored by postcolonial scholars and writers alike, ultimately works to consolidate colonial outlooks and ideologies. On this note, of particular significance are her literary readings from Part One that effectively exemplify the limitations of current postcolonial critique. Her reading of Ondaatje, for instance, offers compelling insights into how the assumption of 'radical difference' invariably leads even progressive and socially conscious writers to perpetuate harmful cultural stereotypes. Likewise, her evaluations of Lahiri and Mukherjee build a persuasive case against the dangers of

pseudo-universalisms or universalism that are devoid of cultural particularity and are fueled by hollow-corporatized-multi-culturalisms.

A central highlight of Majumdar's book that sets the tone of her scholarship is her rigorous critique of Jameson's 1986 essay, "Third-Word Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" in which he claims that "all third world" literary productions embody "radical difference." Her decisive rejection of his premise that embracing "radical difference" is a better alternative to adopting a "general liberal and humanistic universalism" as a criterion for evaluating "third-world literature" is an important moment in the book. It is a moment that ushers her to propose a radical third space of literary criticism, one that avoids cultural essentialism and orientalism, that celebrates localisms in all its uniqueness and diversity while reviving a commitment to universal principles. Her readings of Devi, Barghouti, Soueif, and Sivanandan are indeed a testament to this alternative space that goes against the grain of mainstream thought in rethinking the nature of identity, political agency, and resistance.

Despite the many fine qualities of the book including its admirable range, depth, and versatility of critique, there are some noticeable inconsistencies and omissions. Reviewers such as Pranav Jani have rightly noted that Majumdar, in criticizing Tagore's views on nationalism in *Home and the World*, minimizes his critiques of right-wing currents of the swadeshi movement. One of Majumdar's main reasons for identifying Tagore as a supporter of 'radical difference' is his frequent utilization of the rhetoric of east and west, which is admittedly outdated and has problematic implications. Nonetheless, a more balanced and rigorous appraisal of his views, one that accounts for his stringent opposition to growing Hindu fundamentalism and anti-Muslim sentiments in popular nationalist movements in India, is largely missing from Majumdar's reading. Even the critique of Tagore's gender politics, while valid and not without merit, is limiting owing not just to an easy dismissal of existing scholarship on the subject (particularly works of Ashis Nandy and Sumit Sarkar), but also to the fact that all conclusions about Tagore are drawn from his novel (and partly his nationalism lectures), rather than his overall body of works, precluding a more nuanced, and perhaps less polarizing, understanding of the matter.

Considering that Majumdar's book is about recovering universalism's place in postcolonial theory, its lack of engagement/dialogue with foundational 'postcolonial' works that support this scholarly initiative is concerning. Chibber's famous theorization of universality, for instance, is only superficially referenced a couple of times despite the similar focus of both projects i.e., critiquing postcolonial theory's East/West bias and rethinking the politics of universality in contemporary Marxist and postcolonialist discourse. Majumdar's failure to acknowledge the contributions of scholars such as Patrick Hogan, Mukti Mangharam, Seyla Benhabib, Madhavi

Menon, and Suzanne Keen are also glaring omissions, as these are scholars who have largely shaped the revivalist movement of universalism in recent years and have offered innovative ways of rethinking its intersections with postcolonial conceptions of identity, politics, ethics, gender, history, and resistance, particularly in literary studies.

A universalist approach, Majumdar's book powerfully reminds us, can support not just a reconceptualization of postcolonial identity and politics along more empathetic lines, but also the revival of non-coercive and non-Eurocentric forms of humanism, ones that positively shape cross-social behaviors, and in many cases, empower grass-root anticolonial movements. It is however also clear that the current scholarship on universalism is still at an early stage. There is more room for the development of a more detailed and rigorous understanding of how universalisms are differently expressed in world literature, and how they inform cross-cultural discourses of anti-colonialism.

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When Volumes 2 and 3 of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* appeared in 1984, a publisher's insert announced the imminent arrival of a fourth volume, *Confessions of the Flesh*. The text was advertised as dealing "with the experience of the flesh in the first centuries of Christianity, and with the role played in it by the hermeneutic, and purifying decipherment, of desire" (vii). Foucault died in June 1984, and the promised fourth and final volume, scheduled to appear in October of that year, did not arrive. Daniel Defert, Foucault's longtime partner, had the unfinished manuscript placed in a bank vault where it sat for over three decades. Until now.