

Roger McNamara. *Secularism and the Crisis of Minority Identity in Postcolonial Literature*. Lexington, 2018. Pp. xxiii, 173. CAD \$111.25.

Roger McNamara's *Secularism and the Crisis of Minority Identity in Postcolonial Literature* is situated within the contentious relationships and violent outbursts that occur between different ethnic and religious minorities and the Hindu majority in postcolonial India. McNamara makes the case that a secular perspective, despite its appeal to Western discourse and academic disciplines, is not the only approach for evaluating dissimilar perspectives and ideologies. He argues that because it is an essential component of modernity (a European concept), secularism endorses the values of the upper-class Hindus who successfully established themselves within the colonial system. To recognize and understand the perspectives of minority groups, McNamara explores the writings of Muslims and other minorities in India. He undertakes a keen theoretical and literary analysis in an attempt to present the complex web of cultural and political interactions among these groups. He engages closely with fictional, autobiographical, and historical texts from native writers such as Carl Muller, Michael Ondaatje, Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, and Bama. His analysis of these narratives enables him to situate secularism within the historical personages' and characters' lived experiences and empowers him to tease out nuanced variations of secularism.

McNamara's book starts by setting up an exhaustive account of historical, theoretical, and political stakes. In the introduction, he deftly historicizes the circumstances that produced secularism in colonial and postcolonial India. As legacies of colonial rule, he explains, both secular time and modernity had "radical ramifications for political and cultural life" (xv). He insists that turning back to an idyllic precolonial stage completely free of European influences is impossible. Rather, critics need to "dislodge" the secular approach from its "pedestal" and "consider it one approach among a number of others" (xviii).

McNamara turns to literary analysis in the next five chapters. He focuses on writers and intellectuals from diverse communities: Anglo-Indian, Burgher, Dalit, Muslim, and Parsi. Chapter One focuses on the Burgher minority in Sri Lanka. McNamara closely examines Ondaatje's and Muller's works, which offer fictional explorations of political tensions between the nation's Sinhalese majority and minority groups. McNamara reminds readers that modern historicism legitimizes one group at the expense of another. He argues that Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* rejects historicism and its concomitant

linear narrative as a Eurocentric style that “compels people to take sides in a conflict” (19). It also fails to provide a resolution to the conflict between the Tamil and Sinhalese because it asserts colonial assumptions about these cultures. McNamara proposes the novel relies on allegory and an unverifiable narrative to provide alternative forms of “secular historiography.” The novel also explores “non-secular” and “alternative subjectivities” to construct a narrative that proposes a way to peaceful coexistence between the majority and minorities (28).

Chapter Two shifts the text’s focus to Muslim writers. Through a reading of the historical and political tensions in 1980s India, McNamara judiciously reviews the critical doubts about national secularism and its “endorsements of the cultural values of upper-caste Hindu men” (34). He explores how religious minorities’ and lower-castes’ demands were considered unfit in the rational and secular ideologies of the nation. He proposes that Manto’s and Chughtai’s fiction maps out the “possible contours of a secular India” (35), exposing the wide spectrum of tensions between religion, gender, and sexuality that national secularism managed to sidestep.

Chapter Three discusses Parsi author Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*. McNamara convincingly situates the novel within the broad rubric of post-secularism as an undefined space between modernity (or postcoloniality) and religion (or lack of it). Post-secularism is represented as another variation of secularism that indicts the secular state and its “abstract citizenship” (74). It also, McNamara argues, “can neither reject modernity . . . nor simply embrace religion” (74). He rightly explains that while the novel critiques both religious extremism and liberal secular ideals, it “advocates a constant negotiation between faith and reason” (74). Contrary to other critics, he does not read *Family Matters* as a liberal humanist project. Rather, he views the secularization of faith, which turns religion into ideology, as a source of extremism within the Parsi community.

Chapter Four begins with a meticulous literary deconstruction of narrative accounts of Anglo-Indian imagined communities through a close reading of I. Allan Sealy’s *The Trotter-Nama* as critique of the Anglo-Indian community that aspires to form identities within both colonial rule and secular nationalism. He brilliantly juxtaposes the novel with Frank Anthony’s *Britain’s Betrayal of India*, which describes the community as homogenous. This contrast highlights *The Trotter-Nama*’s aesthetic forms of resistance. McNamara supports his analysis by suggesting the novel turns to an imagined precolonial era in which Anglo-Indian identity is fluid and not reduced to a single and secularized image. The novel also shows, through its use of historiographic metafiction, how national and colonial histories

“suppress alternative narratives that would undermine their ideologies” (116).

In Chapter Five, McNamara investigates the influence of Christianity on minority communities in Dalit writings. The Indian model of Christianity, McNamara writes, absorbed the Hindu culture that ignores the lower castes. He brings together Bama’s *Sangati* and the Self-Respect Movement (1921) to show how Dalit interpretations of the Bible are empowering and fundamentally different from those of the Roman Catholic Church.

The value of this book lies in its ability to shift the reader’s focus from postcolonial binaries such as colonized/colonizer to more nuanced relationships between minority/majority groups in India and Sri Lanka. McNamara stresses how the colonized/colonizer relationship, with its celebratory tones about critique and secularism, participated in and accentuated the minority/majority division. McNamara’s keen close reading of the selected literary works unveils minority groups’ resistance to the widely circulated and imported European “elitism” that has dominated the political, religious, and cultural scenes in postcolonial India and Sri Lanka. While more geographically limited in scope than the title proposes, the book presents a theoretical framework that transcends the localities it discusses. It might prove a challenging read for beginners, given that it applies multiple literary analytical techniques and handles contested subjects. For field researchers and graduate students, however, this title adds a useful perspective to the ongoing conversation about postcolonialism.

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