



Sandeep Banerjee. *Space, Utopia and Indian Decolonization: Literary Pre-figurations of the Postcolony*.

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The book under review examines how a number of key literary and cultural texts, spanning the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, from Britain and India (mainly Bengal), imagined the world after decolonization. The book, by an academic working in English and South Asian literary studies, uses literary and cultural geographical approaches, grounded in cultural and historical materialism. It also makes a fresh contribution to utopian studies, especially in the methods we use in this field. The book focuses on what the first chapter evocatively terms, in its title, spatial desire in the age of empire. Taking inspiration from the work of scholars such as Edward Said and Raymond Williams who analyzed cultural geographies from materialist lenses, while being critical of colonialism, imperialism, and predatory capitalism, Banerjee's book analyzes mainly poetry and fiction. At the heart of the book are also Ernest Bloch's notions of utopian hope and anticipatory consciousness, which articulate themselves through spatial representations.

Banerjee shows that the texts he analyzes so vividly can show imperial-colonial desires, or the hope and desires of anticolonial nationalisms. I use the term *nationalisms* advisedly, because the book shows that not all anticolonial nationalisms are the same. The book repeatedly shows that some articulations of the postcolony, for example by the nineteenth-century Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterji, in fiction and lyric, desire a world after colonialism that is not equal for all inhabitants of India, privileging an ideological-political construct of exclusionary nationalist Hinduism. Equally, analyzing patriotic lyrics, other poetry, and fiction by Rabindranath Tagore, and fiction by the

educator-writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Banerjee shows that more pluralist visions of the postcolony could also be articulated through imagining utopian spaces. For Banerjee, decolonization is a kind of utopianism, and in his concluding section he reads the famous speech that Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, gave at midnight on August 15, 1947, when India achieved independence from British colonialism. While Nehru understands decolonization as a process, even if the moment of formal independence is singular, he also shows, as Banerjee analyzes, awareness of the way Partition, taking place simultaneously with independence for India and Pakistan, divided people in South Asia from each other through new political boundaries. This leads to an abiding sense of tension in Nehru's speech between these boundaries and cutoffs and an India that is seen as eternal.

It is not often that contemporary scholars analyze poetry in utopian studies. As such, the present reviewer found Banerjee's third chapter, on the patriotic lyric, a welcome one. Bankim Chandra Chatterji's poem and song, *Vandemataram* (translatable as "I revere the mother"), is read off against Tagore's poem and song *Jana gana mana*, the national anthem of India. Patriotic lyrics, Banerjee claims, infuse abstract spaces with performative affect, and re-enchant disenchanting places of capitalist modernity. Banerjee strengthens his discussion of the Indian patriotic lyric with an analysis of James Thomson's "Rule, Britannia" (1740) and of Reginald Heber's hymn "From Greenland's icy mountains, from India's coral strand" (1819), bringing out their idolizing and idealizing of Britain, and their representation of colonial and imperial desires and geographies. In *Vandemataram* Banerjee finds, like many other readers, the idealization of Bengali landscape imaged as a Hindu goddess. The novel that the song appears in, *Anandamath* (Abbey of Bliss), is analyzed by Banerjee in another chapter in the book and is shown as excluding Muslims from the reimagined space of Bengal. The content of such analysis is not new, but this is a novel way of reading these lyrics as infused with utopian spatial desires, surcharged with colonial or anticolonial overtones.

Banerjee analyzes Philip Meadows Taylor's "mutiny novel" *Seeta* (1872) as a romance from colonial India, and, in another chapter, discusses Rudyard Kipling's colonial novel *Kim* (1901) as narrating colonial space, viewed as a sociospatial community, with utopian overtones. *Seeta*, an Indian widow, and Azrael Pande, who murdered *Seeta*'s husband, are troped in differing spaces, notably a lawless space of a cave temple, associated with Pande, and colonial Noorpur, a convivial utopian space firmly under the command of the

British. The 1857 Mutiny or Indian Uprising is thwarted when it appears in this romance, and Banerjee shows astutely that neither the “lawless” Pande, associated with mutineers, nor the virtuous woman Seeta is allowed to survive. Pande kills Seeta while she is trying to protect her second husband, British colonial officer Cyril Brandon. The interracial marriage between Brandon and Seeta is too transgressive to allow ideological stability for colonial utopianism. *Kim* is seen as having a protagonist who is both insider and outsider, both *sahib* and local inhabitant, in South Asia, and this never fully resolved dichotomy of Kim’s subjectivity is connected to deft close readings of spaces in the novel, with one set offering a distanced view and another offering a more lived, experiential view of space, which Banerjee argues are set up in a relation of simultaneity, resulting in a sense of tension in perspective.

Tagore’s Bengali novel *Gora* (1909) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s Bengali novella *Padmarag* (1924) both emerge as representing plural, multireligious spatial utopian desires, with claims in them for social justice extending across classes, castes, and religious communities, and across genders. In both novels Banerjee finds important women characters who are depicted as agents of a transformative utopianism. In both novels the private or domestic sphere becomes a site for radical utopian action and transformation. The impossible and yet indispensable desires of egalitarianism and decolonization found in these two fictions form the normative core of Banerjee’s book.

Banerjee argues that the utopian impulse of decolonization is thwarted by phenomena such as violence practiced by colonized people, directed not at the colonizer but at each other: Irish civil wars and Indian Partition violence are notable examples. Such violence, Banerjee argues, has continued systematically in postcolonial societies, directed at otherized communities such as women, working classes, immigrants, lower-caste people, sexualized minorities, and so on. Importantly, too, Banerjee shows awareness of how capitalism and colonialism have reinvented themselves to deal with decolonization: US-led colonial capitalism, and the postcolonial states’ abandoning of the utopian impulse of decolonization are our contemporary realities. And yet, in a dialectical vein, Banerjee still sees the decolonizing utopian impulse flickering today. In dissident, radical students’ struggles in India, protesting injustices of caste, religious fundamentalism, lack of access to food and health; in the contemporary farmers’ movements in India protesting neoliberal capitalist predation—in such movements Banerjee sees nonetheless a continuance of the utopian impulse of decolonization, one that is committed to pluralist,

equitable societies. The book concludes, in this spirit, with the half-sentence, “the utopian impulse that is decolonization lives on nonetheless” (152).

All in all, this is a sharp, crisp, and convincingly argued book, which one hopes will reach many scholars and students, notably in the fields of English literature, comparative literature, South Asian literature, political science, geography, and, of course, utopian studies.