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Book Reviews

Secularism and the Crisis of Minority Identity in Postcolonial Literature
By ROGER MCNAMARA
Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2018, 173 pp.
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In the introduction to *Secularism and the Crisis of Minority Identity in Postcolonial Literature* (2018), Roger McNamara outlines the compelling case he intends to make for the evidentiary value of literature: as applied to complex interfaces of political, communal, and religious identities in India, two decades after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh became a flashpoint for conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. Following the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) 2014 electoral victory, the Hindu Right has been emboldened to pursue its agenda of forced conversion and its campaign of violence against religious minorities while vocal critics have waged "huge protests in the public sphere against these atrocities" (xi), often defending minority rights with the tools of secular nationalism, such as the post-1950 emphasis on "unity in diversity" (xii). Literature can both/either reinforce and/or trouble the preeminence of secularism by illuminating how "lived experience" forms and informs the figuration, naming, and self-representation of communities, identities, and perspectives. And lived divergences within and among religious minority communities and individuals, "mediated by the imagination" (xiii), McNamara contends, work to unmask secularism's putatively democratizing and inclusive pretensions and assurances.

As if to demonstrate how secularism in India sanctions and papers over the Hindu majority's continuing erosion of rights and perpetuation of atrocities, US President Donald Trump declared the following about his official meetings with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "He wants his people to have religious freedom, and very strongly" (February 24, 2020). Asked whether he had raised concern over recent violent demonstrations in New Delhi, in opposition to the anti–Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act, Trump said they didn't discuss them and resumed his empty praise of the Prime Minister's "long record" on "religious freedom." The redundancy and incoherence of such statements bear out one of McNamara's most important insights: secular nationalism is no guarantor of religious equality, and religious freedom in name or law is no catalyst of national unity. McNamara traces this dialectic, or tautology, in an admirably compact discussion of disagreements and terminological asymmetries between major theorists of nationalism, Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, and Aamir Mufti (xvi–xxi).

Yet McNamara's subsequent readings of Burgher, Muslim, Parsi, Anglo-Indian, and Dalit narratives, "native" and diasporic, do not achieve the book's expressed goal of attending in literature to how people make meaning of their own lives—indeed, how they make or remake the conditions of their own lives—and not as passive victims but as agents. The author constrains, possibly undermines, his vision of literary discourse as a

space where official ideologies or party politics can be superseded or reconfigured in his own restaging of polar oppositions: that is, between majority and minority voices and actors, between positions for and against secularist institutions and instruments. Each chapter strikes comparisons between two texts, chosen for their significant disparities of subject matter, manner of narration and composition, referential or nonreferential representational strategy (e.g., realism, allegory, carnival, nonlinearity), and other aesthetic attributes deemed to complicate or unravel the rigidly dichotomous constructions governing political discourse and silencing minoritized voices. McNamara, however, funnels the exploration of alterity and resistance these pairings are intended to open through the dualistic language of mainstream politics utilized all throughout the book. Verbs such as "advocate," "refuse," "support," and "reject" reduce literary elements, innovations, and nuances—including what might be nonanswers to questions of belief—into "harsh critiques," "embraces," and, least transparently, "ambivalences." Texts are conflated with authors and imaginative literature read as coded testimony of opinion. Brief summaries of several theorists, including Marxist thinkers most wary of "tendentious" literature, are treated evaluatively and thematically—for example, as descriptors—more than deployed methodologically, as a strategy of engaging with "indirectness." Minority identity categories of ethnicity, language, sexuality, and socioeconomic status mainly appear on only one side of a binary, whereas, for example, the Michael Ondaatje-Carl Muller dyad that comprises the chapter on Burgher writing and the Sri Lankan Sinhalese–Tamil civil war could be effectively "triangulated" by a book such as Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, which (like Muller's work?) represents sexual non-heteronormativity with humor but of a far different kind.

Nonetheless, for its salutary introduction and its project's ambitions, *Secularism* should spark very important conversations within postcolonial and South Asian studies: perhaps especially at a time—after the book's publication but at this review's time of completion—when the BJP leaders being tried for the demolition of the Babri Masjid face imminent, yet additionally delayed, judgment, as the Supreme Court has ordered, by the Central Bureau of Investigation court.

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Experiments with Truth[1]
By HEDLEY TWIDLE
James Currey, 2019, 265 pp.
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Hedley Twidle's *Experiments with Truth* wrestles with the fretfulness of what it means to live in the postcolony through examining key life-writing and narrative

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