



BOOK FORUM

## Primitivism in the Peripheries: Reflections on Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*

Rashmi Varma 

University of Warwick  
Email: [rashmi.varma@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:rashmi.varma@warwick.ac.uk)

**Keywords:** primitivism; internationalism; indigeneity

Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery* opens important critical space for rethinking world literature in the context of the internationalist tendencies, politics, and practices that have both produced and nurtured it throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In particular, Majumder's interest in the intellectual ferment in the peripheries of global empires speaks to a burgeoning interest in the aesthetics of peripheral internationalism as well as the politics that it was a response to. To this growing field, Majumder infuses a distinctively materialist perspective that draws on systemic readings of world literature that situate it within the capitalist world system, and the combined and uneven development generated by capitalism's incursions into the world's peripheries.

As a small contribution to this forum on *Insurgent Imaginations*, I seek to explore the politics and aesthetics of a radical anticolonial primitivism as an important and particularly rich site from where to think about peripheral internationalism. I am, of course, prompted by Majumder's suggestive and nuanced analyses of the writings of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy on the predicament of tribals in contemporary India and the ways in which the writers' formal innovations illuminate it.<sup>1</sup> I therefore want to extend his discussion and

---

<sup>1</sup> The word *tribal* is the most commonly used name in English for India's indigenous population and is authorized by the Constitution. Doubtless there is a long history of contestation over the word, particularly its colonial antecedents, but that discussion is outside the scope of this short contribution. In the context of India, then, I will use the word *tribal* throughout the article, with some exceptions where a specific ethnic term such as *Santhals* is more appropriate. In the context of Latin America, I will use the word *indigenous* because that appears in most studies of indigenous people from that region. The slide from the "primitive" in primitivism to terms such as *tribal* and *indigenous* and the unevenness of nomenclature represents a complex and contentious history that I just want to signal an awareness of here.

move it toward a reconceptualization of primitivism itself as an idea that was shared by writers and intellectuals in the world's peripheries as what Majumder refers to as "horizontal solidarities between writers and their communities" (119).

The story of primitivism has been typically narrated as the story of the colonial encounter in which the West/Europe established a hierarchical civilizational difference by exoticizing on the one hand, and enumerating on the other, the tribal who was denied coevalness with the modern European subject.<sup>2</sup> Postcolonial historians and anthropologists have noted that this denial of coevalness became an integral part of how colonized intellectuals came to define their own modernity set against the primitive within the self and the nation. Thus, in ways that mirrored European attitudes, the upper-class, upper-caste colonial subject was unable to imagine the primitive as a contemporary. The primitive becomes the "other" of the historicity that must be claimed and reconciled within the geographical territory of the nation so as to gain sovereignty from colonial subjugation.<sup>3</sup>

But primitivism's radical iterations in the peripheries are both less known and less understood, except as operating within traditions of romanticism for a lost past or mimicking colonial stereotypes. Departing from such accounts, I am interested in the political challenge of reading (and writing) primitivism in the peripheries as a project of peripheral internationalism and radical anticolonialism. Far from the primitive representing an inchoate otherness that must be disciplined and historicized, or nostalgically rendered as remnant of a fallen past, it provides an opening into the future. As Ben Etherington points out in his book on literary primitivism, primitivism was "not restricted to Western artists" but was "an aesthetic mode taken up across its span." In fact, he argues, "Artists from colonised peripheral societies were the ones who most keenly felt the loss of unalienated social worlds" and thus perhaps were the most emphatic of primitivists.<sup>4</sup>

Primitivists at the periphery of global empires performed what Majumder's book thematizes as "the counter-hegemonic role of intellectuals" (3) in staking out a politics of anticolonialism that abjured both the orthodox Marxist commitment to a universal narrative of global capital in which primitive societies had to necessarily go through the stages of economic development in order to arrive at socialism (and primitives were viewed as pre-political, lacking consciousness) as well as a romantic nativism that saw primitives through the lens of nostalgia and a longed for but lost precolonial past. Primitivists committed to a radical anticolonial internationalism were instead interested in linking intellectuals to questions of land, labor, art, and culture of the tribals, forging a relation that could enable a critique of existing reality and the imagining of a different future. At stake was a simultaneous critique of colonialism, whose violence had

<sup>2</sup> See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: "Primitives" and History-Writing in a Colonial Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

rendered tribal cultures not only marginal but also annihilated, as also a critique of the nation form and of elite nationalism within whose folds the tribal was to be incorporated, often forcibly, as a national citizen.

The emergence of this critical consciousness was predicated on an awareness of the predicament of indigenous people across the globe. Thus, primitivism of the peripheries operated within a radical historical consciousness that was nevertheless tethered to a universal and materialist worldview and that saw in the tribal not only a sovereign consciousness but one whose location needed to be understood in worldly and international situations. Finally, primitivists were not only profound critics of bourgeois modernity and its production of disenchantment, but also were actively committed to remaking the world through creativity and imagination, seeking to restore dignity and dynamism to work and labor.

Ramkinkar Baij (1906–1980), hailed as the first Indian modernist sculptor based in Santiniketan, the location of Rabindranath Tagore's experimental school of art, called Kala Bhavan, can be seen as one such primitivist. Hailing from a poor family in the district of Bankura in Bengal, Baij arrived in Tagore's art school in 1925 as an untutored genius. In an institution that was established as an alternative to the colonial art schools, Kala Bhavan was also an early internationalist hub for modernist artists from Europe and East Asia, such as the Viennese art historian Stella Kramrisch and the Chinese painter Xu Beihong. The school was a radical experiment in art education, open to global modernism with the goal of revivifying Indian art and breaking its dependence on both colonial and nationalist traditions. Here Baij developed an avant garde sculptural practice using the raw materials found in the tribal Santhal villages that surrounded Santiniketan and asking local Santhals to model for his sculptures. Baij's unique practice resonated both with the radical tendencies within global modernism where primitivism was already a powerful source of civilizational critique, but also within strands of progressive anticolonial nationalism that were seeking to find in the tribal a path to thinking about future sovereignty.

As Baij was creating his monumental sculpture *The Santhal Family* (1938), which depicts a Santhal couple holding a weighing scale and accompanied by their children and a dog, a Santhal who served as the model for the sculpture is said to have asked Baij about what he was making. When Baij told him that he was trying to make a *majhi* (a Santhal) like him, the man is reported to have said, "Yes, the title may be *majhi*, but it has become a deity."<sup>5</sup> For the ordinary *majhi*, the making of the sculpture seems to have entailed not only recognition of his self in the artwork but also a re-enchantment of his ordinary Santhal life in it. The Santhal's experience of witnessing his life elevated and transformed through the medium of the ordinary materials that surrounded him condensed both the epistemological and material aspects of the crisis of representation that the figure of the tribal signaled in modern India.

---

<sup>5</sup> R. Sivakumar, *Ram Kinkar Baij: A Retrospective* (New Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery/National Gallery of Modern Art, 2012), 97.

Baij's work was clearly unprecedented as it broke from romanticist conventions of representing the tribal as an ideal fixed form. In fact, public sculpture in India before Baij was largely religious or ceremonial. In emphasizing the everydayness of the life of a Santhal family in movement, Baij's sculpture made a unique contribution to establishing the tribal as a dynamic subject of modernity. Baij openly acknowledged his primitivism as an "attraction" when he said, "[If] I feel an attraction towards them, the main reason behind this is their life, [its] vigour and rhythm. Their movement and words are rhythmic. The same rhythmic quality is reflected in their households, their day-to-day activities. Their lives are not as coarse and dirty as our lives."<sup>6</sup> *The Santhal Family* sculpture was followed by *The Mill Call* in 1958 which depicted the tribal's proletarianization under industrial modernity but without remorse and nostalgia for a different time. The depiction of Santals running toward the factory as the siren representing the clock time of modern industry has rung is able to hold multiple times together, in contemporaneity.<sup>7</sup> Santhal labor, representing capital's exploitation of ethnic difference as a bodily and temporal resource, is imbued by Baij with a tense and mobile subjectivity that cannot reduce them to abject victimhood.

Three years after Baij's arrival in Santiniketan and the beginning of a unique artistic career as a primitivist, José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930) was writing in Peru on "the problem of the Indian" as primarily "a socioeconomic problem" that was "rooted in the land tenure system" in his 1928 essay on Peruvian reality.<sup>8</sup> Calling for the necessity of expropriating the *latifundia* for redistribution of land to the indigenous classes, Mariátegui's writings sought to construct an "indigenous socialism" that would be both specific to "Peruvian reality" and universal in its understanding of the ways in which capital the world over had dispossessed indigenous people. It would draw upon the "elements of practical socialism in Indigenous agricultural life."<sup>9</sup> These elements consisted of long-standing forms of solidarity and cooperative existence within indigenous communities, elements that are "the building blocks of Mariátegui's utopian-socialist

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Anjan Basu, "Remembering India's First Modern Sculptor, Ramkinkar Baij," *The Wire*, May 25, 2021 (<https://thewire.in/the-arts/remembering-indias-first-modern-sculptor-ramkinkar-baij>).

<sup>7</sup> Perry Anderson has argued that "Marx's own conception of the historical time of the capitalist mode of production was of a complex and differential temporality, in which episodes or eras were discontinuous from each other, and heterogeneous within themselves"; Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (New York: Verso, 1992), 101. Neil Larsen has similarly designated peripheral modernity as that which delineates time as "both modern and traditional, both 'ahead of' and yet 'behind the times' at once, as if not one but two or multiple histories were being lived out in one and the same space"; Neil Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (New York: Verso, 2001) 139–40. Drawing on Anderson and Larsen as also on the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, Benita Parry's work has attempted to understand peripheral aesthetics as the site where "the incongruous overlapping of social realities and experiences from radically different historical moments" is registered in Benita Parry, "Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms" *Ariel* 40.1 (2009) 27–55; esp. 30.

<sup>8</sup> José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*, trans. Marjory Urquidí ([1928]; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

<sup>9</sup> José Carlos Mariátegui, "The Land Problem," in *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*, eds. H. E. Vanden and M. Becker (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 71.

dialectic of drawing selectively on the pre-capitalist past in order to forge new values and social forms in the future.”<sup>10</sup> In this, as Michael Löwy has pointed out, Mariátegui avoided “both the evolutionist dogma of progress and the naïve and backward-looking illusions of a certain indigenism.”<sup>11</sup>

Jeffrey Webber argues that Mariátegui’s emphasis on “the particularities of the national setting actually enables a thoroughgoing internationalism.” Hitching internationalism to the history of capitalism, Mariátegui wrote, “Above all, capitalist civilization has internationalized the life of humanity” in the ways in which it has “created the material connections among all peoples that establish an inevitable solidarity among them. Internationalism is not only an idea, it is a historical reality ... Peru, like the other peoples of the Americas, is not, then, outside the crisis, it is inside it.”<sup>12</sup> The consciousness of how “the struggle against imperialism now relies only on the solidarity and strength of the liberation movement of the colonial masses” thus infused Mariátegui’s writings and work as a Communist writer, journalist, and trade unionist.

What unites Bajj and Mariátegui thus is what Michael Löwy identified in the latter’s work—a Utopian revolutionary dialectic that looked back to the pre-capitalist past in order to imagine a revolutionary future. If for Bajj this was brought to life in the sculptures of the tribals made from the materials of everyday use, for Mariátegui it meant delving into the history of the forms of precapitalist indigenous social life as a blueprint for the future. For neither Bajj nor Mariátegui was this the outcome of any kind of naive romantic longing for a pristine past but was rooted in a sharp awareness of the complex and uneven history of capital that had been imposed via colonialism and slavery. In Mariátegui’s work, this takes the form of a turn to the study of the combined and uneven modes of economic and social formations emanating from precapitalist indigenous forms of communal modalities that persist through the violent distortions brought about by feudalism and the primitive accumulation so integral to capitalism, rendering Peru’s social reality as a deeply layered and complex social formation. Drawing on Marx’s own conception of communism as the reestablishment of certain features of primitive societies, Löwy reads Mariátegui’s conception of socialist revolution as taking “as its starting point the communitarian traditions of the Andean peasants”.<sup>13</sup>

For Bajj, too, this precapitalist past was embodied in the tribal and their land, culture, and environment and was one that could be molded to implicate the tribal into contemporaneity such that a new future could be imagined. Bajj did so by infusing movement and dynamism into his sculpture and by shunning static monumentality. The fact that the materials used themselves were subject to

---

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey R. Webber, “The Indigenous Community as ‘Living Organism’: Jose Carlos Mariátegui, Romantic Marxism, and Extractive Capitalism in the Andes,” *Theory and Society* 44 (2015): 575–98 (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11186-015-9259-2#ref-CR39>).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Löwy, “Marxism and Romanticism in the Work of Jose Carlos Mariátegui,” trans. Penelope Duggan, *Latin American Perspectives* 25.4 (July 1999): 76–88, esp. 84.

<sup>12</sup> José Carlos Mariátegui, “The World Crisis and the Peruvian Proletariat,” in *José Carlos Mariátegui*, 297.

<sup>13</sup> Löwy, “Marxism and Romanticism in the Work of Jose Carlos Mariátegui,” 83.

depletion only emphasizes the simultaneous historicity and contemporaneity of the tribal.

Another feature that calls for thinking of Bajj and Mariátegui as primitivists of peripheral internationalism is what Löwy points out was integral to the latter's conception of "socialism" that "according to Mariátegui, lay at the heart of an attempt at the re-enchantment of the world through revolutionary action." Bajj's predilection for the rhythmic tonalities of tribal life enabled him to precisely infuse his artistic practice as a form of re-enchantment of the tribals relegated to the margins but who carried the potentiality of a different, more equal future. Further, if Mariátegui writing in Peru in the 1920s and 1930s registers his exposure to Marxism and Surrealism in Europe and embodies a primitivism that is inextricably linked to internationalism, we can see iterations of it in Bajj's milieu, where the growing influence of modernist art confronted the radical necessity of an anticolonial and revolutionary practice. Finally, although Lima and Santiniketan were situated geographically far apart, the figure of the renowned Indian poet and artist Rabindranath Tagore, who opened the doors of Indian artistic traditions to global modernism, unites Bajj and Mariátegui, who wrote, "From John Ruskin to Rabindranath Tagore, reformers have denounced capitalism for its brutalising use of the machine".<sup>14</sup> For both, a revolutionary artistic and political practice opposed to capitalism's induced anomie and alienation could find its roots in indigenous and tribal life.

The lineages marked out by Bajj and Mariátegui of primitivism as an ideological, artistic, and practical commitment to social revolution is reprised in the texts of world literature, philosophy of art, and cinema. Novels by the Odia writer Gopinath Mohanty, as well as Mahasweta Devi and Sunil Gangopadhyay's writings in Bengali, Arun Joshi and Arundhati Roy's works in English, Verrier Elwin's impassioned tracing of tribal art in central India, Jagdish Swaminathan's building of bridges to the "archipelago" of "primitive art" through a radical curatorial practice, and works by Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Mario Vargas Llosa's are all expressions from the global peripheries who have turned to an admixture of the improbable and the real as a generic means for representing the predicament of indigenous cultures in the capitalist world. In film, in the works of Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak primitivism becomes an emphatic vehicle for registering alienation and strangeness that is the predicament of the colonized individual tethered to a distorted modernity. Carpentier's concept of "marvelous realism" evocatively captures the coming together of disparate realities in conditions of backwardness. Primitivists have also drawn upon the idea of strange/ness as the means through which the text or artistic work inverts, defamiliarizes, and estranges the mundane and the bureaucratic worlds that characterize modern life and reengages the world of the tribals as a possible Utopian project for the postcolonial nation and a new revolutionary society. As Löwy suggests in his reading of critical irrealism, the "dream of another imaginary world ... opposed to the grey, prosaic, disenchanting reality of modern, meaning capitalist, society" can lead to "challenging the philistine

---

<sup>14</sup> Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*, 117.

bourgeois order.”<sup>15</sup> A critique of the present can be engendered “through the idealized images of a different, nonexistent reality” whose aim is not a return to the premodern times so much as a “detour through the past to a utopian future.”<sup>16</sup>

Drawing examples from Latin America and India enables us to see precisely the ways in which a radical anticolonial primitivism brings to light what Majumder refers to as the “neglected or unrealised dialogues” among the geohistorical regions of the peripheral world (20). For primitivism was enmeshed in an internationalist modernism, making it impossible to study or practice it within the confines of nation-state boundaries. It is a discourse inevitably contaminated by colonial violence as well as resistance to it through an imaginative rendering of the past as a possible Utopian future. As Majumder writes, “Modernism as a set of representational strategies and concerns” can be mapped on to the “disjunctive and discontinuous experience of modernity. Peripheral aesthetics not only arises out of unevenness but also, as a resisting impulse, seeks to abolish its conditions of emergence” (27). In the works of Baij and Mariátegui, the revolutionary project is realized through an amalgamation of imagination and labor, and in that shared artistic and political space they illuminate what Majumder calls the “unequally illuminated conjunctures of the long twentieth century” (19).

**Author biography.** Rashmi Varma teaches English and comparative literary studies at the University of Warwick. She is the author of *The Postcolonial City: London, Nairobi, Bombay* (Routledge, 2011) and coeditor of *Marxism, Postcolonial Theory and the Future of Critique: Critical Engagements with Benita Parry* (Routledge, 2018). She is the founding editorial collective member of the journal *Feminist Dissent*.

---

<sup>15</sup> Michael Löwy, “The Current of Critical Irrealism: ‘A Moonlit Enchanted Night,’” in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 193–206.

<sup>16</sup> Löwy, “The Current of Critical Irrealism,” 196–97.

**Cite this article:** Varma, Rashmi. 2022. “Primitivism in the Peripheries: Reflections on Auritro Majumder’s *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*.” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, 417–423. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2022.15>