BOOK REVIEWS

LATE COLONIAL SUBLIME: NEO-EPICS AND THE END OF ROMANTICISM. By G. S. Sahota. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2018. xiv+277 pp.

In Classical and Biblical literature, the term for ending, *Kairos*, imbricates the meanings of origin and closure, the passing and the fulfilled, and conjoins crisis with critique. G.S. Sahota's *Late Colonial Sublime: Neo-Epics and the End of Romanticism* musters a stunning array of figures rarely studied together: Walter Benjamin and Altaf Hussain Hali, Michael Madhusudan Datta and Mohammad Iqbal, Joseph Conrad and Jayashankar Prasad to grasp how the kairotic moment of romanticism sifts in the Imperial periphery: in Urdu, Bengali and Hindi, and crystallizes in the form of "neo-epic". His move across the disparate temporal nodes of texts such as *Musaddas: The Ebb and Flow of Islam*, *Meghnadhbadhkavya* (*The Slaying of Meghnad*), *Kamayani* (*The Daughter of Kama*) and even Ramanand Sagar's *TV Ramayana* marks the late colonial as an age of the "simultaneity of non-simultaneous" *pace* Ernst Bloch, and replicates the formal amplitude of the neo-epic[1]. The copious epic form revived in the colony in the wake of imperial capital remembers how the commodity form bristles into the garden trope of Indo-Islamic poetry in Hali, or how the Greco-Roman epic is transplanted into the Sanskrit *kavya* in Datta in an age of colonial liberalism. The epic memorialization such events within the formal structures of these texts at the turn of the century goes against the grain of the minimal in metropolitan Modernism. And yet, as Sahota notes, the neo-epics are not dregs of the traditional in a modernizing moment. Neither are they national allegories *pace* Fredric Jameson, he argues.[2] Rather, they are "quintessentially modern" in their obdurate "antimodernism", simultaneously revealing the imperial ruins and committing to their redressal, perfusing the future in the form of the past (14).

Late Colonial Sublime has two parts. The Part I, "Fractured Frames: Imperial Parallax and Disjointed Time" focuses on the crisis of value experienced under the aegis of imperial capital. Everyday life is reified, driven by the universal value of commodity and its ideologies of utility and progress. Romanticism and the sublime are presented as critical categories that emerge at the same moment of crisis and condense within them possibilities of undoing that history. Chapter 1, "Commodity and Sublimity: Mimesis of the Immaterial" dialectically posits the Marxist categories such as "reification", "fetishism" and "commodity-form" against the romantic category of the "sublime", and creates a theoretically innovative model for grasping "nonsensuous similarity" amid apparently distant and disparate phenomena. Chapter 2, "Romanticism's Horizons or the Transmission of Critique" begins with a brilliant reading of Conrad's *Lord Jim* where

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ocean as a category of the romantic sublime focalizes the "immanent contradictions of the imperial order" (57). The illusory ideals of the protagonist become a site of self-reflection for imperialism at large, as subjectivity turns into the allegory of history, a method akin to the work of Jameson, as I elaborate later. A series of quotations from Walter Benjamin is presented as "Oceanic Interludes", and indeed, ocean emerges as the most pervasive category of the sublime in this book. Chapter 3, "Atmospherics of Imperialism: Benjamin's Sublime" presents the crux of Sahota's theoretical maneuver in the book. Benjamin is persuasively credited to be the progenitor of a materialist understanding of the sublime, and that of a revitalized epic remembrance, as I discuss in the next section. Part II, "Neo-Epic Constellation: Out of British India" begins with Michael Madhusudan and ends with Mohammad Iqbal and Jayashankar Prasad, constellating Bengali, Urdu and Hindi traditions of the neo-epic as the paradigmatic genre of the late colonial. Chapter 4, "Hali's Transvaluation of Modernity: Allegories of *Marsiya*" centers on the scalar disjunction of adapting the classical form of the *Musaddas* to life in Victorian India. The images of shipwreck in the ocean of historical change configure the oceanic sublime as an index of transformation, the torn legacy of Mughal India that would be taken up in subsequent chapters in diverging imaginaries of the nation in Urdu and Hindi, in Iqbal and Prasad. Chapter 5, "Iqbal or the *Sturm and Drang* of Late Colonial India: Resemblances of Pure Content" is elaborated through a close reading of *Javid Nama*, and Iqbal's copious vision of Islam as assimilation of the Enlightenment, German Romanticism and Bergsonian Intuitionism. The oceanic sublime in the text is refigured as a departure from the formulae of Indo-Islamic poetry, usually confined to the imaginary of the town with topoi such as "garden", mosque" or "tavern". The vision of a redeemed future out of the here and now of late colonial India unleashes the "sublime energy embedded within the mundane existence", and formulates a break from the Islamic canon (162). This vision, argues Sahota, cannot be contained by Iqbal's political preferences. He explicates how Iqbal's *Payam* interlocks with Goethe's *Divan* in terms of Goethe's earlier interlockings with Persian poetry, and the ebb of flow of the sublime pulsates across the constraints of history. Chapter 6, "Utility and Culture: Modern Subjectivity and the Neotraditional Aesthetics" moves across Bengali and Hindi to write an intellectual history of utilitarian liberalism in North India in relation to the "neo-epic". From the post-liberal possibilities of Datta's *Meghnadhbadhkavya* to the neo-conservatism of Prasad's *Kamayani*, the neo-epic hero turns from the rebel into the new Manu, symptomatic of an age of modern traditionalism, obsessed with progress (*Unnati*) (204-6). The book ends with an "Epilogue", "Melancholic Ornament: TV Ramayana, Nostalgia and the Kitsch as Counter-Enlightenment" where the immersive sheen of TV, itself a material incarnation of modern commodity culture and mass consumption, is paradoxically presented as the sliding door out of the time of capitalist modernity.

Sahota is careful to avoid a culturalist rhetoric of historical difference in his study, influential in a stripe of academic postcolonialism. The temporal unevenness between the metropole and the colony is diagnosed as the aporia of modernity itself, rather than the waiting room of history for the colonized, to use the famous metaphor from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000). Instead of thoroughly rejecting the Enlightenment as the imperial reason of Europe, Sahota displaces it onto the colonial geography, and in the writings of Iqbal and Datta among others retrieves its ""horizon of egalitarianism", beyond the confines of imperialism and nationalism. In his constellation of a "postcolonial Marxism",

the end of romanticism in the colony acquires "dialectical valences", and reveals the mark of untimely capital even in ostensibly imperial-romantic texts from the metropole, such as Conrad's *Lord Jim* (56). The global dispensation of romanticism as anti-imperial aesthetics has become an established area of scholarship through the works of Saree Makdisi, Nigel Leask, Javed Majeed, and recently Manu Samriti Chander among others. In discerning the spatial chiasmus of late romanticism across the imperial core and periphery in the nineteenth century, beyond the logics of dissemination and influence, Sahota's project has a critical affinity with the spatial turn in the study of world literary systems, for instance in the works of Robert Tally Jr. and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee. However, the remarkable originality of *Late Colonial Sublime* lies in its reinvention of Walter Benjamin as a "late colonial thinker", in whose adaptation of the Kantian sublime into the constellated fragments of the commodity-form lies the crux of Sahota's theorization. After Peter Fenves' *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford University Press, 2011) Sahota's *Late Colonial Sublime* is a substantial engagement with the Kantian legacy in Benjamin. Benjamin's everyday life [*erlebnis*] in fin de siècle Europe as well as his experience in the island of Ibiza, are persuasively diagnosed to be haunted by the colonial. This refreshing read is contrary to what Jameson famously called the cognitive disjunction between metropolitan lived experience and its colonial substratum in nineteenth century literature, a rift that was broached in the formal experiments of modernism in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). In that sense, the book could be read in tandem with Lauren M.E. Goodlad's *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty and Transnational Experience* (OUP, 2015) that seeks to decouple realism from the project of hegemonic liberalism. However, Sahota goes beyond the anglophone tradition Goodlad assesses. The parallax structure of his readings undoes the metropolitan-colonial divide in annotating late nineteenth century romanticism, conjoined at the jugged edges of their disjuncture. Here he is arguably positing a thesis akin to Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* (Verso, 2012) that reads modernism as the protracted ruination and melancholic refiguration of romanticism, where "a radical depersonalization of the bourgeois subject" takes place, and subjectivity becomes allegory of the "transformation of the world itself" (135-6). Sahota connects the romantic sublime of early Benjamin in works such as "The Pan of Evening" and "Estranged Land" with the later Benjamin of technological reproducibility and discarded artifacts to zero on landscape (*landschaft*) as the figure of the natural-historical in his philosophy. In landscape, eroded nature conjoins with cultural tropes of the bygone, pleated in a palimpsest without being harmonized (102-3). Indeed, the romantic landscape in Benjamin becomes mere form, a skeleton of romanticism possessed by the nocturnal intuitions of imperial capitalism. The constellation without harmony makes landscape messianic, a horizon of redemption where the clock of historical onslaught could be halted. The Benjaminian sublime, unlike the Kantian one, is antiteleological. Sahota notes how Benjamin espouses a non-instrumental philosophy of language, in contrast to the Neo-Kantianism of his day. Here it is not chiseled with human will, as in Neo-Kantianism. Rather, it prefigures social totality, absorbs the subjective "I" in its magic, and coagulates "the givenness of raw *phusis* and the innateness of human *poiesis*" (114). Coupling memory of an eroded totality and prefiguring a not-yet wholeness, Benjamin in his travel accounts of Ibiza, the astonishing essay called "The Storyteller" and his engagement with Brecht's epic theatre develops an estranged faculty of the epic. It retains the critical awareness of (re)membrance, shreds strewn together in neo-epic, carefully eschewing the racialization

of memory couched in a fascist return to roots. The complex notion of remembrance (*eingendenken*) emerging initially through Benjamin's reading of involuntary memory in Proust, as distinguished from voluntary memory, is crucial to his philosophy of history, a point presented a bit obliquely by Sahota.[3] Indeed, the politics of past typified in these two forms of memory directly maps into the distinction between critical sublime of the neo-epic and romantic mystique of fascism. The blurring contours of this distinction in the early decades of twentieth century is a running concern of Sahota, a predicament examined carefully in relation to Rabindranath Tagore's visits to Italy and Japan (88-92). The dangerous possibility of being trapped into the neo-conservative politics of roots is coeval with the birth of the neo-epic, and it would only enhance in post-colonial India. The epilogue about the *TV Ramayana* presents the overlaps between an imaginary organic "Aryan" community, and the massification of the public sphere. It is the crucible of a "conservative revolution", in the words of the anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen, as Sahota cites (218). It is an "epic visuality", a suspension of history, where new modes of historiography could be forged to remove the estrangement of remembrance, and make memory of the nation homogenous (231).

Late Colonial Sublime is truly remarkable in its breadth and sharpness of insight. Perhaps the only missing link between the postliberal impulses of neo-epic as it was forged in Madhusudan and Hali and its neo-conservative form in *TV Ramayana* is the Orientalist archive in British India that intercepts access to tradition in postcolonial India, and spawns kitsch of the past. Nevertheless, the book is remarkably original and ambitious, and promises sustained relevance across the fields of Romanticism, World Literature, South Asian Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Aesthetic Theory.

Notes

[1] See Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics", *New German Critique*, no. 11 (Spring 1977) pp. 22–38.

[2] Fredric Jameson's essay "Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text* No. 15, (Autumn, 1986) pp. 65-88, has courted controversy since Aijaz Ahmad's lashing rebuttal, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory", *Social Text* No. 17 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 3-25. Often cited as an exemplar of first-world parochialism of a master theorist, Jameson's essay mobilizes the resources of world-system theory to focalize the periphery as a site politico-aesthetic subversion. An important recent attempt to resuscitate Jameson's relevance in the study of World Literature, based on the essay is Auritro Majumder's " The Case for Peripheral Aesthetics: Fredric Jameson, World-System and Cultures of Emancipation", *Interventions: International Journals of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 19, 2017, pp. 781-796.

[3] For a comprehensive account of the distinction between involuntary memory and voluntary memory see the chapter on "Remembrance" in Eli Friedlander's *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

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