

Sahota, G. S. *Late Colonial Sublime: Neo-Epics and the End of Romanticism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018. 291 pp.; \$34.95.

G. S. Sahota's book is a brilliant intervention in the literary and cultural history of modern South Asia, with some forays into aspects of the Japanese Romantic school and modern Chinese visual culture. Its focus on the neo-epic in India in the modern period is a welcome corrective to the privileging of the novel in discussions of modern Indian literary culture. In general terms, Sahota approaches Romanticism as a world literary phenomenon, and shows how Asian Romanticism is not a paltry imitation of hegemonic western models. Rather, as he convincingly outlines, this Romanticism inherited the powerful narrative legacies of its own epic tradition which enabled it to speak to the dynamics of modernity in original and poignantly divided ways. Along the way, Sahota displays sharp critical acumen in his readings of key Indian neo-epics. He is insightful on Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī's *Musaddas* (*Madd o Jazr-e Islām*) (1879; revised 1886), paying attention to how the new colonial economic nexus left its imprint on its texture, and how its deployment of the form of the *marshiyah* (elegy) was at odds with its apparent wholesale endorsement of modernity—as Sahota puts it, “a peculiarly compensatory antimodern valence is given in the very form of the work” (p. 7).

Equally insightful are his readings of Muḥammad Iqbāl's *Jāved-nāmah* (1932) and his other key poems, addressing Iqbāl's frames of reference, his “chiselled” and “unadorned style” (p. 93), oceanic imagery and fluctuating sizes in his poems, his grappling with Enlightenment rationality through a reconstructed Islamic theology, and his conflicted dialogue with Sayyid Aḥmad Ḳhān. The section on Iqbāl's engagement with Goethe and the appendix translating Iqbāl's preface to *Payām-e Mashriq* (1923) are illuminating, not just about Iqbāl's relationship with Western literature, but also Goethe's relationship with Islam in his *West-östlicher Divan*. As Sahota suggestively avers, Goethe was an invisible counterpart to Rūmī in Iqbāl's work, and the “way Goethe opened himself to the *Unheimlichkeit* of Islam held magnetic attraction for Iqbāl's own *unheimlich* Muslim Indian self” (p. 151). In the *Jāved-nāmah*, it is “through the presence of Goethe that Rumi attains a measure of his own self,” and each mediates the self-realization of the other (p. 150).

The chapter on modern subjectivity and neotraditional aesthetics in Michael Madhusudana Datta's *Meghanadvadh-Kavya* (*Meghanādvadh Kāvya*) (1861) is equally illuminating, with its exposition of blank verse as the vehicle for modern subjectivity in the colonial sphere and the overlapping legacies of the ancient Indo-European epic traditions of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin utilized by Datta in his neo-epic as “the fungible raw materials for fashioning

a new chapter of world literary history” (p. 187). The analysis of the poem is accompanied by a useful discussion of Datta’s 1854 essay “The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu,” which Sahota reads in terms of how it “frames the predicament through which the Indian neo-epic was forged over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (p. 172).

Throughout the book, Sahota is alert to the “melancholic poignancy” (p. 138) of how the Indian neo-epic articulated a new kind of traditionalism through non-traditional means as it critiqued modernity and its clock time and bourgeois norms, while its authors simultaneously lived that time and internalized those norms. This poignancy is brought home to us through discussions of the inner turmoil experienced by Iqbāl in Germany, Walter Benjamin’s impoverishment and the period he spent in Ibiza, and Datta’s poverty and alcoholism. In his exploration of the tensions between the eras of Mahāvīr Prasād Dvivedī and Chhāyāvād (Hindi Romanticism), Sahota shows how the Chhāyāvādīs’ break with prescribed sociality and experimentation with new meters marked the tortured arrival of liberal subjectivity within the wider Hindi sphere (p. 203), and how Jayashankar Prasād’s *Kāmāyanī* (1936) reflected the conflict between normative political ends and potentially transgressive aesthetic choices. Appendix B translates Sumitrānanadan Pant’s “The Usefulness of the Epic Form in the Modern Age” with a preface; this, too, is illuminating, showing as it does how the essay “presents a global consciousness as emergent, requiring for its awesome breadth the epic form as a medium of reflection” (p. 243).

The book ends with an appropriately spectacular chapter on the TV *Rāmāyan* (1987–1988), which is informed by Kracauer’s analysis in *Das Ornamente der Masse* of kitsch and the surface sheen of Weimar’s mass culture. In doing so, it approaches the TV *Rāmāyan* not in terms of mass nostalgic sentimentality alone, but as a mass ornament and a form of mass dream kitsch, which throws much light on the rise of fascism in India. As he puts it, the TV *Rāmāyan* was “saturated with a melancholic volatility” and “through it the disturbance of the dream image opens the way towards mass genocide” (p. 227).

However, *Late Colonial Sublime* is not focused on Indian literary culture alone. It touches on the echoes of homelessness across the differentiated terrains of China, Japan, and India in the colonial period. It also has a succinct discussion of Marx’s “The Commodity” in volume one of *Capital*, and an enlightening chapter on Walter Benjamin’s contrapuntal elaboration of the Kantian sublime and his approach to language and translation in term of its messianic force, showing how the Bible spoke deeply to his thoughts on language.

Sahota's book contains many carefully distilled insights and elegant bon mots, and its analyses are perceptive and sensitive. Since Sahota shows how the Indian neo-epic questions instrumental reason, which at the same time impacted on its form, he eschews taking a utilitarian approach to its materials himself. Instead, his book is a series of assembled vignettes, unified in its exposition of how traditionalism is reassembled through modern means in the Indian neo-epic. His book is a must-read for advanced students of world literature and of modern South Asian literature, as well as for courses on the relations between economic thought and literary texts.

My remaining comments are more on the general framing of the argument than on any of its details. It was perhaps surprising to see no engagement with David Quint's *Epic and Empire* (1993), which explores two rival traditions of the epic, the epics of imperial victors and those of the defeated. Many students will read Sahota's book alongside David Quint's, and hence some placing of *Late Colonial Sublime* in relation to Quint would have been useful. Given the emphasis on the new economic nexus of colonial India leaving its signature on the texture of the Indian neo-epic in terms of the "sublime" (p. 6), another study to consider in conjunction with Sahota's is Peter de Bolla's *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject* (1989), which examines how the discourse on the sublime and the national debt in eighteenth-century Britain intersected, and how both coincided with the creation of a national bank. That is, the sublime in the metropolis was already encoded in terms of an economic nexus, and thus the late-colonial sublime in India was one further iteration of ongoing intersections between capitalism, debt, and the reconfiguration of the sublime.

Some discussion of the influence of anarchism on Walter Benjamin might have been helpful—Benjamin's evocation of pure language imbued with messianic force and rooted in an original magical unity destroyed by instrumental reason is echoed in John Zerzan's later 1989 essay "Language: Origin and Meaning," which describes how the instrumentalization of language created false separations and objectifications through its symbolizing power, and how "being alive in nature, before our abstraction from it, must have involved a perception and contact that we can scarcely comprehend from our levels of anguish and alienation" (*ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 46, no. 3 [Fall 1989]: p. 236).

At times, Sahota seems to assume too readily that in the modern era the aura of the art work and cultic objects has undergone widespread and accelerating decay in the West, but, as Paul Crowther has argued in his *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (1993), this is not a blanket phenomenon. There

are certain contexts where it has survived in concentrated form, hence the boom undergone by the art market and gallery system since the late 1950s and the large attendances at exhibitions. Because we are accustomed to reproductions of such works, our encounters with an original take on the shock-value of a privileged experience, or, as he puts it, “the existence of multiple reproductions signif[ies] and expand[s] the existential potency and aura of the original” (p. 18).

Finally, *Late Colonial Sublime* has an obvious stake in textuality as a key to knowledge. For the most part, this approach is conducted extremely well. However, given Sahota’s focus on how a colonial economic nexus marked the Indian neo-epic, one wonders, as is often the case with analyses like these, about bringing textuality and discursiveness up against the social and economic reality outside it. As most of the analysis is conducted at the ideational level, the reader is left pondering about the interactions and interrelations between the concrete material and social relations of capital and labor in colonial India and the Indian neo-epic. This question, though, is one faced by all studies that focus on discourse and textuality, and its not being addressed here is hardly a failing. It is more a sign of the larger question which such studies inevitably come up against. In doing so, though, these studies often cover much ground beforehand and this one does so par excellence.

Overall, this remains a brilliant study of the Indian neo-epic with much more to offer in addition, as this review has shown, and as mentioned above, it should be essential reading for advanced students of both modern Indian literature and world literature.

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