
Neelam Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel. National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), x + 210 pp.

Reviewed by **Fiorenzo Iuliano**

Neelam Srivastava's *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel* discusses the question of secularism as a political and rhetorical strategy that finds its appropriate and, at the same time, controversial concretion in the Anglophone Indian literature of the 1980s and 1990s. Through the analysis of six novels (Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*) that cover a time span from 1981 to 1996, the author explores the multiple connections between the question of secularism, as it has been broached and thematized in the works chosen, and other terms, such as historicism, language, postcolonial subjectivity and citizenship, and finally the transnationalism/cosmopolitanism dyad, crucial to understand recent Indian history and its narrative and rhetorical reformulations. The book can also be read as an attempt at rewriting the history of India as a nation-state and the different forms of Indian nationalism as narratives of secularism.

This approach seeks to blur the linearity of historicism, which traditionally reads events as clearly disposed along an ordered and progressive trajectory; it reconfigures the past as a set of discursive practices, aimed at substantiating the ideologies of power and nation. The novels chosen by Srivastava reflect the contradictory stances towards religion and secularism at play in the historical and political debate, and the different configurations that secularism has assumed in the Indian past. The emphasis on the linguistic and narratological aspects of the novels, along with their historical and ideological articulations, is a crucial feature of Srivastava's book: it shows the political applicability of the semiotic elements of literary texts, and points out that the ideological stances characterizing the controversy about religion and the public sphere, in the Indian context, are crucially embodied and articulated through the polyphonic architecture of the novel.

On the whole, the book discusses and analyzes the six novels in depth, but concentrates most particularly on two of the five authors, Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth, whose main works are read as two different, if not opposite, ways to articulate secularism. Srivastava uses the notion of 'rational secularism' with reference to Seth's most famous novel, *A Suitable Boy*, which opposes Indian nationalism in the 1990s, harshly marked in religious terms, to the universalistic secularism of the 1950s, clearly influenced by Jawaharlal Nehru's political thought. On the contrary,

Rushdie's works are analyzed as the expression of a more subversive 'radical secularism'. On the one hand, the heritage of Nehru's thought is noticeable in Seth's novel, whose position, not differently from the European tradition, does not deny the importance of religion for Indian culture and history, but simply relegates it to the private sphere; on the other, the radical perspective endorsed by Rushdie considers religion and secularism as cultural practices in their own right, narrative and mythical elaborations that build up the nation as a cultural and rhetorical artefact. As Srivastava argues, "Rushdie ... by placing secularism within a diachronic, allegorical unfolding of the nation's history, historicizes secular nationalism and effectively reveals it as a myth" (58); Rushdie's swaying between religion and secularism as cultural and narrative practices is, moreover, read as the expression of the stylistic and linguistic devices of magical realism.

The divide between rational and radical secularism is one of the central hinges around which the whole book is constructed; by opposing the perspective of Seth's work, linear, narratively fluent and ideologically univocal, to Rushdie's syncretic and convoluted style both in terms of language and cultural references, Srivastava displays two different perspectives at play in recent Indian literature in English. The first represents and narrates India as a nation with a clearly defined history, which can be neatly recapitulated and articulated in narrative terms; the second, on the contrary, features the Indian past as a narrative, a rhetorical and ideological construction, with religion as one of its components. Srivastava's emphasis on the use of metaphors, allegories and symbols in *Midnight's Children* and in *The Great Indian Novel*, opposed to the strict realism of *A Suitable Boy* and *A Fine Balance*, reveals their political potentiality and their capability of reweaving Indian history as a complex set of rhetorical constructions and ideological projections.

Srivastava resorts to Bakhtin's work on the novel as an intrinsically dialogic genre, capable of assembling and entwining different and contrasting voices and reducing to the minimum the presence of an external, omniscient author. Interestingly, she juxtaposes the narratological approach, articulated in Bakhtin's lexicon, to the postcolonial stance expressed by Edward Said and his well-known thematization of counterpoint as a significant strategy of discursive construction and cultural analysis. Semiotic structures and cultural practices are, thus, once again brought together in the book, according to a perspective that combines the linguistic devices at work in literary texts and their historical and political references, showing their mutual dependence.

In devoting her attention to novels in English only, Srivastava crucially highlights the opposition between Indian Anglophone literature and the *bhasha* literatures, i.e. , literatures written in the official Indian languages. In this respect, a more in-depth analysis of Indian linguistic policy (which

refers to English and Hindi as Indian ‘national’ languages, and to the other Indian languages, among which Hindi again, as ‘official’ ones) and its effects on literary works would have been appropriate. Srivastava resorts to the notion of “imagined community”, established by Benedict Anderson, to define the transnational, English-speaking, highbrow and, in a certain sense, elitist audience of Indian novels in English, as opposed to the more traditional and conservative market of the literatures written in the state-languages. In her words, novels in English “create an imagined community of readers who are not defined by national boundaries, but by the transnational scope of English” (12). The viable notion of postcolonial community is implicitly elaborated in this analysis; Srivastava openly theorizes the audacious idea of postcolonial citizenship, instanced in Rushdie’s work and in his construction of a diasporic and transnational subject, capable of switching among different histories and languages, never exclusively belonging to any of them. The idea that “linguistic heteroglossia ... [expresses] the idea of a pluralistic, secular nation-state” (156) reinforces one of the book’s crucial assumptions, the necessity to couple narrative and political questions, underlining their interaction and their mutual, and often contrasting, influence.

The problem of history is central to Srivastava’s analysis, and, in particular, to her elaboration on the connection between the novels she analyzes and the period in which they were written, a period marked by the emergence of Hindutva chauvinist nationalism. Starting with Indira Gandhi’s patriotic and autocratic rhetoric (“India is Indira, Indira is India”), and after the state of emergency declared in 1975, an increasingly intense nationalistic tendency burgeoned in Indian politics, culminating in the 1980s with the triumph of the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party and its cultural and religious counterpart, the Hindutva movement. The identification of a supposedly glorious and awesome Indian past with Hindu religious tradition was one of the main tenets of the Hindutva, along with the exclusion from this construction of history of other communities, in particular the Muslim one. Srivastava reads the texts analyzed as different examples of reaction to Hindutva chauvinism: here, a counter-narrative of national history is elaborated as a multicultural and communal experience, constructed through the contribution of different Indian religious communities. Moreover, the position of the Subaltern Studies research group rejected the idea of history as linear progress, dismantling the categories provided by European historicism and, more radically, theorizing the impossibility of conceiving the Indian past according to the terms of European historiography. Thus the necessity to construct an ideological and quasi-mythical ‘usable past’ for India as a nation-state is opposed to the two different secularist approaches that Srivastava discusses in her book, as they are chiefly instanced, respectively, in the works of Seth and Rushdie.

Srivastava traces a history of secularism through the analysis of the controversial relationships between religion and the public sphere that have characterized Indian events. In the XIX century, Indian nationalism had a marked religious connotation, aimed at differentiating the Indian nation and tradition from the British (secular) ones. Gandhi and Nehru elaborated two different forms of secularism: Gandhi encouraged a kind of pan-religious ideology that embraced all Indian cults, subsuming them under the comprehensive authority of a non-identified deity and thus marking Indian national identity in spiritual, if not overtly religious, terms. On the contrary, Nehru, as Srivastava often recalls in the book, espoused the European attitude that confined religion to the sole private sphere. The contradictory stances towards the relationship between religion and state, expressed over the centuries, are reflected in literary texts and subsequently elaborated in the works analyzed. Srivastava often mentions *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao's seminal novel in English, published in 1938, in which Rao narrates daily life in Indian rural villages, scrupulously adhering to the ideological paradigms of Gandhi's teaching. The comparison between *Kanthapura* and the corpus of novels discussed in the book highlights the progressive shift from a nation identified with the local and 'traditional' identity to a cosmopolitan definition of the nation-state, considered as the latest form of Indian secularism.

The last chapter focuses on the cosmopolitan and metropolitan subject as the most recent ideal repository of the Indian secular tradition; according to this perspective, cosmopolitanism is configured as "a non-nationally oriented version of secularism, which is understood not only as a state policy, but as a version of Indian nationhood, thus shaping concepts of both nation and state" (158). The different strategies at work to display the cosmopolitan configuration of secularism are particularly interesting, as Srivastava aptly notices. Among other paradigmatic examples of this tendency, it is worth remarking the role of the city, which often recurs in postcolonial novels referring to both Indian and diasporic contexts; and – in Seth's works – the theme of homosexuality, analyzed as another possible locus of identification of the displaced and cosmopolitan postcolonial subject, thus providing a further element to the definition of present Indian secularism.