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Mohan Rakesh, Modernism, and the Postcolonial Present

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Abstract

Mohan Rakesh, *Modernism, and the Postcolonial Present*: The fin-de-si cle critical project of redefining the spatio-temporal boundaries of modernism has lately gathered new momentum by taking up the question of modernism's relation to colonialism and postcolonialism. Appearing at the intersection of modernist studies and postcolonial studies, important recent essays by Simon Gikandi, Susan Stanford Friedman, Ariela Freedman, and others argue for a recovery of the global networks of twentieth-century modernism that is predicated on cultural interflows rather than a unidirectional and hierarchical relation between the Western center and its non-Western peripheries. Linked by the emerging concept of "geomodernism," the new approaches, however, continue to privilege Western locations and the European languages, especially English, as the primary sites of modernity, often relegating non-Western spaces and non-Europhone works to the status of "vernacular" art.

This essay extends the reach of postmodernism through a discussion of Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972), the iconic post-independence playwright in India's majority language, Hindi, and one of India's leading twentieth-century authors, irrespective of genre and language. As a member of the first generation of Indian-language writers whose careers unfolded after political independence in 1947, Rakesh exemplifies many of the larger literary, political, and cultural relations (and ruptures) that are seminal to any discussion of Indian modernism—those between colonial and postcolonial modernities, indigenous traditions and Western influences, the Indian languages and English, bourgeois-romantic nationalism and ironic individualism, Left ideology and a skeptical humanism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism, center and periphery, village and city. Approaching him as a paradigmatic figure, the essay first considers the concepts of modernity and modernism as they emerge at the levels of taxonomy, theory, and practice in Indian literature and culture after the mid-nineteenth century, providing a conceptual framework for successive generations of pre- and post-independence writers. It then examines the modernist positions that appear in Rakesh's theory and criticism over the course of his career, especially in his arguments about creativity, authorship, form, content, and language. Finally, the essay offers a reading of Rakesh's last full-length play, *Adhe adhure* (*The Unfinished*, 1969), as a drama of urban dysfunction which combines realism with several structural innovations to accommodate the psychodrama of home and family—the privileged narrative of realism in modern Western theatre—to the Indian metropolis. The playwright becomes visible in these sequential analyses as a cosmopolitan modernist fully cognizant of Western movements but also fully committed to an indigenized aesthetic, his cosmopolitanism inhering precisely in the cultural ambidexterity of his vision. If Rakesh's linguistic medium is not that of the Western imperial metropolis, it is a medium with its own thousand-year imperial and metropolitan history; and if his modernism is furthest from the Anglo-European center in terms of geography, language, and cultural codes, it is proximate enough in theoretical, aesthetic, and political terms to constitute an important formation within postmodernism.

Mohan Rakesh, Modernism, and the Postcolonial Present

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I. GEOMODERNISM AND THE INDIAN-LANGUAGE PLAYWRIGHT

The fin-de-siècle critical project of redefining the spatio-temporal boundaries of modernism has recently gathered new momentum by taking up the question of modernism's relation to colonialism and postcolonialism. The formative influence of non-western aesthetic and cultural practices (especially those belonging to colonized peoples) on Euro-American modernisms is a well-noted event in the histories of modern literature and art.¹ But the *reciprocal* influence of Euro-modernist theory and practice on post/colonial expressive forms is only now beginning to receive attention. Some current work at the intersection of modernist and postcolonial studies demonstrates both the necessity and the difficulty of devising an adequate methodology for dealing with "modernism at the margins," and I will approach my discussion of Mohan Rakesh—a late-twentieth-century Indian-language modernist in the theatre—by way of three seminal arguments about the reconfiguration of modernism-as-subject.

Describing postcolonial writers' emulation of high modernists such as T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats as "the great irony of the history of postcolonial literatures," Simon Gikandi nonetheless asserts that

a convergence of political and literary ideologies mark[s] a significant part of the history of modernism and postcolonialism. Indeed, it is my contention that it was primarily—I am tempted to say solely—in the language and structure of modernism that a postcolonial experience came to be articulated and imagined in literary form. The archive of early postcolonial writing in Africa, the Caribbean, and India is dominated by and defined by writers whose political or cultural projects were enabled by modernism even when the ideologies of the latter, as was the case with Eliot, were at odds with the project of decolonization . . . [W]ithout modernism, postcolonial literature as we know it would perhaps not exist.²

These are far-reaching claims about the centrality of modernism to postcolonial writing, and they call for a radical revision of the conventional

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