

## HYBRIDITY IN POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND LITERATURE

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**Through** the early part of the 1990's, analyses of the postcolonial were poised in a theoretical impasse between the competing claims of *identity* and situatedness, on the one hand, and *hybridity* and dispersal, on the other. Of late, this impasse appears to have been resolved in favour of the latter, which has achieved a new ascendancy under the flag of a distinctly *metropolitan* protectorship. As it happens, however, canonicity has had a somewhat unfavourable effect on the heart and soul of hybridity. Shifting places from an oppositional to an enlightened perspective, hybridity now stands charged, within some sections of the postcolonial academy, as a metropolitan affectation: more aesthetics than ethics, more theoretically than politically driven.

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While I share in this general scepticism, my objections to the discourse of metropolitan syncretism are somewhat differently motivated. In the main, I am troubled by the fact that in its canonical manifestation, hybridity or creolisation is only seen as an effect of the colonial encounter, and so, as a symptom of modernity. As a further consequence, syncretism has also been captured as the prize of a strictly secular imagination. Within *postcolonial* literature, this set of associations is most readily elaborated in the work of Salman Rushdie. Not only does Rushdie insist that hybridity is exclusively an effect of East-West migration, but also upon the fact that an aesthetics or ideology of hybridity is constitutively opposed to the domain of the sacred. Here, hybridity is postulated as a carnivalesque poetics of irreverence, doggedly committed to the practice of demystification.

I do not wish to discredit the literary and-to an extent-political benefits of Rushdie's position: his demystification of extreme nationalism and specifically of the rise of religious nationalism in India is pertinent and often interesting. However, it seems worthwhile to also seek out forms of syncretism which are not exclusively predicated upon an encounter with the West, and which might, accordingly, be found outside of a strictly modern or secular imaginary. I believe that this quest might take two directions.

First, it might be expressed as a search for local cosmopolitanisms and pluralisms that bypass Europe. Second, it might reconsider the sacred—or the experience of the sacred—as another means for the elaboration of hybridity within the self, within culture. Amitav Ghosh's, *In An Antique Land* (1992) remains the most powerful exploration of local cosmopolitanisms. Pankaj Mishra's new novel, *The Romantics* (2000) is also relevant here for its attempt to imagine forms of self-division within India. Mukul Keshavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995) is another exemplary exploration of the tensions of inter-communal inter-subjectivity in postcolonial India. While each of these writers attempt, with varying degrees of success, to imagine local syncretism and creolisation, Ghosh is alone in extending his search beyond the protocols of modernity. Accordingly his book stands out as a search for the possibility of non-secular hybridities. There is a great deal to recommend in a re-association of syncretism and the sacred. Not only is this task imaginatively urgent, but is politically expedient as well in a milieu where the *sacred* has been turned into a poor caricature of itself.

Indeed, insofar as the *sacred* has been constricted within the straitjacket of national and religious purity, it might be worthwhile not merely to reject it, but rather to recast it as the scene of mixture and confusion: a theatre for the creolisation of self and other.

