Modernism and the Banality of Empire

Prose of the World

Saikat Majumdar

“Prose of the World is an enormously compelling and vivid study. It shows convincingly that the experience of colonial banality was a principal engine of literary modernism. By bringing a transnational perspective to the history of research century Anglophone fiction, Majumdar provokes modernism by putting its aesthetic celebration of the ordinary into conversation with the epiphanies of crushing boredom. The result is an ambitious, sharply and elegantly account of the relationship between early-twentieth-century fiction and the contemporary global novel in English.”

—REBECCA L. WALKOWITZ, Rutgers University, author of Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation

“There are many impressive things in this book: it provides us with a powerful rethinking of the vexed relationship between empire and modernism, an unprecedented probing of the interior logic of the modernist movement, and a smart meditation on the role of the ordinary and banal in the making of the language of modernism.”

—SIMON GIRARD, Princeton University

“Beautifully written and evidence of a fine intelligence, this book offers a striking and important intervention in ongoing debates in both modernist and postcolonial studies. As such, it will be a point of discussion and reference for quite a long time.”

—ENDA DUFFY, University of California, Santa Barbara, author of The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism

“This well-informed, searching study throws new light on the literary consequences of empire. In insightful account of the experience of boredom and banality on the political and cultural periphery and of writers’ responses to this experience, will be valued by all those interested in the global transformations of modernism and the relation between artistic creativity and colonial hegemony.”

—DEREK ATTIDGE, University of York

Everyday Life in the far outskirts of empire can be static, empty of the excitement of progress. A prevailing sense of banality and boredom are, therefore, common elements of the daily experience for people living on the colonial periphery. Saikat Majumdar suggests that this impoverished affective experience of colonial modernity significantly shapes the innovative aesthetics of modernist fiction. Prose of the World explores the global life of this narrative aesthetic, from late-colonial modernism to the present day, focusing on a writer each from Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, and India. Ranging from James Joyce’s deflated epiphanies to Amit Chaudhuri’s disavowal of the grand spectacle of postcolonial national allegories, Majumdar foregrounds the banal as a key instinct of modern and contemporary fiction—one that nevertheless remains submerged because of its antithetical relation to literature’s intuitive function to engage or excite.

CONTINUED FROM FRONT FLAP

CONTINUED ON BACK FLAP

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

is an assistant professor of English at Stanford University and the author of a novel, Silverfish.

Prose of the World

Majumdar asks us to rethink the assumption that banality merely indicates an aesthetic failure. If narrative is traditionally enabled by the tremor, velocity, and excitement of the event, the historical and affective lack implied by the banal produces a narrative force that is radically new precisely because it suspends the conventional impulses of narration.

CONTINUED FROM BACK FLAP

PRAISE FOR

“Prose of the World is an enormously compelling and vivid study. It shows convincingly that the experience of colonial banality was a principal engine of literary modernism. Bringing a transnational perspective to the history of research century Anglophone fiction, Majumdar provokes modernism by putting its aesthetic celebration of the ordinary into conversation with the epiphanies of crushing boredom. The result is an ambitious, sharply and elegantly account of the relationship between early-twentieth-century fiction and the contemporary global novel in English.”

—REBECCA L. WALKOWITZ, Rutgers University, author of Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation

“There are many impressive things in this book: it provides us with a powerful rethinking of the vexed relationship between empire and modernism, an unprecedented probing of the interior logic of the modernist movement, and a smart meditation on the role of the ordinary and banal in the making of the language of modernism.”

—SIMON GIRARD, Princeton University

“Beautifully written and evidence of a fine intelligence, this book offers a striking and important intervention in ongoing debates in both modernist and postcolonial studies. As such, it will be a point of discussion and reference for quite a long time.”

—ENDA DUFFY, University of California, Santa Barbara, author of The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism

“This well-informed, searching study throws new light on the literary consequences of empire. In insightful account of the experience of boredom and banality on the political and cultural periphery and of writers’ responses to this experience, will be valued by all those interested in the global transformations of modernism and the relation between artistic creativity and colonial hegemony.”

—DEREK ATTIDGE, University of York

Everyday Life in the far outskirts of empire can be static, empty of the excitement of progress. A prevailing sense of banality and boredom are, therefore, common elements of the daily experience for people living on the colonial periphery. Saikat Majumdar suggests that this impoverished affective experience of colonial modernity significantly shapes the innovative aesthetics of modernist fiction. Prose of the World explores the global life of this narrative aesthetic, from late-colonial modernism to the present day, focusing on a writer each from Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, and India. Ranging from James Joyce’s deflated epiphanies to Amit Chaudhuri’s disavowal of the grand spectacle of postcolonial national allegories, Majumdar foregrounds the banal as a key instinct of modern and contemporary fiction—one that nevertheless remains submerged because of its antithetical relation to literature’s intuitive function to engage or excite.

CONTINUED ON BACK FLAP

PRAISE FOR

“Prose of the World is an enormously compelling and vivid study. It shows convincingly that the experience of colonial banality was a principal engine of literary modernism. Bringing a transnational perspective to the history of research century Anglophone fiction, Majumdar provokes modernism by putting its aesthetic celebration of the ordinary into conversation with the epiphanies of crushing boredom. The result is an ambitious, sharply and elegantly account of the relationship between early-twentieth-century fiction and the contemporary global novel in English.”

—REBECCA L. WALKOWITZ, Rutgers University, author of Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation

“There are many impressive things in this book: it provides us with a powerful rethinking of the vexed relationship between empire and modernism, an unprecedented probing of the interior logic of the modernist movement, and a smart meditation on the role of the ordinary and banal in the making of the language of modernism.”

—SIMON GIRARD, Princeton University

“Beautifully written and evidence of a fine intelligence, this book offers a striking and important intervention in ongoing debates in both modernist and postcolonial studies. As such, it will be a point of discussion and reference for quite a long time.”

—ENDA DUFFY, University of California, Santa Barbara, author of The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism

“This well-informed, searching study throws new light on the literary consequences of empire. In insightful account of the experience of boredom and banality on the political and cultural periphery and of writers’ responses to this experience, will be valued by all those interested in the global transformations of modernism and the relation between artistic creativity and colonial hegemony.”

—DEREK ATTIDGE, University of York

Everyday Life in the far outskirts of empire can be static, empty of the excitement of progress. A prevailing sense of banality and boredom are, therefore, common elements of the daily experience for people living on the colonial periphery. Saikat Majumdar suggests that this impoverished affective experience of colonial modernity significantly shapes the innovative aesthetics of modernist fiction. Prose of the World explores the global life of this narrative aesthetic, from late-colonial modernism to the present day, focusing on a writer each from Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, and India. Ranging from James Joyce’s deflated epiphanies to Amit Chaudhuri’s disavowal of the grand spectacle of postcolonial national allegories, Majumdar foregrounds the banal as a key instinct of modern and contemporary fiction—one that nevertheless remains submerged because of its antithetical relation to literature’s intuitive function to engage or excite.

CONTINUED ON BACK FLAP

PRAISE FOR

“Prose of the World is an enormously compelling and vivid study. It shows convincingly that the experience of colonial banality was a principal engine of literary modernism. Bringing a transnational perspective to the history of research century Anglophone fiction, Majumdar provokes modernism by putting its aesthetic celebration of the ordinary into conversation with the epiphanies of crushing boredom. The result is an ambitious, sharply and elegantly account of the relationship between early-twentieth-century fiction and the contemporary global novel in English.”

—REBECCA L. WALKOWITZ, Rutgers University, author of Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation

“There are many impressive things in this book: it provides us with a powerful rethinking of the vexed relationship between empire and modernism, an unprecedented probing of the interior logic of the modernist movement, and a smart meditation on the role of the ordinary and banal in the making of the language of modernism.”

—SIMON GIRARD, Princeton University

“Beautifully written and evidence of a fine intelligence, this book offers a striking and important intervention in ongoing debates in both modernist and postcolonial studies. As such, it will be a point of discussion and reference for quite a long time.”

—ENDA DUFFY, University of California, Santa Barbara, author of The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism

“This well-informed, searching study throws new light on the literary consequences of empire. In insightful account of the experience of boredom and banality on the political and cultural periphery and of writers’ responses to this experience, will be valued by all those interested in the global transformations of modernism and the relation between artistic creativity and colonial hegemony.”

—DEREK ATTIDGE, University of York

Everyday Life in the far outskirts of empire can be static, empty of the excitement of progress. A prevailing sense of banality and boredom are, therefore, common elements of the daily experience for people living on the colonial periphery. Saikat Majumdar suggests that this impoverished affective experience of colonial modernity significantly shapes the innovative aesthetics of modernist fiction. Prose of the World explores the global life of this narrative aesthetic, from late-colonial modernism to the present day, focusing on a writer each from Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, and India. Ranging from James Joyce’s deflated epiphanies to Amit Chaudhuri’s disavowal of the grand spectacle of postcolonial national allegories, Majumdar foregrounds the banal as a key instinct of modern and contemporary fiction—one that nevertheless remains submerged because of its antithetical relation to literature’s intuitive function to engage or excite.
Prose of the World
Saikat Majumdar

Prose of the World

MODERNISM AND THE BANALITY OF EMPIRE

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS   NEW YORK
For Subho
Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression, and every deed, good and bad, is an attempt to forget this. Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives—most natives in the world—cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives . . . so when the natives see you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.

—Jamaica Kincaid, A Small Place
Contents

Introduction: Poetics of the Prosaic 1

1. James Joyce and the Banality of Refusal 37

2. Katherine Mansfield and the Fragility of Pākehā Boredom 71

3. The Dailiness of Trauma and Liberation in Zoë Wicomb 101

4. Amit Chaudhuri and the Materiality of the Mundane 135

Epilogue: The Uneventful 169

Acknowledgments 181

Notes 185

Bibliography 209

Index 221