

## Book Review

*Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines*. Laetitia Zecchini. London, Bloomsbury Academic. Paperback. £24.65.

### The Chronicler of “Ordinary Grief”: Arun Kolatkar and the Songs of Insignificance

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Laetitia Zecchini’s *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India* (2014) is a decisive work on the precepts of modernism in India as it panned out around the aesthetic praxis of Kolatkar and his contemporaries against the cosmopolitan cultural background of Bombay (the present day Mumbai) in the post-independence era. Primarily known as a poet in the pan-Indian literary scene, this book introduces Kolatkar as a man of many talents. Apart from his literary pursuits, he had an immensely successful career in advertisement and graphic designing. A trained artist from the acclaimed J.J. School of Art in Mumbai, one of the oldest art institutions in the country, Kolatkar also had a cultivated knowledge in music—all of which directly honed his literary craft whose multiple layers and textures are gradually unfurled through the course of the book. At the very outset, the author etches out Kolatkar’s reclusiveness and his propensity to dodge public appearances. This created an aura of enigma around him that becomes clear from the numerous sobriquets attributed to the man on the occasion of his death: “The unseen Genius”, “The Almost Invisible Man” and so on. His elusiveness also indicates a self-conscious cultivation of marginality which situates him in an eccentric position in relation to the mainstream regional literature, simultaneously problematizing his place within the modernist and the postcolonial paradigms that he embraced and had put to task at the same time.

While describing the literary corpus of Arun Kolatkar, the author observes a “rooted errantry” that “connects the irreducibly local to the cosmopolitan, the microcosm to the macrocosm, the familiar to the unfamiliar, the minute and little to the geopolitical and historical” (59). This apparent contradiction of being global and local at the same time, is inherent in the very nature of Indian modernism itself, which is not a single movement in art and aesthetics, but a cluster of distinct regional modernisms, occurring simultaneously, or at different historical conjunctures in the twentieth century, performing their “own time-lagged transactions with modernity” (Chaudhuri 955). These movements, in trying “to fashion a style for the ‘modern’ as it is locally experienced” (960) were not

only entrenched in the socio-political circumstances, the creative ferment developed more often than not, around major urban centres in India. Kolatkar's modernism, for example, is spatially anchored around the city of Bombay/Mumbai. And this book is as much a tribute to Kolatkar as it is to the vibrant, chaotic, multi-ethnic, multicultural urbanscape of post-independence Bombay, within which the poet's literary journey largely evolves. The opening chapter explores the complex melange of crosscurrents which Zecchini describes as the "fantastic conglomeration of clashing realities," borrowing a phrase from the bilingual Marathi poet Dilip Chitre (1938-2009), that moulded the literary sensibilities of Kolatkar. The cultural ambience of erstwhile Bombay, carrying a strong vestige of colonial past and at the same time greedily absorbing the most recent influences of other global cultures, made it an exciting place to foster the creative dynamism of young writers. Of course, as Zecchini reminds us, the evolution of literary modernism in the hands of poets like Kolatkar must also be attributed to several interconnected factors in Bombay such as the easy obtainability of cheap paperbacks of global literature in the market, opening up to new writings. It led to a voracious consumption of these books within a select circle. They were eager to experience literature beyond the British canon and responded with a sense of urgency. In those days, the city also boasted of a robust café culture that became sites of lively intellectual exchange. There were some cafés and restaurants, for instance, in the *Kala Ghora* region of Southern Bombay, frequented by artists, critics, writers on a regular basis who raised storms in coffee cups, discussing all and sundry from art, politics to poetry. Several of these figures participated in such gatherings and were widely talked about for their rebellious lifestyle that garnered much notoriety for their touted bohemianism. They endorsed a subversive counterculture that was also associated with the Little Magazine Movements in India in a tangential way, to which Kolatkar and many of his contemporaries were closely linked. This Lit Mag Movement itself was facilitated by the growth of small publishing enterprises which were ready to fund those interested in carving out alternative traditions in literature. As many of these young poets, who identified with the dissident tradition, felt marginalized in the mainstream literary circuit at home, they easily connected with other underground, anti-establishment literary/artistic subcultures across the world. For example, Kolatkar befriended the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg who also shared a great rapport with some of the key personages of the *Krittibas* and *Hungryalist* Literary Movements in Bengal, during his visit to India. These writers aimed at a global connection, opening up a tradition of literary dialogue beyond the familiar orbit of European literature.

In the book, the author probes into the conventional battle between tradition and modernity in modernist literature only to unsettle the established binary. No doubt these modernists rejected the literary traditions that preceded them in the 1940s, particularly the lineage of that ornate "quasi-classical" Sanskritic mode of expression, and the ideals of the Victorians or the British Romantics that dominated the poetic practices both in vernacular and Indian English; they simultaneously reinvigorated several other alternative traditions. *The Absent Traveller* is Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's

English translation of a collection of Prakrit love poems. In fact, several of these writers, recovered the gems of *Bhakti* writing:

Like Anglo-American modernists such as Ezra Pound (re)discovering Provençal verse makers, Chinese poetry, Tu Fu and Li Po, haikus or Japanese Noh theatre, Kolatkar, Mehrotra and others reinvented their ‘medium’ by making their pacts and finding their bearings across space *and* time boundaries, both abroad to distant literatures *and* to the Indian past. Consequently, they also outgrow Western modernist texts, or rather relate and relocate them dialogically with a modernity that is recovered in precolonial traditions (Zecchini 74).

Thus, Mehrotra translated into English the esoteric verses of the fifteenth century mystic poet of the Bhakti cult in the *Songs of Kabir*. And Kolatkar, himself embarked on an ambitious project of translating the poems of Sant Tukaram, the seventeenth century, Bhakti poet from Maharashtra. However, these reworkings were also reinventions in the broad sense that they always added something new to the existing form by including a modern reinterpretation.

As a bilingual writer, Kolatkar had all through juggled between Marathi and English, while being also familiar with nearly half a dozen languages, including Kannada, Sanskrit and Persian, and acquainted himself with Arabic and Croatian. So for Kolatkar, the thoroughfare between different languages was usual. After writing a poem in Marathi, he went on to write another in English. This mutual reciprocity between languages is evocatively conveyed from his not-so-uncommon practice of “starting a poem in Marathi, finishing it in English (or vice versa); writing several poems in one language to translate a poem in other language; or cannibalizing, scavenging, and recycling the ‘discarded material’ of one poem for other versions” (66). Writing in English, as Raja Rao urges, is about expressing “in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own” (296).<sup>1</sup> Thus to claim any degree of ownership by way of localizing it, one has to infuse it with the everyday reality of the non-Western world. Most postcolonial urban writers, are for practical purposes, “instinctively bilingual,” as Rao puts it, from the very beginning even when they choose to write in a particular language over the other. This is specifically true for those inhabiting a metropolis like Bombay/Mumbai where its “very mixed population” has “entranced the use of English, not only as a cultural tool, but as an everyday functional means of communication” (Shahani 1250) and commercial exchange. With poets like Kolatkar, this bilingualism came naturally: “Writing in two languages [...] i’ve never found it more remarkable than the fact that I have 2 legs 2 asses 2 eyes & two tongues in my head” (Arun Kolatkar, as qtd in Zecchini 63). In the book Zecchini thus grapples with the many-pronged issue of his multilingualism in his literary practice around a host of questions: “Is bilingualism a sign of schizophrenia, alienation dissimulation, transgression?” (70) “Does he steal

from one linguistic tradition to feed the other?” (70) She also makes an interesting study of how idioms and expressions from one language made their way into another in Kolatkar’s poetry, hybridizing it and rendering it cosmopolitan in verve and spirit. He brings out the polyglotism inherent in any language. His writings constantly challenge the linguistic boundaries and their receptive capacities with a belief that “language should be capable of expressing not just what’s in your lane or village, but happening anywhere else in the world” (as qtd in Zecchini 69). As a result, Kolatkar’s language is as pluralistic and polyphonic as his Bombay. By dismantling the parochial notion of any cultural exclusivity, his poems were set in multiple cultural backgrounds where he purportedly incorporated “themes, feelings and traditions” of other linguistic cultures into the verse.

Like multiple languages, Kolatkar’s writing also displayed a strong mobility between different mediums. His formal training in art and his long career in advertising made him conversant with the grammar of visual language, facilitating ekphrastic transference between textual and extra-textual forms of artistic expression. Kolatkar sang parts of *Jejuri*, his collection of poems that received the Commonwealth Poetry Award in 1977, on guitar and even had an initial plan of making a film on *Jejuri*. Zecchini engages closely with concerns of internal translation, transcription, reinvention and improvisation that are of great importance, while looking at the literary oeuvre of Kolatkar.

As Kolatkar’s literary career, spanning over five decades, would attest, the writer took an abiding interest in the quotidian, non-archived histories by making the “intractably unpoetic,” to take from Eliot, the fragile, quirky, trivial, and insignificant the subject matter of his poetry. The author tells us how Kolatkar took great interest in everyday, non-literary documents: “I [...] like looking at legal, medical, non-sacred texts—schoolboy’s texts from Egypt, a list of household objects in Oxyrhincus, a list of books in the collections of a Peshwa wife, correspondence about obtaining a pair of spectacles, deeds of sale, marriage, divorce contracts” (Arun Kolatkar as qtd in Zecchini 94). With great perseverance, he collected scraps and pieces, retrieving those small voices of “everyday life” and its “elementary realities” (141), that could potentially supplement, or even challenge the thresholds of public history when not lost amidst, “the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation” as Arundhati Ray had put it, so eloquently in *The God of Small Things* (Roy 19). The book delves extensively into Kolatkar’s preoccupation with recovering the “triflings” from the refuse of history. They betray a love for what George Perec calls the “infra-ordinary,” differentiating it from “the spectacular, gigantic and apocalyptic” (3). Kolatkar thus joins the disparate pieces like the broken glass of “The Cupboard”, he describes in *Jejuri*, “held together/with bits and pieces/ of an old yellowed newspaper/ each rectangle/ of the doorframe / is an assemblage” (Kolatkar 44)—precarious, insecure, and yet revealing their resistant edges against the violence of the strong.

Working minutely with a vast archive around the life and times of Kolatkar, the book effortlessly navigates between different themes, while being true to the goal of locating Kolatkar within the

framework of modernism in the Third World. She delineates with a wealth of detail how this modernism was rooted in the socio-political milieu of post-independence India, within the inclusive, multicultural ethos of Bombay/Mumbai that created a bridge between the local and the global. However, while the author takes great pain to connect Kolatkar with other literary cultures and traditions transnationally, what is perhaps wanting is an elaboration on Kolatkar's association with his contemporaries in other modernist traditions in India, beyond the Marathi circle. The book does make a brief mention of the *Hungryalist* Movement in Bengal but this connection is not developed at any length. It remains there as a passing reference. However, this does not take away from the merit of the scholarship, which is certainly of great interest to all engaged in literary modernism outside Europe. Apart from dwelling on the cultural specificities of a variant of global modernism, the book also interrogates the crucial question of intermeshing, as well as the problematic of reading modernism within a postcolonial context through Kolatkar who challenges the limits of both paradigms. Finally, Zecchini's fascinating work, pulsating with the sights and sounds of a great city at a certain historical period, is about Bombay itself which evolves, like the poet, and flows as a character within the pages of the book.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>“Author's foreword” to *Kanthapura* (1938), anthologized in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*.

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