

Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines

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Laetitia Zecchini has written an insightful and necessary book on Arun Kolatkar, examining this important Indian poet's work from literary, social, and political perspectives. Entitled *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India*, the book, departing from sources such as Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's "Death of a Poet," offers us a generous assessment of Kolatkar.

A key figure in post-independence Anglophone Indian poetry, Kolatkar staked out a territory that, in terms of style and sensibility, contrasted with his contemporaries'. Unlike Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes, for example, Kolatkar did not travel abroad in his youth; his poems' settings were quintessentially Indian; he composed in his native Marathi; and he translated verse, not only his own, back and forth between Marathi and English, but also Indian devotional (*bhakti*) poetry, leaving us in *The Boatride* its most ingenious English renditions to date. These salient aspects of his life and practice allowed him to circumvent the anachronistic British influence on Anglophone Indian poetry and to apply the colloquial idiom of Bombay to address his themes with both the intimacy of an insider and the detachment of an outsider, which he did in his trademark, perfectly modulated, tone of a pokerfaced speaker.

In "Bombay Bohemianism, Bombay Cosmopolitanism," her opening chapter, Zecchini animates the city of the 1950s and 1960s, formative decades in Kolatkar's literary career (at eighteen, in 1949, he moved to the city). During those decades, enterprising poets, visual artists, editors, and small-press publishers resourcefully complemented one another's interests. The personalities and projects Zecchini introduces populate subsequent chapters, providing a narrative backdrop to a scholarly treatment that, while examining Kolatkar's artistic development and oeuvre, traces local history (often through the poet's *Kala Ghoda Poems*) and the genesis of the modern Anglophone Indian poetic tradition.

Zecchini is most provocative in the last two chapters, collectively titled "The Politics of Kolatkar's Poetry," in which she uses *Kala Ghoda* and *Sarpa Satra* to highlight political subtexts. The historical crossroads at which Kolatkar was positioned indeed made him alert and responsive to political undercurrents of his time. In *Kala Ghoda*'s "David Sassoon," the statue of the eponymous public figure notes:

I've seen the massive rampart wall,
 twenty-seven feet high and just as broad,
 of the old Fort St. George fall . . .
 I've seen the Moorish dome
 of the Prince of Wales Museum grow and grow
 like a monster bubble before my eyes.

Zecchini assiduously labors over the thesis that events spawned by chauvinism, communalism, and nationalism inform Kolatkar's poetry. Without condoning the violence of extremists, Zecchini could have better contextualized this sensitive subject ("Those to whom evil is done," noted Auden, "Do evil in return"). To trace the events to prolonged, methodical British occupation, subjugation, and exploitation by identifying them as reflex reactions to colonialism, however, might fall outside the remit of a "postcolonial" literary assessment, in which pre- and post-1947 India are, conveniently though inexactly, treated as distinct paradigms, without due regard for the incursion of the destructive former into the latter.

Poets and critics will appreciate Zecchini's treatment of the industrious polyglot Kolatkar's eclectic interests and modes of work in the chapters "Marathi and English 'Cycles of Give and Take,'" "Seeing the World Anew: Recording and Defamiliarizing the Ordinary," and "From Scrap to Art: Recycling and Transfiguring the World." The first of these, which considers Kolatkar's Marathi work and his translations, is particularly edifying.

Tuned to its complexities and subtleties, Zecchini relishes Kolatkar's poetry and eloquently shares her enthusiasm for it. Kolatkar's poet personae keenly observe through the lens of wit. Even in the most somber circumstances, they are playfully rendered, sometimes as irreverent but amiable scoundrels, shrewdly focusing on some minutia until it somehow, an integral part of its surroundings, seems an outrageous incongruity. The God-smitten characters of the *bhakti* poems, too, manifest these qualities, and even the most metaphysical discourses are spirited, as we see in the following translation:

It was a case
Of God rob God
No cleaner job
Was ever done.

God left God
Without a bean.
God left no trace
No trail no track.

The thief was lying
Low in His flat.
When he moved
He moved fast.

Tuka says:
Nobody was
Nowhere. None
Was plundered
And lost nothing.

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