

## “It’s Missing”: *damn you*, *Missing Person*, and the Material History of the Postcolonial Poem

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This article investigates the rich and relatively underexplored material contexts of Indian poetry in English, examining the unique historical and cultural archive offered by its little magazines and poems. It begins by contemplating the significance and afterlife of the little magazine *damn you: a magazine of the arts*, a publication that advertised itself as “India’s first small press little mag” (n.p). *Damn you*, which ran to just six issues between 1965 and 1968, was founded in Allahabad by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Amit Rai, and Alok Rai. Mehrotra went on to be involved with many avant-garde literary projects, editing the little magazines *ezra: an imagiste magazine* and *fakir*. Later, in 1975, Mehrotra co-founded the small poetry press Clearing House in Bombay, along with Adil Jussawalla, Arun Kolatkar, and Gieve Patel. Mehrotra has published subsequent volumes of his own poetry, with Clearing House (*Nine Enclosures*, 1976; *Distance in Statute Miles*, 1982), Oxford University Press (*Middle Earth*, 1984) and Ravi Dayal (*The Transfiguring Places*, 1998), and is also well-known for his critical work, editing Oxford’s *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) and *A History of Indian Literature in English* (2003), and most recently translating *Songs of Kabir* (2011).

As I turned the fragile pages of *damn you* in the British Library’s reading room in London, I contemplated the journey this one magazine had undertaken, wondering at the influence this fledgling publication might have had on Mehrotra’s subsequent literary career. I thought too about the differences between this official archival space, and the circumstances in which I had last encountered *damn you* and the other little magazines that came out of India in the 1960s: in the informal archives of Adil Jussawalla’s apartment in Bombay, and Mehrotra’s book-lined study in Allahabad. In London, the magazines were revered and preserved in the hushed academic environment of the British Library. In India, by contrast, they came to life— not only in the stories both writers had to recount about them, but also, more tangibly, in their material existence as things to be held, read and shared. Jussawalla and Mehrotra, characteristically generous with their time and material, invited me to borrow a selection to read and photocopy—a gesture that I at first met with trepidation: making my way across the city by cycle rickshaw with a bundle of magazines clutched in a bag on my knee, I initially feared

damaging or losing them. Increasingly, however, I came to realise that for Mehrotra and Jussawalla, these unique, short-lived magazines are not historical relics but are in fact part of the evolving and ever-changing context of Indian literature. Far from offering the reader an authoritative and finite source of information about the past that must be preserved against the contingencies of the present, these magazines invite critical reflection on the continuing processes by which poets and poems circulate and travel, accruing multiple meanings and stories along the way.

To pay attention to such magazines is not only to gain insight into the context of poetry publishing in the 1960s; it also allows critics to historicize and contextualize subsequent literary texts and projects. In particular, as I suggest here, an analysis of the little magazine encourages a reconsideration of certain suppositions about the relationship between postcolonial poetry and the metropole, revealing trans-historical and cross-cultural relationships that problematize the popular notion that postcolonial literature is in some way “writing back” to the former colonial centre. This article thus adopts a materialist approach in order to investigate the relationship between little magazines and individual poems, and the wider literary context informing Indian poetry in English. It focuses in particular on *damn you*, as well as Adil Jussawalla’s long sequence of poems *Missing Person* (1976). This challenging and theoretically dexterous piece has been interpreted as evidence of the simultaneous alienation and cultural hybridity of the postcolonial subject, valued as much for its theoretical engagement as for its aesthetic. Homi Bhabha in particular reads the poems as symbolic of the postcolonial condition, undertaking a poststructuralist reading of Jussawalla’s text in order to offer a critically celebratory account of its hybridity (Bhabha 1994). Close analysis, however, redirects the reader to the material and historical sense of the poem’s own production, while its formal range conveys the multiple heritages and trajectories of Indian writing in English.

In bringing together a study of a little magazine with an analysis of a particular sequence of poetry, I signal my wish to examine the literary space Indian poets created for themselves in this period, asking: what traditions did they draw on? In what ways do these texts negotiate the various processes of their own creation? As Mehrotra himself wrote recently in the introduction to a collection of his essays, any “literary landscape is made up of much more than isolated works of literature” (*Partial Recall* 1). This article is thus an attempt to investigate the relationships between isolated works, in order to redirect attention to the poets and contexts that as yet have little place in the better-known narrative of Indian writing in English.

## Dismantling the Canon

In his famous and frequently anthologised poem “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House,” A.K. Ramanujan presents the reader with a history of a single family that is, at the same time, an allegory for the cultural formation of India. Ramanujan introduces the suggestive image of an ancestral “great house” into which people, objects, histories, stories and things accumulate: “nothing / that ever comes into this house/goes out. Things come in every day/to lose themselves among other things/lost long ago among/other things lost long ago” (*Collected Poems* 96). The “great house” of the poem, and the family who live in it, are given shape and substance by these divergent details, events and “things.” The “great house” can be read as an allegory, too, for modern Indian literature, which so often displays the heterogeneous linguistic and cultural traditions of its writers. Like the great old house of the title, Indian writing is characterized and enriched by the multiple heritages to which its writers lay claim. Hence in 1976, when the bilingual Marathi/English poet Arun Kolatkar was asked to name his most significant literary influences, he referenced an impressively varied range in his reply, including Indian *bhakti* poets, European modernists, contemporary American writers and Russian formalists: “Whitman, Mardhekar, Manmohan, Eliot, Pound, Auden, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, Kafka, Baudelaire, Heine, Catullus, Villon, Dnyaneshwar, Namdev,” he began, going on to include in his list “Wang Wei,” “Gogol,” “Janabai,” “Agatha Christie,” “Truffaut” and “Laurel and Hardy”(qtd. in Mehrotra “Introduction” *Collected Poems in English* 14-15).

Despite its transnational, transhistorical range, it is notable that many academic accounts of Indian literature in English continue to focus on a selective and remarkably similar body of texts and genres. As Amit Chaudhuri argues, Western critics and publishers have often assumed that Indian writing can be “represented by a handful of writers,” most often those whose work shares a set of thematic or aesthetic commitments (xvii). In particular since the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, it has been lengthy, playful, postmodern, subversive novels, which dramatize the colonial encounter and retell the history of the nation, that have been assumed to best “represent” Indian writing. This narrative leaves little space for those novelists whose style does not fit the popular and commercially appealing postmodern paradigm—nor for its poets and playwrights, whose work cannot be so easily read according to a thematic or theoretical model.

Nonetheless, just as critical accounts of the novel concentrate on a specific kind of prose writing, criticism of modern Indian poetry also displays a preference for a certain type of verse. Hence, as Rushdie emerges as the representative Indian novelist, it is the Bombay poet Nissim Ezekiel who is projected as the quintessential Indian poet. Ezekiel published his debut volume of poems *A Time to Change* soon after

independence, introducing readers to what was undoubtedly a distinct, new voice: contemporary, ironical, erudite, his writing instigated a decisive “clean break with the Romantic past” of earlier writing in English (Mishra 14). His work, moreover, accrued significant international prestige when it was selected for publication by a major press: *Hymns in Darkness* was released by Oxford University Press’s Three Crowns New Poetry in India series in 1976, along with Keki Daruwalla’s *Crossing of Rivers*, A. K. Ramanujan’s *Selected Poems*, Shiv Kumar’s *Subterfuges* and R. Parthasarathy’s anthology *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets*. Although these very different poets were already established figures in India, their inclusion in the “New Poetry in India Series” positioned them as new and representative poetic voices for a metropolitan audience and lent the “Oxford seal of approval to a canon of authors” (King *Modern* 36). Finally, Ezekiel was involved with many literary journals in this period, in particular *Quest* (1955-1976) and *Poetry India* (1966-1967), both of which were aimed at those with a serious interest in contemporary poetry.

Ezekiel’s critics often focus on the influence of Western high modernism in his writing, finding in his unsentimental and secular tone an affinity with T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, as well as W. H. Auden and the British Movement Poets. For some, his early poetry is rather “derivative” in style and subject matter, while for others, Ezekiel’s assimilation of established literary models constitutes a significant achievement (Mishra 82). Likewise, critics have identified similarities between the design, content and agenda of journals like *Quest* and *Poetry India*, and earlier British publications such as Stephen Spender’s *Encounter* (King 15). The book reviews in *Quest* and *Poetry India* often reference contemporary British writers, using them as a touchstone against which to compare Indian poets. In a review of Kamala Das’s *Summer in Calcutta* that appeared in the first volume of *Poetry India* in 1966, for instance, Nita Pillai likens Das’s work to Ted Hughes’s, suggesting points of identification between these two different writers in such a way as to implicitly validate the former’s work.

The extensive focus on Ezekiel’s writing and its engagement with high modernist texts and writers, implicitly endorses a traditional and somewhat crude postcolonial paradigm, whereby writers are engaged in a process of recuperating and “writing back” to a metropolitan canon. To compare *Quest* with *Encounter*, or to identify instances where Ezekiel borrows from the style of the Movement poets, is to presuppose a misleading divide between postcolonial and metropolitan writers, and to imply that Indian poets were engaged in a project of belated literary imitation. As Laetitia Zecchini in particular has demonstrated in her recent work on Indian modernism, such an approach neither recognizes the reciprocity between modernist writers and Indian poets, nor acknowledges the various ways in which traditional forms and styles have been reinvented in an Indian context. It also fails to acknowledge the influence of non-European literary texts, such as regional *bhakti* writing and

contemporary American culture, which find expression in the work of many Indian poets: “Literary modernism in India is both distinct from Euro-American modernism and, crucially, often liberatingly related to it” (*Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India* 16). This critical narrative, finally, also risks overlooking the work of Ezekiel’s contemporaries, and the non-metropolitan contexts in which they worked and published. The experimental little magazines of the 1960s, as I suggest below, offer an insightful and unique perspective from which to consider the complex processes of canon formation, allowing critics to begin to trace the material trajectories of modern Indian poetry. Like postcolonial book historian Gail Low, I thus examine the literary text—the magazine and the poem—“less [as] an object than a palimpsest of the process of [its own] making and unmaking” (141).

### *Damn you* and a Counter-canon

In its title and visual appearance, *damn you* immediately advertises itself as a non-conformist publication. Each issue has a slightly different front cover, featuring the title – which is hand drawn – in a different place on the page. Other little magazines that appeared shortly after *damn you* also favour a non-conformist visual design. Every issue of Pavankumar Jain’s *Tornado* (1967-1971), for instance, was a different size and had different covers, while the pages contained a variety of individually pasted in items that Jain gathered from his everyday surroundings; a bus ticket, a cinema stub, a stamp, a lock of hair. Such a gesture clearly differentiated *Tornado* from other titles, sending a message to the reader that their issue was unique. These magazines manage to preserve the individual “aura” of the published work against what Robert Fraser identifies as the visually homogenizing and “imperialistic claims” of print culture (55). Each issue of the little magazine thus accrues a very particular kind of value, one that Pierre Bourdieu termed “symbolic capital” rather than economic (7). As Bourdieu shows, cultural prestige depends on the extent to which a text is unique and individual, and on its apparent “inversion of the fundamental principles of all literary economies” (39).

By comparison, the design of the more mainstream magazines was modern, plain, and standardized. Ezekiel wrote to Abraham Solomon in September 1955, outlining his plans for *Quest*’s second issue: it would have a blue cover, “but the geometrical set up [of the first] remains, and is even reinforced inside. Any sort of illustrative, pictorial, or decorative designing would have been quite unacceptable” (qtd. Rao 121). Unlike the symbolic capital accrued by *damn you* and *Tornado*, *Quest* appears to seek assimilation into a commercial literary market, whereby value is dependent on the creation of a specific brand identity.

The experimental little magazines, moreover, bear witness to the artistic labour and material investment involved in producing them, as

well as to the individual tastes of their editors. Mehrotra and his friends had to teach themselves how to print *damn you* on an old Gestetner mimeographing machine, and took responsibility for the finished copy of each issue. Hence, any visual or stylistic inconsistencies, such as uneven ink coverage, call attention to the presence of the magazine's creators, and invite the reader to contemplate the circumstances in which it was produced. As Mehrotra later remarked to Eunice de Souza, his own literary models changed all the time, a fact that is evidenced in the content, tone and design of each issue of the magazine. He was "writing under Breton's influence one week and ... Ginsberg's the next," he explained, his work and editorial interests reflecting the particular literary trends of the moment (*Talking Poems* 105). By assuming control over its production, the editors of *damn you* were further free to dispense with traditional print features, choosing not to set a fixed price for each publication, for example, and selecting to replace a traditional editorial with a more rousing "statement."

The irreverent and rebellious title of *damn you*, as well as other magazines such as *Tornado*, *Dionysus* and *The Bombay Duck*, further indicates its departure from mainstream cultural values and its desire to rouse or shock. Unlike *Poetry India* in particular, which shows a clear commitment to publishing writing from and about the nation, these magazines have no apparent affiliation with any particular place. Indeed, as Eric Bulson points out, the little magazine as a literary form flourished throughout the world in different locations and contexts during the twentieth-century, existing at a distinct angle from the commercial business of book publishing—which was more overtly dependent on the financial capital found in metropolitan centres. As such, the magazine "does not belong to a single nation" and disarticulates the supposed divide between the centre and periphery found in much world literary theory, often crossing and transgressing national borders (270). The title, *damn you*, and the circumstances in which it was so named, demonstrate the flexible and transnational space it existed in. The editors chose the title after being sent a copy of the American magazine *The Village Voice* by Vijay Chauhan, Amit and Alok's uncle, who was at that time studying in the United States. Here, they read about Ed Sanders's provocative New York Beat magazine, *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, and its risky and irreverent title appealed to them: "We now decided to steal the name for ourselves, modifying it slightly" (*Partial* 60). Written and produced from Allahabad, *damn you* was simultaneously situated in and informed by this New York publication, its transposed and "modified" name revealing how even the most niche and experimental texts travel across national borders.

Bulson rightly points out that there is a deceptive "myth" that the little magazine travelled and circulated without difficulty (270). As he notes, the cost of sending magazines abroad, and the challenges involved in maintaining networks of distributors, impacted significantly on the extent to which magazines could travel, and to where. However, the very fact that these young writers had heard of *Fuck You* is indicative of a

transformation in the possible way in which texts might now circulate. As Vijay Mishra has suggested, the 1960s witnessed a break between “older diasporas”—such as those in Britain—and “diasporas of advanced capital” (447). Uncle Vijay, studying on a Fulbright Scholarship at Columbia, was part of this new Indian diaspora, settling in the United States and able to access some of its cultural texts that would previously have been unavailable. Combined with the “paperback revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s, Indians could now begin to access the work of writers who were as yet not included on traditional literary syllabi at home (Chitre 5). Hence, as Mehrotra recalls, he and his friends led “two lives,” analysing *Macbeth* at school, and reading newly available anthologies of contemporary poetry at home (*Partial* 68).

The form and content of *damn you* and its contemporary magazines reveal literary and political affinities with a “new international counter-culture” (King *Modern* 23). As Deborah Baker shows in her study, *A Blue Hand*, Allen Ginsberg’s work was especially popular with writers and intellectuals in India, a fact confirmed by Jussawalla, who recalled the impression made on him when Ginsberg gave a reading in Bombay in 1962. Although Mehrotra was not present at this event, he has noted the influence of Beat writing and attitudes on his work and outlook, describing his “state of euphoria” after first reading poems by Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (*Partial* 59). Even Mehrotra’s mannerisms and personal style drew on these new counter-cultural role-models—writers whose work expressed a contemporary mood of political protest and dissatisfaction with hegemonic values: “Our attitude of rebellion was shaped by our reading, just as much as it was reflected in the books we read” (*Partial* 59).

*Damn you* adopts an Americanised idiom in its use of language, style, and format. Contributors are invited, on the reverse of each issue, to “send us your poems, angelic ravings, prose, your spontaneous bop prosody”—words that directly echo Sanders’s own call, on the reverse of the first volume of *Fuck You*, for poets to “send...your banned manuscripts, your peace-grams, your cosmic data, your huddled masses yearning to be free, your collections of freak-beams” (n.p). Like Sanders too, who self-consciously positions his magazine in a sub-cultural space by stating that it is produced “at a secret location in the lower east side,” its editors are portrayed as rebellious figures working against the grain of normative culture: “for reasons other than copyright it may be smuggled in all the countries of the world” (No. 4 n.p). *Damn you* further positions its imagined community of readers as conspirators in this rebellious cultural project, referring to them directly as “our unappointed salesmen” and calling on them to take part in the informal distribution of the magazine: “first read it and sell it for what this effort is worth, and send us the money” (No. 4 n.p). *Fuck You* and *damn you* thus both cultivate a particular audience—one that is not united by shared national boundaries, but by political and aesthetic sensibilities.

It was, moreover, to the United States that the editors predominantly directed their search for contributors:

The English poets we were familiar with were the sort to have monuments in Westminster Abbey, and it did not occur to us that we could ask Indian poets... This left the United States, a country just fifty yards down the road, at whose entrance stood not the famous statue, but a bright red letter box nailed to a neem tree. (*Partial* 69)

In this passage, Mehrotra suggests the increasing openness of literary boundaries, and the new sense of proximity—physical and imaginary—between poets writing in Allahabad or Bombay, and those in the United States. His words invite reflection on the various transnational relationships that were emerging during this period, as well as the reasons they were able to do so: for the editors of *damn you*, it was again Uncle Vijay who initially acted as a go-between for the poets and potential contributors in Greenwich Village, sending them the names and addresses of writers and magazines that might be willing to exchange ideas and work (*Partial* 69-70).

*Damn you* lasted for just six issues, but the network of poets and publications it established relations with was broad and far-reaching. The final issue carries a list of all the magazines *damn you* exchanged with, giving a sense of the dispersed nature of its readership. Among the names listed are: “*Trace, University of Tampa Poetry Review, Wormwood Review, Elizabeth, dust books, Manhattan Review, open skull... Openings Press... Beloit Poetry Journal, Loveletter, South Florida Poetry Journal, Outcast...*” (*damn you* No. 6, qtd. in Mehrotra *Partial* 72). A similar list in the inside cover of *ezra* further evidences the broad and unexpected reach of the little magazine network, exchanging with “*poetry rev/outcast/wormwood rev/avalanche/...riverun/dust/Smyrna press/manhattan rev/open skull*” (No. 4 n.p).

Although Mehrotra acknowledges the influence of American hipster poets on his writing, the little magazines demonstrate the extent to which these influences were altered and adapted in a different context. Mehrotra’s “Bharatmata: A Prayer,” for example—which was first published in 1968 by his *ezra-fakir* press and reprinted in a special issue of the American magazine *Intrepid* in the same year (Delaoch and Weissner)—has Ginsberg’s “America” and *Howl* as particularly apparent points of reference. Mehrotra’s long poem has an immediacy of expression, reflected in its formal openness and use of colloquial language. Like Ginsberg, Mehrotra addresses his poem to the country of his birth: “india/my beloved country, ah my motherland/you are, in the world’s slum/the lavatory” (n.p). The poem proceeds to list and interrogate the country’s failings, citing the “village reduced to a bone” by poverty, the all too familiar presence of “pot-bellied children,” and the evidence of failed attempts at modernization: “the ganga/is overflowing/with hydroelectric projects/and pretty houses of prostitution” (n.p). Mehrotra is unafraid of criticizing the contemporary nation, and



presents industrialization in particular as detrimental for communities and individuals: “the blast furnaces” and factories “turning out/pig iron/slag/steel/girders/angles/children” (n.p).

As Bruce King notes, poets like Mehrotra were influenced by the emphasis on local observations, direct speech and personal details found in much contemporary American writing, taking these traits and using them to express their own concerns, experiences and memories (“Modern Indian and American Poetry” 12). Hence, while the critical tone of this poem owes much to Beat writing, the events depicted in the text speak to a specifically Indian context of aggressive industrialization and over-development. Mehrotra thus adapts American hipster language in order to suit his own circumstances and, as Jahan Ramazani contends with regard to postcolonial poets in general, displays his ability to “negotiate, accept, indigenize, resist, and transform [these] foreign influences...in accordance with [his] specific historical and cultural conditions” (xiii).

Little magazines like *damn you* did not only draw on contemporary literary models in English, however. The poetry published also evidences the influence of pre-colonial regional texts, traditions, and writers. As Akshaya Kumar and Laetitia Zecchini both note, the Indian English poets were often simultaneously translating the work of earlier regional poets: Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar produced translations of Tukaram from Marathi to English; A.K. Ramanujan translated the early Tamil hymns of Nammalvar; and Mehrotra was working on translations of the fifteenth-century poet Kabir. Both experimental and mainstream magazines gave a great deal of space to work in translation, moreover: *damn you* included translations from Urdu by Baqar Mehdi; *Tornado* published Gujarati and Marathi poetry; and *Poetry India* included translations of Tukaram and Mardheker from Marathi by Chitre and Kolatkar. As Zecchini observes, the translation practices developed by these poets displayed a new creative energy: exposed to European and American writing, and invigorated by the cultural mood of experimentation and change, Mehrotra, Chitre, Kolatkar and others now sought to reinvent ancient Indian writing by using anachronistic language and hybrid forms (39).

The influence of older and alternative Indian poetic traditions is apparent in the poetry published in English too. In “Bharatmata: A Prayer,” for instance, the speaker of the poem addresses India directly, critiquing its cultural commercialization: “temple of modern india/where anglo-indian women teach/newrich couples the ballroom” (n.p). Mehrotra’s confrontational style is a feature that is as reminiscent of *bhakti* poets as it is of Beat writers. Here is Mehrotra’s translation of Kabir, who speaking to the reader as he or she contemplates the life they have led: “Crying won’t help/When death already/Has you by the balls” (*Songs of Kabir* 78). Similarly, in Kolatkar’s poetry, a reader can identify parallels between his choice of subject matter and that of the *bhakti* saint poets who so inspired him. In *Jejuri*, for instance, Kolatkar deliberately focuses on the unsightly people, animals and objects found in a small temple town, recuperating the ordinary and everyday into his poetry: “the

spirit of the place/lives inside the mangy body/of the station dog,” he writes in “The Railway Station,” signaling his interest in the downtrodden and downcast (CP 70). Kolatkar’s ability to find the divine in the least likely of places bears parallels with those earlier poets whose work he translated. “God is here/god is there/void is not/devoid of god,” Janabai’s speaker in “i eat god” declares, dispensing with any notion that access to god is exclusive: “and moreover / there’s god to spare” (Kolatkar trans. CP 299).

Ramazani notes that “single nation genealogies remain remarkably entrenched” in the classification and marketing of postcolonial writing (23). There is, moreover, a tendency to suppose a separation between poets and novelists, visual artists and musicians, maintaining clear creative divisions between groups and individuals. Little magazines provide a timely disarticulation of such divides, for they bear witness to the proximity that existed between poets, writers and artists in this period. *Tornado*, for example, contains images and doodles by the artists Bhupen Khakhar and M.F. Husain, both of whom would later become iconic figures in Indian painting. Similarly Kolatkar—who also worked for many advertising agencies in the city—designed the covers for both issues of the little magazine *Dionysus* (1965-1966), and later, for each of the volumes of poetry produced by the small press Clearing House. The opportunities for collaborative and “creative symbiosis,” Laetitia Zecchini suggests, existed in a very specific place and context: Bombay, she argues, with its rich history of multilingualism and cosmopolitanism, provided vital opportunities for artists and writers to meet and work together (“Modernism in Indian Poetry” 37). The little magazines of this period thus enrich not only a critical understanding of Indian poetry and the visual arts, but also of the cultural context of a particular city.

In the third issue of *ezra*, Mehrotra chose to replace the traditional editorial with a series of reviews of the magazine, taken from the international press. One such statement published in *The Century* stands out: “Anybody cheesed off (sic) the literary establishment in india will welcome these two magazines (damn you and ezra),” the reviewer states. “The Illustrated-Ezekiel-Lal axis...ought to be aware” (n.p). This review is to some extent misleading, for it assumes that the “Illustrated-Lal-Ezekiel axis” had no contact with the more experimental magazines and poets. On the contrary, the mainstream and experimental spheres frequently overlapped: many poets who contributed to *damn you* also published work in *Poetry India* and *Quest*; Kolatkar and Mehrotra were included in Parthasarathy’s influential OUP anthology of Indian poetry; and Parthasarathy himself had, in 1965, co-founded the avant-garde Bombay magazine *The Bombay Duck* with S.V. Pradhan—a magazine shut down by the authorities after just one issue (King *Modern* 23). Nonetheless, the experimental little magazines exist in a distinct, literary sphere, one that is all too often overlooked, or else included as a mere literary footnote in the better known “Illustrated-Ezekiel-Lal” narrative of Indian poetry in English. They may be difficult to locate, but these

artifacts allow us to recalibrate the chronology and development of Indian poetry in English, redirecting attention to the individuals who have had such a vital role in shaping it.

### *Missing Person* and the Hybridity of the Postcolonial Poem

If engaging with the material production of little magazines directs critical attention to the contested histories of and influences on modern Indian poetry, examining particular poems as material and historical archives in themselves further demonstrates the heterogeneous heritage of Indian poetry in English. Here, I consider a particular sequence by Adil Jussawalla, which, like little magazines, undermines certain preconceptions about Indian literature. *Missing Person* draws attention, I suggest, to the ongoing conflicts involved in the act of writing, and bears witness to the violence that implicitly informs hybrid styles and genres.

While Jussawalla is recognized as one of the most influential poets working in English, he is not a prolific writer, and has published just four volumes of poetry (*Land's End*, 1962; *Missing Person*, 1976; *Trying To Say Goodbye*, 2011; *The Right Kind of Dog*, 2013). *Land's End* was well received, and Jussawalla's most recent volumes have been highly praised by reviewers. The poet has also just published a collection of essays, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, which is being met with an enthusiastic reception. The strength of his reputation as a poet, however, largely rests on his second book *Missing Person*—the “difficult and sometimes opaque” experimental three-part sequence which Jussawalla published on his return to India after more than ten years living in Britain (Thomas 43). *Missing Person* depicts the experiences of a postcolonial middle-class subject, portraying his marginality abroad and increasing sense of obsolescence in India. The protagonist is “Lost, running from acid to Marx” (*MP* 16)—his struggles to find a place in modern India recorded in a variety of styles and idioms.

*Missing Person* consists of three sections: the long title sequence, which is divided into two interdependent sections, was mostly written in 1975 after Jussawalla's return to India and presents the shifting and nightmarish visions of a postcolonial subject who is ostracized in Britain and out of place in India. The poems in the second section, “This Room and That,” were written between 1962 and 1975 in Britain and India, and are more thematically clear, reflecting on the historical rupture and repercussions of Partition, for instance, or the complex emotions of the returning exile. The final section, “Travelling Separately,” was written in the mid 1960s, and consists of a series of poems written in song form. It is the poems in “This Room and That” which are most often anthologized and which have received more evaluations, perhaps owing to the readily discernible events being evoked: “Partition's people stitched/Shrouds from a flag” Jussawalla writes in the evocative “Sea Breeze, Bombay,” making a powerful critique of the human cost of Partition (39).

It is the opening sequence, “Missing Person,” however, which is both strikingly innovative and yet the most bewildering. Clear narrative perspectives are effaced in favour of a succession of hallucinatory scenarios and juxtaposed styles, and an accumulation of broad historical references that overwhelm the missing person. Different metanarratives—Communism, Christianity, and Hinduism—compete and overlap, appearing to vie for the protagonist’s commitment. The style too draws on multiple traditions; scenes taken from the cinema are juxtaposed with incantatory religious images, while the violent language of racism is juxtaposed with depictions of English literature being taught in Indian schools. The shifting images, and the constant movement from one register to another, and from one voice to another, lends the text a surreal and unsettling quality. His poems appear to explore the collective identity crisis of India’s new middle-classes, doing so by continually relocating and displacing his subject: in one section he is in a cinema hall; in another a school room—which in turn becomes “a library in Boston/a death-cell in Patna” (15). He seeks meaning in brief sexual encounters, attempts to find religious absolutism, takes drugs and yet remains unsure of his position in society, “his adventures as flat as beaten tin/original only to the extent of/their extent” (31).

Indeed, the missing person is figured as an absence, lacking physical substance: at birth he is “a quiet mirror with hair all over” (13); he is “our two-bit hero” (22); and “an invisible man” who is “faintly penciled/behind a shirt” (29). The images of invisibility and transparency are accompanied by suggestions of violence, moreover, and in an ominous early scene, Jussawalla aligns images of absence with references to physical pain. In a setting that resembles an interrogation cell, undisclosed voices are overheard talking about—rather than to—the protagonist: “Lock up his hands./His hands aren’t there/and we know of no work they’ve done” (17). The protagonist’s very body is being effaced and his captors do not know why they are holding him:

What was it our first file  
accused him of? *It’s missing.*  
Start all over again.  
Start: Missing Person. (17)

By the final section in the opening series, the protagonist is ripped apart by a “rioting people,” apparently powerless to prevent his own destruction (22): “his shouts for law and order/won’t shake the posse off,” the voiceover declares: “its dogs/harry, attack,/are at his throat and back” (23).

Critics have found *Missing Person* an intimidating and somewhat bleak sequence that expresses the collective “identity crisis” of the postcolonial bourgeoisie (Sterling 34). In a recent interview with Vivek Narayanan and Sharmistha Mohanty, the poet acknowledged how bewildering the poems are, noting that some of his friends at the time felt it to be too polemic a text (*Almost Island* 23-24). However, according to poststructuralist critic Homi Bhabha, the text can be read as a celebratory

performance of anti-essentialism. He argues that its fragmentary structure and emphasis on disembodiment and dislocation deconstructs the notion of fixed identities, staging a critique of hegemonic forms of representation: “what is interrogated is...the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed” (“Interrogating Identity” 68). The missing person, and the ambivalence between his visibility and invisibility in the text, Bhabha argues, is disruptive and “erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures” (83).

These different interpretations reveal more about theoretical and thematic trends in postcolonial studies than the intricacies of Jussawalla’s actual text. Indeed, Bhabha does not examine the poem in any detail, using it instead as a means to develop a theoretical notion of the supplementary nature of postcolonial subjectivity. The varied references Jussawalla includes in his poems, however, and the specific circumstances in which it was published, introduce a different reading of his work as a text that was closely engaged with, and critical of, the context in which it was written. For although *Missing Person* is not a documentary text, and does not present a realist account of contemporary India, its imagery and formal structure does clearly place the poem in its specific environment.

*Missing Person* was published by a small independent press—as all Jussawalla’s creative volumes have been (*Land’s End* was published by Writer’s Workshop; *Trying to Say Goodbye* was published by Almost Island; and *The Right Kind of Dog* was published by Duckbill Books). Indeed, it was the first volume to be released by the Bombay co-operative Clearing House in 1976, along with Kolatkar’s *Jejuri*, Mehrotra’s *Nine Enclosures* and Gieve Patel’s *How Do You Withstand, Body*, all of which appeared the same year as Oxford University Press issued its New Poetry in India series. Clearing House was largely self-funded, and could only print relatively small numbers of its titles. As a result, books went out of print quickly, and “Most... did not make their way out of Bombay” (Hasan “Your Missing Person” n.p). Nonetheless, Clearing House possessed creative autonomy in terms of the work it could publish, precisely because it was not a profit-driven enterprise. Unlike the editors at OUP, for instance, who were instructed to “only embark upon it [a publishing venture] if you are confident of above average payback,” the editors of Clearing House were free to publish the work of poets they respected and admired, irrespective of any expected financial return (Jonathan Crowther to Ravi Dayal, 16 July 1976). It developed a reputation as a press of high literary standards, publishing volumes that would go on to reshape the landscape of Indian poetry in English. Jussawalla and the other Clearing House poets were thus at an angle from metropolitan literary culture, and were able to express ideas and sensibilities that did not necessarily adhere to more mainstream cultural expectations. While living in Britain, Jussawalla described recently, he became aware of a lack of interest in, or ignorance about, Indian literature (*Almost Island* 13). Western readers had especially stereotypical

expectations of India and Indian writing, some of which Jussawalla outlined in the introduction to his 1974 Penguin anthology *New Writing in English*: “India: loving, wise, non-militaristic... Indian writing: tedious, other-worldly” (17). There was also an assumption, Jussawalla notes, that “Indian writing is parasitic on Western literature,” lacking a distinctive voice of its own (18). Jussawalla’s anthology successfully undermined these assumptions, introducing the reader to the vibrancy and variety of contemporary Indian literature. Likewise, *Missing Person* also unsettles and rejects clichéd expectations about Indian literature and the postcolonial subject, showcasing instead the heterogeneity of the modern Indian poem.

The missing person is described by anonymous voices throughout using clichéd language: he is “your country’s lost property” (15), a “colonial ape” (22), “our two-bit hero” (22), “our own Bugs Bunny who acted funny” (24). India too is described using empty stock phrases, with its “childbrides bundled to a knot” (15) and “yowling” poverty (16). The reader is strategically positioned as a spectator in this opening section, invited to see India and its subjects through a series of mediated images: “See Famines. See Wars. Their heaped-up dead/on the world’s plate of gold” (17). Such images are familiar, Jussawalla points out, from Western films, Marxist discourse, television and popular culture, and have become normalized through repeated usage (*Almost Island* 24). However, these commonplace phrases become sinister when transposed into a new and “defamiliarised context” (24). Hence, the opening lines of the first section of “Missing Person” portray the subject’s birth using the dramatic montage of the cinema, but are disturbing because the events are so thoroughly de-contextualized: “House Full. It’s a shocker. Keep still./Blood crawls from a crack” (13). The cinematic frame is thus rendered strange and bewildering, providing the reader with no narrative clues.

Jussawalla observed in his anthology that Indian literature is often especially concerned with death and violence, and the texts he selected frequently portray “dismemberment and dislocation” (32). Violent metaphors are found throughout *Missing Person* too, often set against the language of popular culture and commerce. The cinematic opening scene, for instance, is accompanied by a violent protest: “There’s trouble outside:/crowds, stammering guns, the sea/screaming from side to side” (13). Later, as the missing person is “ripped apart” by a crowd, a voiceover interrupts with an ominous warning (22):

And this is how you will end:  
Before the final fade-out, like an ad:

“Here is our smug little watch that’s lost its hands.  
Here is our own Bugs Bunny who acted funny...” (24)

The juxtaposition of superficial commercial culture with outbursts of violence indicates that even in modern, “cosmopolitan” India, political and

social disturbance is never far away. Like the over-industrialized landscape Mehrotra depicts in “Bharatmata,” Jussawalla’s poem thus critiques the aggressive commercialism of popular culture, which is, in this scene, complicit in the destruction of the missing person.

Just as the poem exposes the damage wrought by cultural clichés and stereotypes, it also challenges the notion that Indian writing was dependent on Western traditions and forms. Unlike *Land’s End*, which as Anand Thakore notes, displayed a somewhat comforting “faith in a traditional poetic” lineage via its use of Christian symbolism and European modernist tropes, *Missing Person* brings together an overwhelming range of forms, styles, tones and registers (“On the Music of ‘A Missing Person’” n.p). They include, Mehrotra observes, snippets of nursery rhymes, cinematic stills, quotations from Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, and references from classical Greek, Egyptian and Sanskrit myths—all of which are then further compounded by an overwhelming use of puns and word games (*Twelve Modern Indian Poets* 125-127). The missing person has been formed from this divergent array of influences and contexts, and the poem expresses something of the dislocation this brings: “His thoughts were bookish,” states the anonymous narrator in the opening of the second series of poems, before going on to acknowledge the confusion that arises out of so many “bookish” influences: “a squall from the back of his skull/suddenly fluttered their pages,/making him lose his bearings” (29).

The poem, like the earlier little magazines, is thus revealing of its heterogeneous intellectual and literary context. However, the contrasting registers and influences of *Missing Person* perform a decidedly more critical function, undermining the celebratory and reconciliatory accounts of hybridity found in much postcolonial literary discourse. Hence, while Ramazani, for example, suggests that poetry can “mediate seemingly irresolvable contradictions” in its form and style, *Missing Person* reminds readers instead of the material and historical upheaval and rupture involved in such a process (6). As the poet acknowledged, it is impossible to reconcile all the divergent histories to which the postcolonial subject has access: “All the cultures that have made him [the missing person] have made him invisible” (qtd. *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* 125). Although the protagonist is familiar with various narratives and stories from different traditions, he is unable to access them entirely: he is “[l]acking the classical bust/of Achilles’ tyre/or of Vidura’s eye” (30) and “lacking the aboriginal’s/throat, shafted with snakes” (31).

Indeed, the poem consistently returns the reader to the material and historical processes through which hybridity emerges—processes that involve a human cost. So, even as Jussawalla incorporates the “high modernism” of Pound, for instance, the references to violence and disruption serve as an important reminder that the subject’s access to such modernist texts has been far from uncontested, and is founded on colonial conquest and acquisition. Hybridity is, in this poem, a phenomenon that emerges in the frequently violent acts of translation and appropriation to

which the protagonist is subjected. Hence in the schoolroom scene, English is presented as creative and attractive, as well as dangerous and threatening: it is “bright as a butterfly’s wing/or a piece of tin/aimed at your throat;” it is “expansive as in ‘air’/black as in ‘dark’/thin as in ‘scream’” (15).

*Missing Person* acknowledges the human cost of literary and cultural hybridity. However, the sequence does not present the missing person as a hopeless figure because of the dislocation they are subjected to. Instead, the poem historicizes the postcolonial subject, and the poem, documenting the very material—both historical and literary—out of which each has been constructed. Indeed, as Sudesh Mishra suggests, Jussawalla’s poem introduces a dehumanized and “non-logocentric” notion of the text, replacing descriptive narrative language with fragmentary lists, puns, intertextual references and styles of speech (310). The poem thus asks not who the missing person is, but rather what he is made of, and in doing so manages to undermine the literary clichés and theoretical models that have been used to describe him.

This article has examined the formation and production of poets, texts and literary canons in India’s post-independence decades. In doing so, it has hoped to redirect attention to the poets, editors and poems that have been overlooked by the better-known accounts of Indian poetry in English. Non-metropolitan creative work and collective ventures made a decisive impact on India’s literary scene, and on subsequent writers, publishers and readers in India and abroad. By paying attention to the networks and affiliations revealed in little magazines and poems, this article further demonstrates how contextual, historical analysis enriches and perhaps challenges postcolonial literary criticism. This may sound an obvious statement to make, but as Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri note in their introduction to *The Indian Postcolonial*, contemporary postcolonial studies has been so inclined to “move in every direction”—both geographical and theoretical—that it risks losing sight of the text or context it is examining (2). Indeed, they note the irony that as Indian writers and theorists become increasingly pre-eminent in the field, “the specific tracery of locale and region their ideas bore tended to be erased...and their connection with the form giving cultural geography of India suspended” (5). As this article has shown, the postcolonial poem cannot be disassociated from its “form giving” cultural context, even as its range of affiliations continually exceeds the place and time of its creation.

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