

Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines

Laetitia Zecchini

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Reviewed by Prasad Bidaye, Humber College, Toronto

Laetitia Zecchini's *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines* highlights an exciting set of ideas that have been relatively untouched in the field of postcolonial South Asian literary studies: bilingual literary practices; contemporary revisionist translations of pre-colonial *bhakti* poetry; the vibrant counter-cultural arts scene that emerged in the city formerly known as "Bombay" during the 1960s and 1970s; and of course, the eponymous poet of Zecchini's study.

One could argue that Zecchini could have placed her primary focus on one of Kolatkar's contemporaries: for example, Dilip Chitre, Adil Jussawalla, or Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. The latter are included as secondary figures, but as Zecchini demonstrates in the first half of *Moving Lines*, Kolatkar is the only writer who clearly serves as a point of intersection for all of the aforementioned aspects of the Bombay-based modernist scene of the last century. He also functions as an entry-point for most scholars and readers of South Asian poetry in English, particularly those positioned outside the subcontinent. Kolatkar is one of the few South Asian poets to achieve global attention, largely because of *Jejuri*, a cycle of poems that won the 1977 Commonwealth Prize. As Zecchini notes, his legacy has also been secured through Salman Rushdie's characterization of Bhupen Gandhi, a fictional and controversial poet in *The Satanic Verses*.

More recently, Kolatkar's name has become increasingly prominent through Amit Chaudhuri's essays on South Asian modernity in *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture*, and the latter is central to the theoretical framework of Zecchini's study. Like Chaudhuri, Zecchini positions Kolatkar and his fellow Bombay poets as "modernist," rather than conventionally "postcolonial," writers (3). Their concerns have little to do with issues of empire, diaspora, or globalization directly; these issues do come up, but not with the same thrust in Zecchini's discussion. Instead, Bombay modernism is theorized in this study as a movement born from a multi-directional rebellion against Victorian aesthetic tastes, Sanskrit classicism, and colonial-era Marathi literature.

Zecchini also makes it very clear that while there are parallels between Kolatkar and mainstream Anglo-American modernist poets, the modernism that he and his contemporaries developed is in response to their own time and place. As with the Bloomsbury circle, Kolatkar is presented as an artist disinterested in commercial appeal, but his greater significance lay in his praxis of *decontextualizing* his poetry from dominant oral cultural practices in modern Marathi and other

such vernacular literary traditions. As a self-decontextualized artist, Kolatkar was free to experiment and explore new forms and languages in Marathi and English as well as freely translate between both, to the extent where the concept of an original draft was virtually non-existent.

“Decontextualization” is a key theoretical concept in *Moving Lines*, and Zecchini develops it further in her discussion of Bombay’s cosmopolitan sensibility as well as Kolatkar’s transgressive politics (18). The former, she argues, is partly the product of Bombay’s long-standing legacy as a city of immigrants, but also specifically the cultural scene of the early post-independence era when the “paperback revolution” had taken off, exposing writers like Kolatkar, Chitre, and Mehrotra to the diversity of global literary traditions (particularly French and American) in a pre-globalized age. This exposure then resulted in the birth of the “little magazine” movement of “ephemeral, irregular and often mimeographed” publications (48), enabling the Bombay poets to break with the dominant literary establishment and form new and highly avant-gardist literary communities.

The peak period of the Bombay poets is viewed by Zecchini partly as a South Asian analogue to that of the American Beats. The comparison is well-justified, given her lively accounts of how Kolatkar hosted Allen Ginsberg on his visit to India in the sixties; although Deborah Baker has previously explored Ginsberg’s visit in *A Blue Hand*, the accounts of his interactions with the Bombay poets is far more detailed in *Moving Lines*. Zecchini also reads Kolatkar from the theoretical perspective of Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, though in this particular case, the street-level, disorderly perspective in Kolatkar’s poems is equally rooted in his own personal history as a garbage picker and an urban wanderer as they are in his fictional imagination. Thus, the *flâneur* here is the artist himself, not merely the character or persona of his text.

In the closing chapters of *Moving Lines*, this bohemian sensibility is treated for its political dimension, one that is rarely discussed in the scholarship on Kolatkar and his contemporaries. For Zecchini, Kolatkar’s obsession with filth and debris signifies a resistance to the purified ideals of orthodox Brahminical Hinduism. This transgressive attitude is also paralleled in Kolatkar’s multi-lingual style and his cosmopolitan absorption of world literature, thus challenging the monolingual Marathi nativism of his contemporary Bhalchandra Nemade and more radically, the fascistic Shiv Sena organization that seized Bombay and renamed it “Mumbai” at the end of the twentieth century.

At the same time, Zecchini’s discussion of Kolatkar as well as Chitre’s English-language translations of *bhakti* poetry suggest that their work is perhaps much more rooted in Marathi literary history than their critics care to think. *Bhakti* translations, for Kolatkar and Chitre, held a purpose that went beyond making a contribution to Anglophone world literature. Zecchini argues that “*Bhakti* is reinvented through modernism and through English” (80). Kolatkar’s translations, often unpublished and produced for his small group of

friends, appear to be the most radical, transposing the “saintly” voice of Tukaram and Janabai through the idiom of African-American blues and American rock. These inventive translational practices also demonstrate a desire to “make contemporaries” out of one’s cultural “ancestors,” thus disrupting the modernity-tradition dichotomy that unfortunately stifles most discussions of *bhakti* and other pre-colonial forms of South Asian culture (75).

Moving Lines is a rich work of scholarship, relying on textual analysis as well as archival research and interviews with key players in the Bombay modernist story, including Kolatkar’s widow and extended family. It is also highly entertaining, given the anecdotes of Kolatkar’s irreverent, eccentric, streetwise lifestyle. Zecchini acknowledges the limits of her work, mainly her inability to read or “speak Marathi” (xvi). However, given the linguistic instability created by Kolatkar and his contemporaries, the logic of working exclusively in primary languages holds little weight here and a case for valuing the authenticity of literary translation over original texts achieves a new precedence in this study. That said, a Marathi translation of *Moving Lines* would certainly be invaluable for broadening its audience and provoking Marathi scholars to respond to this study. Hopefully, a bilingual reader with Zecchini’s scope and Kolatkar’s sensibility will be inspired to pursue such a project with *Moving Lines* in the near future.

Works Cited

- Baker, Deborah. *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*. New York: Penguin, 2008.
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- Kolatkar, Arun. *Jejuri*. 1974. Ed. Amit Chaudhuri. New York: New York Review Books, 2005.
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