

*Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture*

Anjali Nerlekar

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Anjali Nerlekar's *Bombay Modern* is the second book-length study of the Indian poet Arun Kolatkar (1931-2004) to be published within the past couple of years, coming right after Laetitia Zecchini's *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India* (2014). The two scholars worked independently yet in awareness of each other's research, which resulted in two books that are distinct and complementary, and equally indispensable to a better understanding of Indian poetic culture in postcolonial Bombay and beyond.

Kolatkar is the quintessential posthumous poet. Wary of intercourse with commercial publishers and media in general, he carefully and selectively cultivated the art of reclusion, avoiding all kinds of publicity, shying away from interviews, and publishing very little in his lifetime. Only after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and largely thanks to the encouragement of friends - especially the poets Adil Jussawalla and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and the publisher Ashok Shahane - did he agree to the publication of two collections, *Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Sarpa Satra*, not long before he died in September 2004. These were followed by the New York Review of Books edition of *Jejuri* (2005); *Arun Kolatkarchya Char Kavita* (2006; a reprint of four Marathi poems originally published in 1977), and *The Boatrider & Other Poems* (2009), both published by Pras Prakashan. The latter was edited by Mehrotra, who is also responsible for *Collected Poems in English* (Bloodaxe, 2010), and the forthcoming *Early Poems and Fragments* (Pras Prakashan). To these we should add the Marathi version of *Jejuri* (Pras Prakashan, 2011) and Zecchini's French translation, *Kala ghoda : poèmes de Bombay* (Gallimard, 2013).

This steady output of publications (including scholarly articles by Nerlekar, Zecchini, Emma Bird, Rajeev Patke, Vidyan Ravinthiran, and others) represents a level of scholarly and editorial attention that neither Nissim Ezekiel, nor Dom Moraes, two other pioneers of postcolonial anglophone poetry in India, enjoyed since their passing a few months before Kolatkar. The main reason is to be found in both Zecchini's and Nerlekar's books, which emphasize the bilingualism, the cosmopolitanism, and the material modernism of this multivocal author, "who," in Nerlekar's words, "as a poet wrote the poem, as a publisher generated the space for it to appear, and as an editor invented the readers for the new departure and created the conditions necessary for that poem's dissemination" (3). In fact, *Bombay Modern* may be the first book that looks at postcolonial

anglophone poetry in India from a New Modernist Studies perspective, concerned with the material forms of poetic production, print culture, and their underlying social networks.

To stress the interrelationship among textual, extra-textual, and contextual realities in Kolatkar's work, the book is divided in two parts. The first ("The Context") establishes specific spatiotemporal coordinates: Bombay, "but also its routine extensions through literary links into Pune and sometimes into Aurangabad" (10), in the years 1955–1980, a crucial period for which Nerlekar borrows a term from Marathi criticism, *sathottari*, to "cover Ezekiel and his generation of poets, as well as the younger poets like Jussawalla, Mehrotra, Kolatkar, and Chitre" (9-10). Here Nerlekar traces the evolution of *sathottari* poetry in Bombay by looking primarily at the "twinning operations of the little magazines and the small presses," since their "origins are the same, and the people working in them are the same, but the operation of the ventures and the structure of the products are vastly different" (75). The three chapters in this section focus on the little magazine movement in English and Marathi; two major small presses in each language, Clearing House (a publishing collective launched by Jussawalla, Kolatkar, Mehrotra, and Gieve Patel, which published eight books between 1976 and 1984) and Pras Prakasan (started by Shahane in the mid-1970s and still run single-handedly from his small apartment in a suburb of Mumbai); and translation as a form of localized cosmopolitanism and a polemical response to two politically charged events (both occurred in 1960), namely the creation of the linguistic state of Maharashtra, with Marathi as its official language and Bombay as its capital, and the establishment of the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters, with its "strong push for translation as a mode of nationalist reformation of regional identities" (38). These three foci are mirrored in the second part of the book ("The Texts"), where they provide a new and thought-provoking paradigm for understanding Kolatkar's poetry. This simple but effective structure, and the many ways in which the two parts reflect and illuminate each other, represent perhaps the most original and valuable aspect of *Bombay Modern*.

Nerlekar's two-pronged methodology effectively combines sound documentation with a fresh and appealing theoretical approach. Her direct access to some of the protagonists of the little magazine/small press movement in Bombay (especially Jussawalla, Mehrotra, and Shahane) and their papers (part of which have been recently acquired by Cornell University) informs and substantiates her critical approach. The latter draws on recent scholarship on localist and material modernism, and particularly on Jerome McGann's theory of the social text, according to which a literary work "is made up of not just the linguistic code, or the words of the text, but also the paratextual elements" (81). These paratextual elements form what McGann calls the "bibliographic code," and include "typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format, and all those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral to the text" (81). Nerlekar submits some of these elements (especially book cover design, page layout, and typography)

to a close reading, covering three major books; two issued by Clearing House and one by Pras Prakashan. Her analysis shows how the iconic covers of Patel's *How Do You Withstand, Body* (1976) and Mehrotra's *Distance in Statute Miles* (1982) (designed by Kolatkar, like all other Clearing House titles), give the reader a unique insight into the content of each book. Elsewhere, it is the shrewd layout (the result of a close collaboration between author and publisher) which gives Kolatkar's *Bhijaki Vahi* (2003), a collection of "women's stories" from different ages and parts of the world, its poignancy and meaning.

On rare occasions Nerlekar's levelheaded critical discourse gets muddled by such academic jargon as in "the concomitant randomization of the inflexible" (56) or "the fungible significance of the page" (169). A few inaccuracies and typos (e.g. "invisibalizing" instead of the hardly more digestible "invisibilizing," 48) occasionally impair the text; but these are the results of insufficient fact-checking and copy-editing, and should be imputed to the publisher rather than to the author. Thus, we read that the English-language journal *Quest* was edited by Nissim Ezekiel first in 1954 (7), then in 1955-57 (108), then again in 1954-57 (120), while in fact Ezekiel's editorship lasted for the first sixteen issues, from August 1955 until February-March 1958 (although his involvement as reviews editor continued until the publication ceased during the Emergency). Similarly, one of the two editors of the little magazine *Dionysus* is identified twice (63, 78) as Shirish Pradhan and a third time (199) as Shrinivas Pradhan. The index lists both, which leaves the reader none the wiser (the actual name is Shrinivas Vasudeo Pradhan). The publication date of Kolatkar's *Collected Poems in English* is first given as 2009 (171), then, correctly, as 2010 (198, 272), but the index refers only to the second of these three occurrences.

Literary history and criticism are traditionally textual affairs, reading-oriented and often blind to the visual and material aspects of book production, circulation, and reception. Only recently have these aspects been taken into account in the investigation and appreciation of a writer's—or a group of writers'—work, although mostly within modernism and avant-garde studies. The main reason for this is that the material production of a work of literature, and especially its "publication," requires a series of artistic, technical, and business competencies and skills that are professionally related to specific individuals or departments, but extraneous to the author. Only rarely have these various steps been undertaken by a group of artists and writers who collectively handled the overall creation and dissemination of their work. In such cases, critics who are thus inclined may cast their analytical and interpretive nets more widely and inclusively, to explore and expose the various complex and often subtle interrelationships that exist across the intellectual-material divide of literary production. By focusing on Bombay's little magazines and small presses in the *sathottari* period, and by applying this interpretive model to Arun Kolatkar's poetry, Anjali Nerlekar has blazed a promising subcontinental trail in the flourishing field of modernist studies. It is hoped that others will follow her lead, since the literary

landscape of modern (i.e. postcolonial *and* colonial) India offers similarly unexplored research opportunities.