

LAETITIA ZECCHINI, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India. Moving Lines*. (Historicizing Modernism Series). London / Oxford / New York / New Delhi / Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2016. Xvii, 229 pages, £28.99. ISBN 978-1-4742-7566-8 (pb)

What did literary modernism look like in India? In portraying its most prominent figure, Arun Kolatkar (1931–2004), Laetitia Zecchini offers fresh insights into the world of Bombay’s Beat Generation. The book provides an intriguing example of the entangled history of literary modernism, maintaining a fine balance between the analysis of transcultural references (amongst others, Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin and the Beatniks) on the one hand, and local narrative genealogies (*bhakti* songs, folk stories) on the other. Arun Kolatkar is introduced as a bilingual “poet-tramp”, who constantly blurred the lines between English and Marathi, Ginsberg and Kabir, the ordinary and the alien, scrap and art.

The study consists of six chapters, divided roughly into three larger sections, each representing a different mode of translation. According to Zecchini, the act of translation is the most significant feature of Arun Kolatkar’s writing and self-conception. The first two chapters set the scene for Kolatkar’s time and network, the Bohemian Bombay circles of the 1950s and 60s. Independent small magazines and presses, which published both contemporary American poetry and translations of popular medieval Marathi poems, testify to the creative exchange between American and Indian writers, among them Allen Ginsberg, whose *Indian Journals* bear witness to encounters with Indian colleagues between 1952 and 1953 (Allen Ginsberg, *Indian Journals. March 1952 – May 1953. Notebooks, Diary, Blank Pages, Writings*. San Francisco: Dave Haselwood Books & City Light Books, 1970). Over the following years, Kolatkar and his poet friends developed “Americaneese”, an expressive language inspired by the Beatniks, Bob Dylan and Black American Speech, as an alternative to the elitist (colonial) British idiom. Apart from the strong American affinities, the “overlapping multilingualities” (p. 23) were characterised by the “recycling” of traditional genres such as devotional *bhakti* songs composed in Marathi and Hindvi, an early form of modern Hindi.

How did *bhakti*, a religious movement which had its heyday in the 15th and 16th century, elicit such a vivid response among the Bombay Beatniks? Zecchini argues that Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Dilip Chitre modelled their own “counter cultural movement” (p. 78) along the lines of the *bhakti* legends Tukaram and Kabir. By translating *bhakti* songs into colloquial English and adapting it to modern contexts, the Bombay poets rebelled against the linguistic agitations of the late 1950s, when nationalistic activists, supported by Socialist and Communist leaders, called for a unified state of Marathi-speaking people (Samyukta Maharashtra), which ultimately resulted in the dissolution of the (multilingual) Bombay State in favour of the creation of the linguistic state of Maharashtra in 1960. In this context, Zecchini states, modernism was perceived “as an offspring of the West and somewhat ‘un-Indian’” (p. 9). Despite

his pioneering role in Americanising and thus modernising Indian English, Kolatkar never gave up writing in his mother tongue, Marathi. On the contrary, he often worked on poems in the two languages simultaneously. Zecchini convincingly interprets these bilingual exercises in Kolatkar's writing as instances of translating between different audiences and realms of experience, "local and cosmopolitan systems" (p. 76).

In chapters three and four, the author reconstructs the artist's aesthetic perception and techniques of defamiliarising the ordinary, based on his diaries and unpublished material. Here, translation served the purpose of looking at the ordinary from "eccentric angles of vision" (p. 24). Kolatkar was a trained painter, who had worked many years in the advertising business (with, among others, the acclaimed novelist Kiran Nagarkar). In his poetry, he envisioned ordinary street scenes as artistic installations, scrap and waste as readymades. We learn that the "Baudelaire of Bombay" spent much time in the setting and subject of his own poetry: every Thursday, he observed street life from inside his "studio", the Wayside Inn Café in Kala Ghoda. Several anecdotes vividly attest to Kolatkar's collecting frenzy: newspaper articles, lyrics and snatches from overheard conversations were, in Zecchini's terms, "recycled" into poetry – yet another translation process, which converted the ordinary into highly stylised forms of art.

"The Politics of Kolatkar (I/II)", the last two chapters of Zecchini's book, shed light on the political and ethical dimension of his work. In *Sarpa Satra*, a cycle of poems that retells the opening myth of the Mahabharata epic, Kolatkar defamiliarises a canonical text by giving voice to a victimised woman, thereby offering an alternative reading beyond elitist and nativist frames of interpretation. Again, Zecchini draws a connection to heterodox *bhakti* and folkloric traditions and stresses the importance of storytelling as a means of expressing multiple voices and different perspectives that make up historical narratives: "Translation is a sacrilege of sorts because it is linked to the plurality of messages, messengers, texts and contexts" (p. 192). Later Indian authors have taken up these unorthodox interpretations of mytho-historical themes and figures. Kiran Nagarkar's award-winning novel *Cuckold* (1997), which tells the story of the 16th century Krishna devotee Mirabai from the perspective of her husband, illustrates how Kolatkar's influence reached far beyond the Bombay Beatnik circles.

Zecchini's study reaches its limits where the intertextual connections to contemporary Marathi poetry and prose are concerned. As Anjali Nerlekar shows in *Bombay Modern* (2016), the poet's occupation with vernacular literature was by no means restricted to traditional sources. By taking up this dimension of Kolatkar's bilingual work, Nerlekar challenges "the dogma of easy global cosmopolitanisms within which all discussions of modern Indian poetry are framed" and thus makes a perfect complementary reading to the present study (Anjali Nerlekar, *Bombay Modern. Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016, p. 214).

Elegantly written, Zecchini's compelling tribute to Arun Kolatkar and the Bombay Bohemian scene in post-independence India organically embeds sample texts which reveal their own aesthetic potential. In addition to exhaustive archival resources, the author draws on numerous anecdotes and information from Kolatkar's circle of friends and fellow poets, most prominently Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. This adds an entertaining touch to this narrative of the pioneer of modernism in India. By integrating a non-Western artist in the canon of literary modernism, Zecchini reminds us once more that modernism as an imaginative mind-set and creative mode of expression was not limited to European avant-garde(s) or American popular culture. More importantly, her study helps us to appreciate how global modernism in the 20th century, despite transcending geographical, cultural and linguistic borders, produced independent forms and varieties "in conversation" with vernacular narrative traditions in South Asia – a relationship still to be discovered in much more detail.

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KONRAD MEISIG (ed.): *Utopias from Asia. An International and Interdisciplinary Symposium in Santiniketan on the Occasion of the 150th Birthday Anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. An Asian Impact Activity in Memoriam of Momoyo Okura.* (East Asia Intercultural Studies / Interkulturelle Ostasienstudien, 8). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012. Xxvi, 205 pages, €54.00. ISBN 978-3-447-06794-2

The articles in this volume derive from two separate international and interdisciplinary workshops, one bearing the title of the volume – "Utopias from Asia" – which took place in October 2011 in Santiniketan, India; the other with the even more general title "Myths from Asia" half a year later, in February 2012 at Mainz University in Germany. The papers from the second workshop are compiled in a separate "Supplement Section". The volume also contains an editor's preface, explaining Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birthday in 2011 as the incentive for a workshop on "Utopias from Asia"; welcoming addresses from the workshop; and the well-informed keynote speech by Udaya Narayana Singh, the then Vice-Chancellor of Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan. His inaugural talk naturally discusses the Visva-Bharati University as a realisation of the utopian vision of Rabindranath Tagore as a humanist and educationist. Singh interprets Tagore as an "author-musician-painter-activist-linguist turned cultural leader who tried to combine different and divergent traditions – Indian, Western as well as East Asian" (p. xxv). From this perspective, Singh does not challenge the common reverential rhetoric which regards Tagore as a cultural harbinger, one whose modernist aim was to transform reality according to a vision (i.e. utopia).