



Book Review

Kedar Kulkarni. (2022). *World Literature and the Question of Genre in Colonial India: Poetry, Drama and Print Culture, 1790-1890*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. Pp. xvii+ 249. Price: £ 76.50. ISBN 978935436698. Hardcover.

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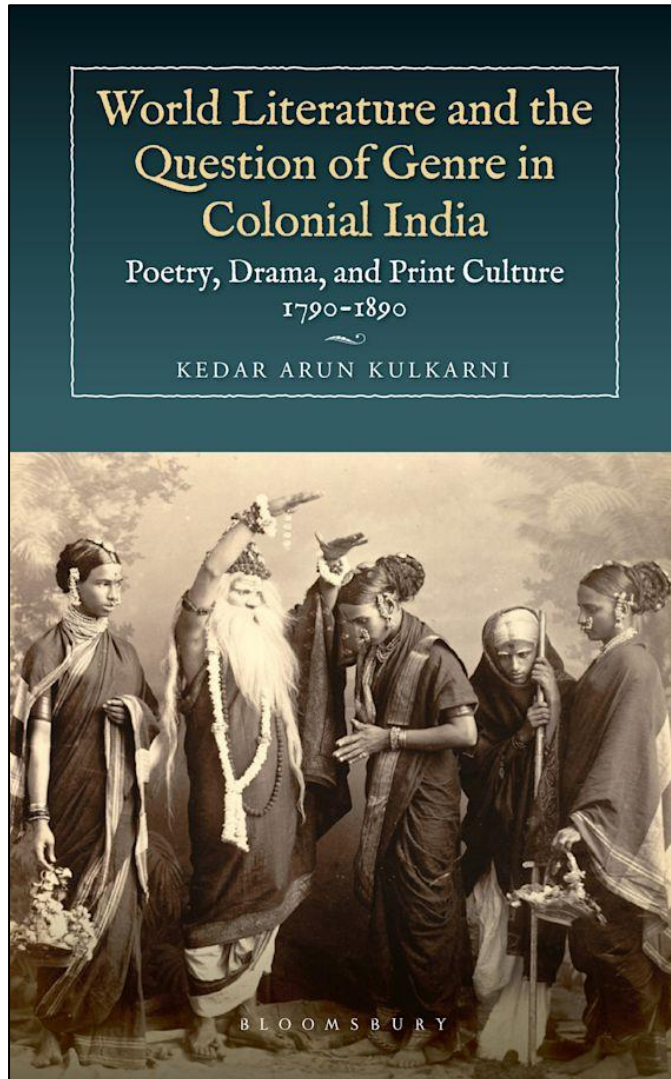


Image 9.1: Jacket Cover (source: Bloomsbury / public domain)

When I first decided to review *World Literature and the Question of Genre in Colonial India* (henceforth *World Literature*), I had not expected a theoretical textbook, a masterpiece on how world literature in the colonial period transformed, and was transformed, through its contact with the vernacular in Western India. The author Kedar Kulkarni argues that this bidirectional influence was vital for the emergence of modern Marathi literature, giving rise to the generation of a literary ecology specific to the Marathi region. While the book primarily focuses on Marathi, that yields particularly well to analysis, *World Literature* sets an example for all those interested in similar enterprises that explore the vernacular literary histories of other linguistic regions. *World Literature* consists of 5 chapters, apart from the *Introduction: The Archives against Theory: Language, Literature and Genre* (pp. 1-42) and *Conclusion: Theory after the Archives* (pp. 234-242). These 5 chapters are organized into two sections: *Part I: Literature Remade*, and *Part II: Colonial Literary Culture*. While *Part I* contains the first two chapters: *Romanticism in India and Gifts for the Coloniser* (pp. 43-80) and *From Literary Commons to Literary*

Canons (pp. 81-122), the last 3 chapters in *Part II* are titled *Foundational Melodrama for India: Shakuntala and Surrogation* (pp. 123-157), *Incorporating 'Love': From Sanskrit Kavya to Marathi Drama* (pp. 158-208), and *Heterogeneous Worlds: The Farce against Drama* (pp. 209-233).

World Literature is not an entirely linear narrative with *Part I* describing the way in which elite vernacular literary circles of Pune and Mumbai influenced world literature, followed by the overlapping interest in *Part II*, on indigenous aspects of Marathi vernacular literature that

merged residual precolonial traditions with what the book calls ‘worldliness’ or the *laukik*. This merge or ‘incorporation’ is, then, what produced modern Marathi literature as a heterogenous, vernacular ecology calibrated against English, Sanskrit, and other indigenous poetic traditions. Commenting on the importance of poetry as central to Marathi literary ecology, the author writes (p. 5):

...the 19th century was one where poetry *was* literature, bar none, and Marathi and Indian theories of poetry had an impact on global literary culture that was second to none, despite the preponderance of poetry as a genre of performance. These theories relied not necessarily on pure orality, but one that saw orality as an ideal—heroic and virtuosic performance and the voice was preferred over moribund textuality...The primary dyad that galvanised literary activity in the decades preceding colonial incursions, therefore, was not between author and reader, but between performers and spectators. What of literature’s graphic literacy then? And what is to be gained by obstinately policing literature as reading and writing? What the Marathi situation offers, instead, is a case whereby the singular is universalizable, so to speak, reframing world literature through implicit critiques of literacy—and shifting the focus to performance.

Thus, what the author means by vernacular literary ecology here, that I feel could have been an ideal title for the book (“From Oral *Vangmay* to Printed *Sahitya*” [as indicated on p. 33]), encompasses a broader understanding of literature that includes performance—poetry and drama. This broader encompassment is conceptually vital, since it is the inclusion of poetry and drama within the definitional frames of literature, that also makes Marathi literature legible as world literature. This conceptualization diverts the discussion about literature away from superficial limitations, of what Kulkarni calls graphic literacy—the read and written text, while a focus on literariness situates literature within political discussions about capitalist excess. Brahmins continued to dominate Marathi literature, enabled by the success and popularity of print technology. Printing not only creating new formats like anthologies, but it produced a domain where Brahmin intellectuals found a new role as authors and owners of texts.

The spoken and written interacted in colonial Western India, facilitated by the ‘worldliness’ (*laukika*) of indigenous bardic poetry, where not all performers were monolingual-Marathi. Describing such an interaction, the author cites examples of theatrical ephemera or playbills from the 19th century, stating that they “participated in an economy of enchanted industrial communications, in which travel(,) and the power of print amplified the meanings and associations of stories (p.7).” These ephemera could be read in multiple ways and constituted forms of knowledge that broke barriers between public and private. They created ‘eurochronology’ or the inclusion of Marathi within discourses about the development of European literature. Describing the process of recalibration between Marathi-Sanskrit, indigenous poetic traditions, and English as the ‘second vernacularisation’, the author states (p.17):

Marathi literature, from one that functioned within a region of multiple power centres, roughly united through a common panchoric literature and language ecology, experienced a second vernacularisation as political structures became colonial, in relation to English and also Sanskrit.

This synchronicity and merge took place due to various reasons, primarily colonialism, wherein Marathi encountered English, and alongside, a reconceptualization of Sanskrit poetics and indigenous traditions, mediated by elites and impacted by British and German romanticism. The author does not reject that Marathi literature was influenced by English; instead, he shows

how Marathi literature, emphasising worldliness, was equally influenced by Sanskrit and indigenous aesthetics. To this end, the author explicitly asks (p. 29): “How did a political transfer from the late premodern to the 19th century alter the literary ecology of Marathi—and for whom? How did a relatively distinct, panchoric ecology, experience a second vernacularisation via the colonial encounter?” Attempting to answer these questions, the chapter 1 of the book describes how Marathi literature, based on its older imbrication with Sanskrit and epic-poetic traditions influenced colonial discourse about literature and language. The chapter further discusses the relatedness between ‘literature’ and ‘literariness’ that came to be defined through and against romanticism: the worldliness and transcendence of *shahir* or bardic poetry, ecologically linked with European orientalist discourse. Attempting to encapsulate this confluence, the author states (p. 45):

My purpose and goal of this literary history, then, is two-fold: to find vocabularies of worldliness and globalism within the discipline of comparative literary studies that rely on alternative and intersecting genealogies than the (German-idealistic) versions available, and to define them in a more precise way that enables the real imaginative contours of the colonised’s gift (to the coloniser) to shine.

Chapter 2 explores how the rising popularity of print transformed the performer-audience relationship, especially with the rise of new, largely ahistorical, Brahminical genres that entailed the production of printed anthologies (p. 85): “Editing, in this context, is significant, because it selectively adjudicates a preference for certain poet-performers (‘authors’) over others, some versions over others, stabilising which epic episodes, and the language in which they are narrated, in addition to the form.” The rising importance of the anthology editor, (re)produced Brahminism in the shaping of ‘canonicity’, as editors worked together with colonial authorities to produce ‘readerly’ texts—something that impacted performances as equally. Enabled by the predominance of print, Brahmin editors could demonstrate their authorial ownership of mechanically reproduced printed materials, even though a literary ‘ownership’ of an epic was impossible. Print produced massive transformation in Marathi literature, becoming intertwined with capitalism. Using the Marxist theory of excess, chapter 2 describes how this transformation wrought by print increasingly produced the idea of a ‘cultural commons’, consisting of printed epic traditions that simultaneously merged with performance.

Chapter 3 provides an excellent analysis of how this transformation impacted performance— theatre and drama. This impact allowed theatre to exceed the stage and enter the social domain, and the author demonstrates this through an exploration of Kalidasa’s play *Shakuntala* that became famous in the 1880s, in the specific avatar of the epic popularised by Balvant Pandurang Kirloskar (1843-1885). The author analyses the reasons for this popularity that transformed drama into a social and very public force, by describing *Shakuntala* as a melodramatic surrogate for what were dying relationships of the colonial time (p. 31):

By viewing *Shakuntala* through the prisms of melodrama and surrogation, I am able to examine processes of aristocratic retrenchment in the 19th century as an emerging, predominantly brahman, middle-class sought patronage both from colonial and aristocratic personages. Thus the play and similar productions became vehicles for triangulating a sort of unstable cohesion between three groups, just as the performances...were also socially cohesive and about the world.

The performance of *Shakuntala*’s Kirloskar-ian version were deeply ‘felt’. It worked like a salvific, presenting spectators with a solution to the various social dysfunctions introduced by colonialism. Largely understood as part of orientalist discourse imbibed by the colonial Indian academy, embellished by changes such as the inclusion of female performers, *Shakuntala* was

read as a melodramatic analogy to the socio-historical disintegration of colonial times: “The play’s vision and its performances fill gaps within a social order, thereby operating as substitutes to actual lost social relations (p. 125).” Printing, production, and the popularity of influential, authored, and owned elite narratives led to the production and formation of definitive versions of epic poetry and drama. Chapter 4 describes exactly one such instance of the same Kirloskar’s *A Musical about Subhadra* (1882). *Subhadra* produced authoritative power for Kirloskar, as he intertwined ‘low’ and ‘high’ poetic elements from bardic and the epic poetry in his production. This incorporation produced a complex, non-linear process that neither privileged colonial rupture, nor represented precolonial continuity. Instead, *Subhadra* represents the formation of a new literary ecology. Kirloskar-ian *Subhadra* was iconic, demonstrating the heterogenous world of Marathi literature that included the influence of English Opera. The public, including many luminaries of the day, who came to be increasingly involved with the production of literature, (re)produced theatre as a social force (p. 199):

These overlaps between the internal and external frames of reference demarcate the fundamentally public nature of these productions. They are not contained even as they contain prior poetic traditions that are thoroughly adapted and reworked. Nor are they private affairs, received as novels;...(they) created the vernacular world through performance, mobility, popular access and elite mediation...creating these worlds was about co-opting the poetic world and bringing it into focus through literary text...collapsing the public ‘sphere’ into public ‘space’ and thus almost literally creating worlds—within and without—the performance.

In this transformative, heterogenous world, Marathi literary ecology also served other utilitarian purposes that included the political, as described in chapter 5 (which I find the most interesting of all chapters). The author outlines how the political and urban transformations of late 19th century Bombay Presidency found expression in the emergence of a new, largely urban genre: the farce, that did away with the earlier focus on epics and mythology. With the emergence of farce, Brahminical authorial importance declined, making new space for critique and subversion within the Marathi literary ecology. Farces were a diverse and textured genre that attempted to valorise the everyday—street life for example—as forms of subversion. Farces were usually without authors, and covered different themes like conjugal relations. Chapter 5 focuses on the three overlapping themes: women’s evening temple rituals, travel by steam boat, and instances of parodying other performative genres. These themes, the author states (p.228):

...provide an intimate view of daily life and the sites where unfulfillable desires may be experienced, how that experience may be aestheticized, among many other possibilities. These ideas were then circulated among cities, as part of the repertoires of many different theatre troupes. Most of all, then, the farce enabled these street scenes and practices to become theatrical through a practice of spectatorship.

The *Conclusion* is introspective, exploring in depth underlying reasons and choices for using the theoretical paradigm of a literary ecology that integrates a historical definition of literature, with an equally essential and strong evolutionary penumbra of performance. This epistemic building of literary linkages is especially important for a renewed understanding of literature, especially given the over-preponderance of the novel in vernacular literature, and the stress on Indian literature in English and other European languages within postcolonial scholarship. The author calls upon historians of literature to reconceptualize the definition of literature itself, to allow for a closer and more complete and representative definition of literature that is based on an inclusion of the vernaculars (p. 236): “Indeed, if English is to be the cosmopolitan language

of our era, which by hook or crook it is, then it too must change to accommodate definitions that enable more accurate world views.”

World Literature is a book that everybody interested in the history of modern vernacular literature should read—especially those interested in performance, the impact of colonialism on vernaculars, and the histories of second vernacularisation in India. The author has undertaken a challenging task in writing this book, as he tries to reach diverse and multiple audiences at the same time: non-native scholars of Indian and Marathi literature, historians of colonial India, scholars of world literature, and native Marathi scholars of and in Maharashtra to name a few, who are invested in treatises about their mother tongue. The author, himself, seamlessly straddles all these four categories, and multiple others. But then, Kedar Kulkarni is also an exceptionally talented and gifted scholar. Expecting exceptionalities is perhaps also where the market weakness of this book lies. Satisfying too many audiences at one time is a daunting task—they are like the ‘public’ of theatre world itself—inextricably welding society with text. *World Literature* requires an academic translation in Marathi for a fuller and more complete appreciation and reception of a brilliant, perceptive, and sensitively written book.