

Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism
in India

Historicizing Modernism

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Moving Lines

Laetitia Zecchini

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To Adil, Arvind and Ashok

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Series Editor's Preface

Historicizing Modernism

This book series is devoted to the analysis of late-nineteenth-to twentieth-century literary Modernism within its historical context. *Historicizing Modernism* thus stresses empirical accuracy and the value of primary sources (such as letters, diaries, notes, drafts, marginalia or other archival deposits) in developing monographs, scholarly editions and edited collections on Modernist authors and their texts. This may take a number of forms, such as manuscript study and annotated volumes, archival editions and genetic criticism, as well as mappings of interrelated historical milieus or ideas. To date, no book series has laid claim to this interdisciplinary, source-based territory for modern literature. Correspondingly, one burgeoning sub-discipline of Modernism, Beckett Studies, features heavily here as a metonymy for the opportunities presented by manuscript research more widely. While an additional range of 'canonical' authors will be covered here, this series also highlights the centrality of supposedly 'minor' or occluded figures, not least in helping to establish broader intellectual genealogies of Modernist writing. Furthermore, while the series will be weighted towards the English-speaking world, studies of non-Anglophone Modernists whose writings are ripe for archivally based exploration shall also be included here.

A key aim of such historicizing is to reach beyond the familiar rhetoric of intellectual and artistic 'autonomy' employed by many Modernists and their critical commentators. Such rhetorical moves can and should themselves be historically situated and reintegrated into the complex continuum of individual literary practices. This emphasis upon the contested self-definitions of Modernist writers, thinkers and critics may, in turn, prompt various reconsiderations of the boundaries delimiting the concept 'Modernism' itself. Similarly, the very notion of 'historicizing' Modernism remains debatable, and this series by no means discourages more theoretically-informed approaches. On the contrary, the editors believe that the historical specificity encouraged by *Historicizing Modernism* may inspire a range of fundamental critiques along the way.

Matthew Feldman
Erik Tønning

Preface

This book is not about literary modernism in India. With its many regional literatures and many languages, that would be an impossible task, far beyond the scope of these pages and my capacities. The book is not about modern Indian poetry in English either. Not only has the field been mapped before, but as a bilingual poet who created a body of work as important in English as in Marathi, Arun Kolatkar exceeds the field altogether. This book is first and foremost about a poet; it stems from the conviction that Kolatkar is one of the sharpest and most remarkable voices of world poetry. But it also outlines *a* story of modernism in India through a particular writer, a particular place, Bombay, and a particular time: the post-independence ebullient scene, which the poet Dilip Chitre also described as a ‘fantastic conglomeration of clashing realities’.

I have found the place, the time and the poetry exceptionally stimulating and challenging because they revise many of the conventional representations of modernism, poetry, translation, India, Indian or ‘postcolonial’ literature and also prevent any national reframing of the literary field. I may therefore be trying to map what Sanjay Subrahmanyam has aptly called a ‘connected history’, an expression that makes particular sense for a poet who was also a fervent reader of Fernand Braudel and who burrowed away in the many connected histories of the world. The following pages uncover the transformative traffics between travelling cultures, literatures, forms and idioms, the many resonances of Kolatkar’s poetry with world poetry and of Bombay modernism with other modernisms across the world.

This book is bound to be incomplete for reasons which many of my Marathi interlocutors have often pointed out. I do not speak Marathi. Although not knowing one of Kolatkar’s languages has been a source of constant frustration, I have decided (perhaps unreasonably!) that it would not prevent me from writing and working on Kolatkar. Since no book exists on the poet as yet, it seemed imperative to write one. I am sure bilingual scholars will soon take up where I left off and make the ‘other side of the moon’ visible.

‘Moving Lines’ are words that I used for the title of one of the first interventions on Kolatkar I gave at a conference in 2008. As I put the finishing touches to the manuscript, I realize that I have developed many of the arguments in this

early paper, that 'moving lines' could encapsulate the essence of this project, and possibly express the spirit of Kolatkar's poetry as well. Modernism and modernity are unstable notions that transcend strict space and time boundaries. This book aims at widening geographical horizons, at moving temporal and spatial lines of accepted cartographies and genealogies of modernism and at dislodging the postcolonial canon. The assumption of this work is also that the story of modernism is the story of translations and migrations, that modernism is a transnational and *travelling* syntax. Lines are borders or boundaries that must be pushed or exceeded. They are also lines of poetry and lines of visuals and graphics. Arun Kolatkar, who trained as a painter, worked as a graphic artist and became an advertising legend, was a visual, kinetic and at times cinematic poet as well.

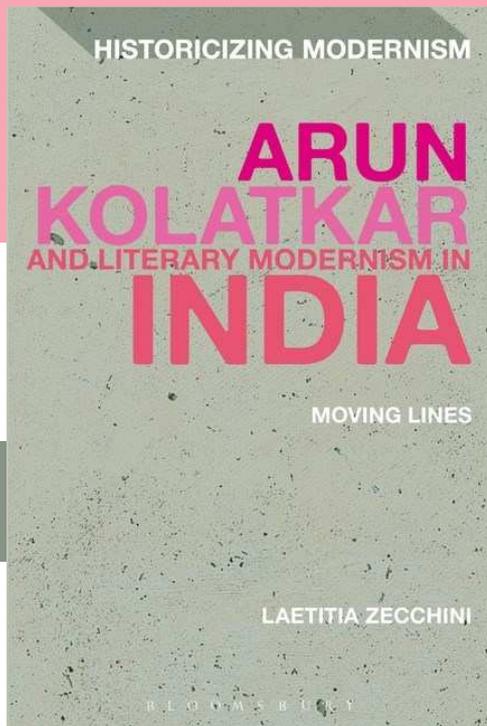
The Policeman: A Wordless Play in Thirteen Scenes, which is the only book of the poet's graphic work published to date, encapsulates the spirit of Kolatkar's world, which constantly reforms and renews itself, gesture after gesture, line after line, image after image. It is composed of a series of line drawings where the poet's sense of humour, tenderness, playful irreverence and extraordinary visual imagination are given free rein. It also opens on a remarkable self-portrait of the poet, although the clean-cut mouth and drooping mustache are the only traits immediately discernible. The mouth is closed on a cigarette, and the smoke curling up from the cigarette outlines the contours of a nose, an eye, the hint of a forehead and an elongated eyebrow. It is a portrait between the lines, as it were, the moving, malleable, provisional portrait of an artist who slipped through the hands of fixed identities and who treasured impermanence.

'What is god / and what is stone / the dividing line / if it exists / is very thin', wrote the poet in the *Jejuri* collection. Kolatkar makes lines wobble between gods and stones; Marathi and English; prose, poems and songs; art and scrap; the words of others and his own; talking pictures, wordless texts and moving images. He also jumbled all kinds of traditions and lineages, and stretched the boundaries of poetry to the limit.

Paris, 26 February 2013



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Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India

Moving Lines

Laetitia Zecchini

The first monograph on the Indian poet Arun Kolatkar, revealing the complex interplay of traditions, translations and languages that have fashioned Indian literary modernism.

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“This is the first major critical study of Arun Kolatkar, the late-twentieth century’s most absurdly neglected poet. It is also a stylish, refreshingly anti-academicist example of what literary scholarship at its best and boldest can do today. By redrawing the map of ‘literary modernism’, and encouraging us to think about the English language and its poetry in compelling new ways, Laetitia Zecchini has not only created space for Kolatkar in our times. She has given new life to the lost art of literary criticism.” – Peter D. McDonald, St Hugh’s College, Oxford, UK

“*Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India* gives us a strikingly different picture of literature and the world, deeply located and open to a world of voices, resolutely experimental and making contemporaries out of diverse ancestors ... The first monograph on one of the world’s great poets who had an extraordinary *oeuvre* in two languages—Marathi and English—this book is also a bold critical intervention in post-colonial literature and literary modernism world-wide. As vibrant, perceptive and brimming with ideas as its subject, it brings to life the city and the transnational counter-culture that Kolatkar was so much part of.” – Francesca Orsini, Professor of Hindi and South Asian Literature, SOAS, London, UK

“An exciting, readable, deeply researched, analytical study of a world-class author who was mostly unknown to those outside India until after his death, this is one of the best books about Indian literature.” – Bruce King, author of *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, *Three Indian Poets*, and *ReWriting India*

“This pioneering book, much of it based on archival sources, is an immense feat of literary recovery and retelling ... Scholars who come after her will forever be in her debt”. – Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, poet and editor of *A History of Indian Literature in English*

Laetitia Zecchini is a permanent researcher at the CNRS in Paris, France. She has published extensively on Arun Kolatkar and on modern Indian literature. Her research interests focus on contemporary Indian poetry and on the politics of literature, on postcolonial criticism, non-western modernisms, dalit literatures and South Asian literary history. She is the translator of Kolatkar’s *Kala Ghoda Poems* (2013) into French.

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