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ACTS OF FLANERIE AND HOMECOMING:
Urban Spaces in the Poetry of Arun Kolatkar

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To cast even a fleeting glance across Arun Kolatkar’s oeuvre is analogous to losing yourself in a city – the reader as a flaneur – in sprawling labyrinthine pathways trafficking in art and filth, in the seaside banter of Bombay, and in pilgrimages out, to the dark heart of religion.

While Kolatkar’s first collection of published poems, Jejuri, evokes the eponymous small Maharashtrian pilgrim town and contemplates questions of faith, rituals of worship and the perpetually fluctuating nature of faith, his later collections, Kala Ghoda Poems and Sarpa Satra alternatively meditate upon the ethos of life and living in an Indian metropolis – its various palatable and unpalatable significations – and the relevance of myth in contemporary history. The posthumously published collection The Boatride and Other Poems recapitulates a poetic consciousness deeply intrigued by the polemic of a changing cultural milieu – modern-day-India’s perceptibly precarious character, where all identities are unfixed and protean. The question of language and plural linguistic identities, too, is a concern embedded in his poems, emphatically foregrounded by the fact that he was a bilingual poet, writing with equal verve and conviction in both Marathi and English.

In the Introduction to The Boatride and Other Poems, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra recollects Kolatkar’s response to Eunice D’Souza on one particular occasion when she remarked on the books on Bosnia on his shelves. Mehrotra comments that Kolatkar dwelt at length on his reading habits. “I want to reclaim everything I consider my tradition,” was Kolatkar’s reply. “I am particularly interested in history of all kinds, the beginning of man, archaeology, histories of everything from religion to objects, bread-making, paper, clothes, people, the evolution of man’s knowledge of things, ideas about the world or his own body. The history of man’s trying to make sense of his
place in the universe and his place in it may take me to Sumerian writing. It’s a browser’s approach, not a scholarly one; it’s one big supermarket situation.” (Kolatkar, 2009, 29)

In his poetry, especially poetry which attempts circumscribe the experience of urban spaces, Kolatkar’s method of observation is precisely that of a browser – somebody whose gaze moves effortlessly along the aisles of a supermarket or a library, and alights on things which trigger his curiosity. Although the objects that his languid gaze throws up are largely ephemeral in nature, for the span of those few seconds, the object of interest is potently summed up and examined closely to divine truths of the ordinary. In Kala Ghoda Poems, the streets of Bombay, under Kolatkar’s scrutiny, metamorphose into historical archives which trace the city’s burgeoning urban landscape to its roots, its sights turning into the paraphernalia a flaneur slowly gathers as he walks by. Thus, for Kolatkar, the city is cumulative, always moving from one stark yet mellow epiphany to another, and it always exceeds singular, monolithic conceptions and definitions. It is against this inconstant city, as Kolatkar writes in his long poem, ‘The Boatride’, that “the sea jostles/ against the wall/ vacuous sailboats snuggle/ tall and gawky/ their masts at variance/ islam/ mary/ dolphin/ their names appearing/ music.” (ibid 206)

Thus, Kolatkar’s cityscape epitomises variations and his poetry, the quality of their confluence.

In “Irani Restaurant Bombay”, for instance, Kolatkar depicts a space which is volatile with details, yet enigmatic. Its dark interior holds landscapes where “dogmatically green and elaborate trees defeat/ breeze; [a] crooked swan begs pardon/ if it disturb the pond” (ibid 53), while the same landscape is inverted in “a thirsty loafer’s” glass of water. Everyday routines – almost banal in retrospect – of visiting a café on a hot, dusty afternoon acquire a larger-than-life density and are transfigured into elaborate rituals, where even the loafer affects “the exactitude of a pedagogue”. Inside the restaurant, a battle between portions of light and darkness ensues and unbalances the passer-by. Not only does the landscape wobble in a glass of water, but “instant of mirrors turn tables on space/ while promoting darkness below the chair, the cat/ in its two timing sleep dreams evenly and knows/ dreaming to be an administrative problem.” (ibid)
When Kolatkar’s cityscape issues into smaller domestic and public terrains it only exemplifies features of the larger narrative, in that, the city and all its multitudinous facets and possibilities is one where the dreary and the beautiful, the dark and the irradiated are in constant negotiation, on occasions overlapping and replacing the other, so that the dreary and the dark are frequently rendered opulent. But while such spaces are ardent in the mere fact of their existence, they always hold the latent possibility of disintegration. In the restaurant, “the cockeyed shah of Iran watched the cake/ decompose carefully in a cracked showcase”, the swan is “crooked”, the landscape “wobbles” and “the heretic needle jabs a black star”. Urban spaces in Kolatkar’s poetry are geometrically warped spaces. They are built along dissimilar trajectories and are constituted by oblique lines and shapes rather than straight, easily comprehensible designations. Furthermore, the composition of the restaurant in the poem is intensely aware of and metonymically refers to greater economic modes of formulation – it is along these lines that a capitalist-consumerist urban space is structured. The restaurant and the city are dark counterparts to each other, and in the former, “tables chairs mirrors are night that needs to be sewed/ and cashier is where at seams it comes apart” (ibid). A deep consciousness of the economic undercurrents of urban life characterises the greater part of Kolatkar’s oeuvre. Places which were previously emblematic of religious effervescence and sanctity are undercut by incursions which are distinctly commercial and consumerist in nature. Even Jejuri, a pilgrim town, is more a tourist trap than a spiritual destination. When the narrator arrives at Jejuri in a bus, the priest, the pilgrim town, in fact, the bus, too, is complicit in the deception, and all three are equally menacing and fraudulent. “The bus goes round in a circle,” writes Kolatkar describing the manner in which it enters Jejuri. “Stops inside the bus station and stands/ purring softly in front of the priest./ A cat grin on its face/ and a live, ready to eat pilgrim/ held between its teeth.” (Kolatkar, 2006, 15)

Kolatkar’s long poem “The Boatride” is an ode to the city again, but here the city materializes as an extension of the sea. An explicitly Bombay poem, Kolatkar meditates on experiences of the city which inevitably pursue and mine the water body surrounding it to yield submarine reflections. Bombay is a land reclaimed from the sea, and Kolatkar never forgets it. The sea in the poem is an entity assembled in opposition to the city, one which the
multiple subjects in the poem resort to as an escape from “flaws in stonework”, after “grappling with granite” of the city’s immutable borders. (Kolkatkar, 2006, 197) In fact, the sea’s mutability is sought as a foil for the city’s rigid contours. On the sea abounds “the confusion of hands about/ the rigging/ an off white miracle”. (ibid 197) The sea offers “a clarity of air” difficult to discover within the city’s grimy interior. Furthermore, a newly-married man finds that his desire for his new bride is transposed to the elements, and “gold/ and sunlight/ fight for the possession of her throat/ when she shifts/ in the wooden seat” (ibid 199). At sea all details of memory pleasantly blur, and reappear only when the boatride draws closer to its end signifying an elegiac return to land and to the concrete values of the city: “Familiar perspectives/ reoccupy/ a cleaner eye/ sad as a century/ the gateway of India/ struggles back to its feet/ wobbly but sober enough/ to account for itself/ details approach our memory/ ingratiatingly” (ibid 206).

Bruce King, in his essay “Two Bilingual Experimentalist: Kolatkar and Chitre”, comments that, “In ‘The Boatride’ an ordinary trip around Bombay harbour is treated by Kolatkar as both incredibly boring and as a source of wonder while the poet observes and sometimes fantasises upon the trivial and stereotypical. The trivial is viewed with a coolness which curiously creates a complexity of tone, while the poet as observer will suddenly imagine other possibilities for the scene, especially of a surreal or incongruous manner. Kolatkar is aware as a visual artist that a slight manipulation of sight lines, of angle vision, can defamiliarise and turn into art what is normally regarded as dull, commonplace reality. By taking an odd, non-committal tone and by bringing in unusual perspectives Kolatkar turns the commonplace into an aesthetic experience, using the ordinary as the basis of art”(King, 2004, 165).

Kolatkar is interested in precisely this aesthetic of the ordinary where details of the everyday are reinvigorated continually by the poet’s eye instead of being investigated by a gaze which has already turned apathetic. Consequently, his poetry conjures up a plethora of images which reinvents the city and attempts to decipher it for what it is even amid its tremendous clutter of buildings, people, roads and filth the same way the seagull in ‘the boatride’ “invents/ on the spur of the air/ what is clearly the whitest inflection/ known”(Kolatkar, 2006, 200).
Although the exploration of urban spaces through the cityscape and divergences of language, culture, religion and geographies is an all-pervasive motif in Kolatkar’s writing, his collection of poems on Bombay’s art district Kala Ghoda, titled *Kala Ghoda Poems* best embodies this motif; the collection consists of several sequences of poems (“Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda”, “The Shit Sermon”, “The Rat Poison Man’s Lunch Hour”, “Man of the Year”, to name a few) which constitute an exposition on Kala Ghoda: the intricacies and textures of the lives and modes of living of those who populate the district. The opening sequence Pi-dog thwarts the reader’s expectations by positing that – as opposed to what the convention would have us believe – geographies need not be owned or given expression only through the media of specific human subjects, or necessarily take shape within a human consciousness, but can be and continually are appropriated by the proliferating excess of non-human components which occupy them: not just inanimate objects but animals – wild, domesticated, stray, and those that have taken to the city adapting to its various whims with as much ease as a human city-dweller. “This is the time of the day I like best/ and this the hour/ when I can call this city my own; […] when it’s deserted early in the morning,/ and I’m the only sign/ of intelligent life on the planet” (Kolatkar, 2006, 15) says the pi-dog at a time when the inrush of people and their automobiles, bilious clouds of smoke and crowds surging past purposefully on their daily engagements haven’t yet overpowered the streets; in a sense the non-human sections of the city can reclaim it only during the wee hours of the day or very late into the night when the city resumes, at least partially, a pristine stature.

This poem, like several in the collection, devotes its attentions to excavating origins across temporal and spatial disjuncts, and like many others, is about reclamations – of lost lands, lost mythologies, lost accounts of history. It is as much about recovering lost pasts as about reconstructing them from fragments of memory and fact, both of which are equally unreliable but seductive in their promise of a coherent self-narrative. “I like to trace my descent/ – no proof of course, just a strong family tradition – / matrilineally, to the only bitch that proved/ tough enough to have survived,” says the pi-dog somewhat smugly in the third part of the sequence, “first, the long voyage, and then the wretched weather here/ – a combination/ that killed the rest of the pack/ of thirty foxhounds,/ imported all the way from England” (ibid 17).
the other hand, the pi-dog claims, “On my father’s side/ the line goes back to
the dog that followed/ Yudhishthira” (ibid 18), as if to say that it is a perfect
amalgamation of both chronicles of mythology and religion yet simultaneously
embodying modern narratives of globalisation – an identity that most city-
dwellers in India hanker after – hence revealing a possibility that the larger
aspirations of the city have explicitly leaked into the fabric of the lives of all it
contains.

Kala Ghoda Poems is also a demonstration of the act of flanerie – here,
a specifically Bombay flanerie. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra acknowledges as
much in his “Introduction to The Boatride and Other Poems” commenting
that, “In 1962, when he wrote 'Irani Restaurant Bombay', Kolatkar wouldn't
have read Walter Benjamin's essays, which were not then available to the
Anglophone world, nor would he have heard of the arcade-haunting Parisian
flaneur. But as Bombay loafers himself, someone who daily trudged the city's
footpaths, particularly the area of Kala Ghoda, he would have recognised the
figure” (ibid 22). Kala Ghoda Poems consists of the poetry of the ordinary as
much as the poetry of the peripheries – from crows, old bicycle tyres,
watermelons, to darker subjects like prostitution, poverty, death and
hauntings, the collection spans the marginalia of the city.

Often scatological and overtly sexual, the poems, in their language and
imagery expressly evoke the murkier side of human nature, and the city too is
annexed into its dismal syntax; but the poems constantly defy expectations and
disallow the subject to obscure poetic possibilities. In fact, for Kolatkar, the
city comes alive and is most exuberant in its murk and filth. In the poem A
Note on the Reproductive Cycle of Rubbish, Kolatkar remarks that rubbish
may initially look beguiling, but one has to look beyond first impressions to
gauge its true nature. “It may not look like much./ But watch out/ when
rubbish meets rubbish/” because it is at that point of contact that rubbish
turns fertile, waits “Patiently./ Copulates with the winner.” (ibid 35) In
another poem sequence titled “Meera” Kolatkar writes of a “fresh new series of
installations” which go on display “in the form of modest piles of rubbish/all
along the kerb”: thus, for Kolatkar, garbage is replete with artistic value, and in
fact, for a city which is expanding unapologetically leaving the debris of its
former self and its appendages to form a residue at its peripheries – all the
while fluctuating persistently between innumerable veneers – garbage is
plausibly the perfect art installation to appropriately express its shifting states of being.

In another instance, the third section of the poem Knucklebones is addressed to a woman, where the poet begins, “You get up with a big smile on your bum./ Your sari wears a grin/ where your buttocks have sucked it in” indicating that the overtly sexual character of many of Kala Ghoda’s inhabitants does not detract but rather irrevocably forms a part of it: one’s sexuality is not something one needs to apologise for, but instead acknowledge, even celebrate. When the woman stands, it isn’t just her sari, “it’s time itself that feels the pinch,” but she shows great presence of mind and straightens her sari out, and the poet concludes, “time unpuckers when you smooth your behind.” (ibid 69)

But ultimately, the poet persona’s tone is elegiac, for having lost a beloved city to the throes of an expanding population and urbanisation which has left the city crippled, now possessing a mere shadow of its former glories. In the seventh section of the poem-sequence titled David Sassoon, the poetic persona angrily berates the city “that gets/ more and more unrecognisable/ with every passing year”, “a cement-eating blood-guzzling city/ pissing silver, shitting gold,/ and choking on its vomit.” He mourns its loss – a loss which he is compelled to witness as it occurs. “I find myself prisoner once again,/ [...] and forced to watch/ the slow disintegration of a city/ I cared about more than any other.” (ibid 148) Thus Kolatkar’s poetry is a tribute to a city which changes mercilessly under his gaze, a city which does not relieve its inhabitants of the sorrow of returning to an unrecognisable past. In Kolatkar’s Bombay homecoming is impossible, at least not in the true sense of the word, because his city has already been corroded and is beyond repair. If he returns it will only be to a wrong home, a misplaced nostalgia, a place disfigured by an unforgivingly cruel, misshapen memory.
References