

RAJEEV S. PATKE

Literary Modernism in Asia: Pramoedya and Kolatkar

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I MODERNISM VERSUS MODERNITY

Modernism is a large, loose, and baggy monster of a term, which struggles to encompass a diverse set of creative practices and cultural assumptions with European origins and a field of reference that has since become unevenly global. I propose to use the example of two writers from outside Europe in order to argue that the tension between artistic modernism and societal modernisation characteristic of European culture in the early part of the twentieth century is reproduced — or, more precisely, transfigured — in postcolonial contexts during the latter half of the twentieth century in differential ways that go beyond the initial correspondence or indebtedness to European forebears.

My argument is based on the widely recognised distinction between modernism as a phenomenon which found its most concentrated expression in European and American art during the early decades of the twentieth century, and modernity or modernisation as the historical realisation of the European Enlightenment project of instrumental rationality, with progress as its goal, and the technological rationalisation of nature and human institutions as its means.

Modernism as a cultural referent suffers from the effect of several ironies. Its efficacy as a descriptive term remains overshadowed by the fact that it is a retrospective nomination, described vividly by Stan Smith as ‘a movement constituted backwards, like Beckett’s series of doggy obituaries, the new dog endlessly buried for the sake of

dogs to come' (240). The notion of 'modern' implies a link with the 'new', the 'contemporary', and 'the avant-garde'. Yet, as Raymond Williams noted laconically, 'What was 'modern', what was indeed 'avant-garde', is now relatively old' (Williams 52). Thus 'modern' is balanced equivocally between a denotation that is historically specific and a connotation that evokes perpetual novelty. More seriously, theorists of diverse ideological persuasions, ranging from American New Criticism to the European intellectual Left as exemplified by Lukács and Adorno, have identified aesthetic autonomy as one of the principal traits unifying most forms of modernism. However, as noted by Peter Bürger in the 1970s, the post-Romantic modernist myth of the autonomy of art inhibits analysis of its aesthetics as 'the normative instrumentality of an institution in bourgeois society' (lii). This repression becomes particularly noticeable when modernism is transplanted outside Europe, where its role as an aesthetic principle cannot avoid engagement with the very different social formations and political ideologies it encounters in postcolonial societies and nations, as I hope to illustrate later.

The autonomy imputed to modernism is misleading in yet another respect: as a movement affecting the arts, modernism is often treated as if it were largely unrelated to the older and concurrent phenomenon of European colonialism. Yet, as many commentators have reiterated, modernist art provides ample evidence for a significant relation between its aesthetic strategies and the impact of colonialism on the cultures of the colonising nations.

In Europe, the relation between modernism and modernisation either generated what Perry Anderson calls 'cultural despair' (28), which can be illustrated from a diverse range of writers from Weber to Ortega, Eliot to Tate, and Leavis to Marcuse, or it subsidised various forms of utopian optimism, from Marinetti to Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller to Marshall McLuhan. When modernism is transposed outside

Europe, the antithesis between despair and utopianism is reproduced in intensified form, and accompanied by several additional ironies.

II MODERNISM AND COLONIALISM

The first irony to the perpetuation of modernist practices outside Europe and the USA is that both the agonistic and the emancipative aspects of modernism were mediated to cultures and societies outside Europe through colonialism, whose institutions were always equivocal between exploiting and educating their colonies. While modernist writing and art were either ambivalent or critical towards the spirit of colonialism, their influence could not have spread to regions outside the West without colonialist institutions and mind-sets. This means that the spirit of radical individualism and experiment that is central to modernism traveled to the colonies and the newly-independent nations of the mid-twentieth century belatedly, either as imitation, or as the local and belated re-enactment of the dialectic between modernity and modernism whose characteristic preoccupations had first developed in the context of European societies and cultures. The transposition raises a question that affects every theory of modernity: is it to be treated as an undifferentiated and global phenomenon, or are its various asynchronous manifestations culture-specific? That is, does modernisation follow the logic of its development regardless of cultural difference, or does it undergo modifications relative to cultural difference?

In a recent essay on 'Two Theories of Modernity', Charles Taylor recommends *cultural* — as opposed to the more widely prevalent *acultural* — explanations of modernity. The *acultural* approach supports the assumption 'that modernity comes from a single, universally applicable operation', and thus 'imposes a falsely uniform pattern on the multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the exigencies of science,

technology, and industrialisation' (Taylor 180). In contrast, Taylor argues, a *cultural* explanation is better able to recognise that 'transitions to what we might recognise as modernity, taking place in different civilisations, will produce different results that reflect their divergent starting points' (182). The differences are not merely a matter of belated derivativeness. Modernism, as Anderson notes, was 'a complex set of aesthetic practices', and 'the product of a historically unstable form of society and an undecided epoch' (53). When reproduced outside the West, its strategies have had to respond and adapt to instabilities of a different nature from those confronted by writers like Conrad, Eliot, Valéry, Joyce, Mann, Pound, or Faulkner.

European modernism is equivocal in its attitude to three major issues: colonialism, gender, and the political Right. The anomaly in respect to gender has several consequences for any narrative of modernism. Bonnie Scott, in *Refiguring Modernism*, draws attention to how 'the men of modernism, from Pound through Forster, did not have a framework that could include or contain Woolf, West, and Barnes' (179). As for the reactionary politics of modernism, Pericles Lewis notes, 'The political paradox of modernism was that literary experiment sometimes participated in the turn to authoritarian nationalism of a d'Annunzio, but just as often led to the cosmopolitan reevaluation of national identity implicit in the multilingual punning of *Finnegan's Wake*' (211). When modernist practices are imitated or adapted outside Europe, such equivocations acquire a very different cultural resonance, which supports Charles Taylor's recommendation that modernism is better accounted for as a plurality of culture-specific phenomena.

The second irony to modernism is that while its European manifestations (as in Conrad or Eliot) exposed a dark underside to the Enlightenment will to progress, the historically belated assimilation of colonised societies into the project of modernity did

not permit their writers a corresponding degree of scepticism about the Utopian elements of that project, either in terms of postcolonial nationhood, or the asymmetrical development of capitalist globalisation.

The third irony to modernism is that while its European manifestations — from Gauguin to Picasso, or Lawrence to Eliot — drew upon the otherness of the non-European in transforming its self-image, non-European modernisms could hardly do the same. Instead, they have often ended up discovering or inventing oppositional alterities from within their own cultures. As remarked by John Jarvis in *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*, ‘The other ... retains the capacity not just to inspire fear, but to tempt and fascinate. Disgust and desire can be very close’ (1). My examples will attempt to show how the dialectical play between disgust and fascination in modernist writing outside Europe generates typologies which differ markedly from the role played by the non-European Other in European modernism.

The converse generates a fourth irony. If Europe was busy imaging itself indirectly through its many Others, the colonised were busy trying to gain assimilation into Eurocentric modes, and one of the ways this could be done, as noted by Simon Gikandi, was for ‘colonised writers to use forms and figures borrowed from European modernism as a point of entry into certain aspects of Western culture’ (15–16). Even if many European modernists may have nursed reservations about colonialism, the influence of modernism outside Europe thus became complicit with a very different agenda, which inadvertently fed the growth of Europe’s continued cultural dominance in a post-imperial era.

Having described modernism as a complex notion riddled with ironies, I propose to examine the implications of the general claims sketched above with reference to the novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer (from Indonesia), and the poet Arun Kolatkar (from India). I propose to argue that in the narratives of Pramoedya, we encounter a tension between modernism as a form of narrative technique and modernisation as a form of socio-historical necessity. In Kolatkar's case, a surreal poetics grapples with an internalised disenchantment with tradition that is empowered by a habit of skepticism derived from post-Enlightenment rationality. Kolatkar comes from the kind of Sanskritic culture invoked by a modernist like T.S. Eliot. Ironically, it takes an outsider like Eliot to make a value of that which evinces distaste and satire from an insider like Kolatkar. The rapt and needy Orientalism of Eliot turned from his time and place to the Brahmanical pieties of Indic culture for succor and 'Shantih'. In reverse analogy, Kolatkar berates the internal colonisation practiced on Indian society by its Brahmanical belief systems. Eliot's distraught disbelief drew grateful sustenance from Indic religions; Kolatkar derives his sardonic and subversive attitude from European models of post-Enlightenment skepticism. The two examples will suggest the more general conclusion that the predicaments of modernism outside Europe become radical transpositions of the ambivalent relation between modernity and modernism in Europe.

III PRAMOEDYA: THE PRICE OF SOCIAL MODERNITY

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* (comprising *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps* and *House of Glass*) was composed during a fourteen year detention in a work camp for political prisoners on the Indonesia island of Buru. The novels have been translated into English by Max Lane, who — the Penguin edition indicates — had to leave the Australian embassy in Jakarta in 1981 for having translated

Pramoedya. The narrative began as orally composed stories told by Pramoedya to his fellow-prisoners when he had no access to his papers or to writing materials. They were eventually transcribed over the period from 1975 to the late 1980s. That a writer so dedicated to the cause of the idea of nation should be imprisoned by an incarnation of that nation, and his books banned by successive nationalist regimes, constitutes one of the abiding ironies of postcolonial nationhood in Southeast Asia.

The quartet offers a complex and ambitious dramatisation of the impact of, and resistance to, Dutch colonial rule in the East Indies over a period ranging from the 1880s to the 1920s. As a sequence, it provides acute historical analysis in the form of a fictional chronicle. It also represents an instance of what I propose to describe as a specific kind of post-modernist writing, while conceding that ‘post-modernist’ as a term is even more problematic than ‘modernist’, especially when applied to writing outside Europe or the West. It is used here in the specific and dual sense of writing which assimilates — while remaining distinct from and subsequent to — modernist practices.

Pramoedya’s novels may have had their origins in oral story-telling, but the narrative they constitute is marked by a distinctive self-reflexivity which aligns them firmly with the conscious and writerly manipulation of narrative point-of-view. The manner in which distance in attitude and tone is modulated — between implied author and implied reader, and between author, reader and the fictional narrator — would not be possible without the implication of a written text, patterned to point up contrasts that would be difficult to sustain in oral narrative.

The *Buru Quartet* is narrated from the point-of-view of two dramatically opposed protagonists. This technique has antecedents in the multiple narrative perspectives exploited by novelists such as James, Ford Madox Ford, Conrad, and Virginia Woolf. In

this context, the notion of ‘antecedents’ is meant to suggest a technical lineage and a set of elective affinities, rather than direct influence. In an interview published in *Michigan Today* (1999), Pramoedya singled out Steinbeck and Saroyan as his admired authors, adding that he learnt English by reading Steinbeck.

The first three novels adopt a first-person mode which familiarises the reader to the life and early career of an individual of exceptional qualities, called Minke, whose character is partially based on an historical person who pioneered journalism in the Dutch Indies. He is portrayed as growing — and then outgrowing — the potentially modernising influence of a Dutch colonial education, a process of intellectual maturation initiated by a woman, Nyai Ontosoroh, the mother of his first wife, and an individual whose acumen transcends her own ethnic and gendered subordination in Javanese society, as the mistress of a Dutch businessman. Pramoedya indicates in his interview for *Michigan Today* that this woman was modelled on his own mother.

The claim confirms what the early part of the quartet dramatises: the heroic role played by the intuitive and alert woman of exceptional quality, who will show the incipient male leader the path that can lead to his political destiny. Ironically, therefore, the colonies give scope for a more untrammelled politicisation of the impulse to freedom from oppression than found, for example, in D.H. Lawrence’s fictional women, or in Virginia Woolf’s wounded call in *Three Guineas*, which advises the women of England to withhold support for British participation in the impending World War because their real enemy was not Germany but patriarchy.

Pramoedya’s narrative creates characters who articulate a very precise awareness of their own position in relation to colonial history. They also provide a concrete instance of the general claim made in the first part of my argument that modernism came to Asia

as part of colonial influence. In Pramoedya's case, it shows itself primarily in terms of narrative technique. His narrative focuses on a familiar historical irony: that the incipient leadership from the colonised parts of Asia learned to demand political freedom from the European nations who denied them that freedom but taught them to recognise its worth. It also provides incidental confirmation for the general plausibility of the hypothesis proposed by Fredric Jameson, that colonial writing is characterised by fictions which allegorise the nation. This is an accurate description of a tendency in works like the *Buru Quartet*. Jameson's argument has been challenged by Aijaz Ahmad (1986), but it finds incidental support from Pramoedya, who affirmed, in an interview given to the *Los Angeles Times* (1999): 'I believe that my books, such as the *Buru Quartet*, are part of the process of nation-building'.

Minke becomes a focal point for the growth of nationalist opposition to colonial rule. He first learns to modernise his approach to his own society and its outmoded conventions of thought, belief and practice. He then learns to politicise resistance to colonialism, which happens to be the agent of his transformation. The novel treats his will to modernity with a cautious and increasingly post-modern scepticism. The political drive animated through Minke is problematised by virtue of its European derivativeness. In a double irony repeated throughout the colonial world, the modern patriot learns to ask for self-rule from the European nation who denies him access to the freedom it cherishes for itself. To find parallels or antecedents to this phenomenon within European modernism we have to go to a writer like W.B. Yeats, whose commitment to Irish Revivalism — and his later disenchantment with it — remind us that Ireland was England's first (and remains its last) overseas colony.

The fourth and final part of the quartet, *House of Glass* (1988), refracts and partially subverts the foregoing narrative by shifting the narrative persona from Minke to a self-

serving police commissioner, Pangemanann, who plots against Minke at the behest of his Dutch masters, and brings about his downfall. The novel's self-reflexivity extends to the relation between Minke and Pangemanann, who embody divergent viewpoints on Javanese history, in such a way that the fourth novel sharply undercuts what Minke has come to represent through the first three novels.

Pramoedya may be said to engage in a dialogic meditation on the problems besetting the advent of a modernity mediated to his society by Dutch colonialism. His analysis is rooted to the specific social formations of Javanese history, confirming the plausibility of the claim introduced above through Taylor, that modernity is *cultural* rather than *acultural* in its formations. The *Quartet* begins by foregrounding Minke; by the end it has foregrounded the problems that beset his kind of optimism. As suggested by John David Morley in *The New York Times Book Review*, 'Manoeuvred into the background by the plot, he [Minke] is not the book's true subject — nor is it really the historical awakening of Indonesia. Rather, the author's chief concern here is with the corrupting influence of colonialism, represented by Pangemanann' (online).

The specific irony around which Pramoedya develops the relation between the hunter and the hunted is that Pangemanann is apparently sincere in his admiration for the man he destroys: 'I would now have to spy on and take actions against this man whom I respected and honoured so much' (*House of Glass*, 8). This tortured character sets up a kind of one-sided, Conrad-like, secret-sharer complex with his victim (a regard unreciprocated by Minke). This technical device gives Pramoedya the opportunity to examine the underside of the double-edged modernity inculcated by colonialism in the Javanese. Pangemanann is articulate not only about his admiration for Minke, but also about his disgust at his own commitment to the ruination of this potentially heroic figure. Pangemanann says of himself: 'They would never know how he had to bow

down, with his tortured conscience, becoming, against his will, a man without principles' (46).

He is endowed with an analytic frame of mind that is merciless in exposing his own inner corruption. He is living proof that modernity is not the only thing learnt from Europe by the Javanese. His introspections provide the novelist with a vehicle for a sustained analysis of the complex relation between colonialism and the tainted or incomplete modernity it engenders. Pangemanann becomes the mouthpiece for the expression of an embittered irony:

The great teachers beautifully taught about the enlightenment of the world that would be brought by the Renaissance, the *Aufklärung*, about the awakening of humanism, about the overthrow of one class by another that was begun with the French Revolution when the feudal class was removed by the bourgeoisie. They called on the people to side with the progressive march of history. And meanwhile, I was sinking into the disgusting colonial mud. (46–47)

On the one hand, colonial modernity stands for the capacity to foster reason, the rule of law, a love of liberty, and a respect for organisation and order in governance; on the other hand, it has the disabling capacity to foster disjunctions between righteous principles and their duplicitous implementation. Pramoedya thus sets up an antithetical relation between modernism as a mode of historically self-conscious narrative and modernisation as the mixed blessing of historical necessity. In the downfall of Minke, he ends the quartet on a note of pessimism that is bleak without being hopeless.

The dual narrative strategy adopted for the *Quartet* as a whole dramatises several types of complicity: between indigenous nationalism and the elite colonial education system; between women as the agents of modernity and as the victims of patriarchy, ethnocentrism, and colonialism; between colonial rule as the enabler and the disabler of social revolution; between the colonised intellectual as enlightened analyst of his society, and its self-serving, self-loathing subverter. The sequence leaves the reader with

a deeply ambiguous sense of what modernity has entailed for Javanese society, and by extension, for other colonial societies on the cusp of similar changes.

Pramoedya conveys, in no uncertain terms, the inevitability and desirability of modernity, but he is also insistent on its cost to traditional modes of life in Java. A post-modernist technique is deployed to present a view of peoples before they have learnt to recognise themselves as modern nations. In this proleptic and minatory perspective, the complex relations between agency, power, and victimisation are shown as ominously poised between progress and misrule. A narrative technique derived from modernism is applied with great skill and force to open the anxiety that modernity might be a flawed but necessary blessing. Or, to put it differently, the novelist acknowledges and blesses modernity as a flawed necessity.

IV KOLATKAR AND THE UNEASY PLEASURES OF MODERNITY

Kolatkár studied art before taking up a professional career in advertising and the graphic arts in Mumbai (the covers of his books are based on his designs). He began writing poems during the 1950s: first in Marathi, then in English and from Marathi into English, and also the other way round. By the 1960s, his sparse output had acquired a coterie reputation among poets in Marathi. This was transformed into wider local and international recognition when the English-language *Jejuri* (1976) won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. *Jejuri* remains the single most striking sequence of poems in English written by an Indian. It was followed in 1977 by a collection of his Marathi poems. A long gap of over thirty years ensued before the Marathi poems of the intervening years were collected in *Cirimiri* (2003). The English poems and adaptations since 1977 remained uncollected for a long time, giving his career a certain throwaway

quality that is not without its Dadaesque elements. The publication of *Sarpa Satra* and *Kala Ghoda* in 2004 (in English), concurrent with the publication of another Marathi volume, made 2003 and 2004 the *annus mirabilis* of his career.

The notion of ‘Kolatkhar the poet’ begs a question: which Kolatkhar? Any attempt at an answer must avoid splitting the English from the Marathi writing. Kolatkhar’s subject matter remains Indian, whether in English or Marathi; his two languages handle Indian preoccupations with attitudes influenced by modern Western art and poetry. This remains true of the poems in either language. What differs is the ease with which cultural and social connotations evoked in Marathi have to look — with varying degrees of success — for equivalences in English. Kolatkhar’s bilingualism, therefore, provides an opportunity to test the question of how — or how far — modernist practices can be transposed from one language and culture into another.

Poetry in Marathi came into its own in the thirteenth century. The tradition is distinguished by a genealogy of poet-saints from Dnyaneshwar (13th century AD) to Tukaram (17th century AD), who promoted forms of devotion that gave voice to the plight of the underdog, and offered resistance to the caste-system that still dominates Indian society. Kolatkhar relates to this tradition in an ambivalent spirit. Like them, he rebels against the inert weight of tradition; but he also subscribes to a trust in rationality and scepticism that is at least in part a legacy of the introduction of post-Macaulay-1835 models of Western education into India. In that sense, the modernity of outlook that alienates him from aspects of his own society is comparable to that dramatised by Pramodya in Minke. In Kolatkhar’s case, an old and internal Indian enemy — Brahmanism — is resisted with the aid of two unlikely allies: subaltern vernacular poetry, and Western modernist art practice.

what is god
and what is stone
the dividing line
is very thin
at jejuri

(*Jejuri* 28)

Jejuri dramatises a mood of alienation from the dereliction of the Hindu modes of worship prevalent in Maharashtra, as exemplified by the worship of a shrine at Jejuri, which is thirty miles from the city of Pune. Modern irony excoriates idol-worship, superstition, corruption and decay. But the poet has no alternative to sardonic melancholy. He has nothing to fill the void left by unbelief. The faith that animated the oral tradition of Marathi poetry is gone, even though the memory of its simplicity, directness, honesty, integrity, and resilience remains as an elective affinity, now turned inside out. Like them, Kolatkar would like to resist the weight of hypocrisy and cant, but what can he rely on? He turns to irony, irreverence, and a spirit of anarchy borrowed and adapted from a specific corner of the Modernist spectrum. All those who have written on Kolatkar agree on his Western debts. For instance, Philip Engblom, who teaches Marathi at the University of Chicago, and translates Marathi poetry into English, highlights the degree to which Kolatkar's poetry had its origins in a Marathi rebel fringe which drew its inspiration from a miscellany of influences ranging from 'the European Dadaists, Futurists, and Surrealists to the contemporary Beats of the United States' (online).

Kolatkar's bilingualism refracts facets of the relationship between modernity and modernism not exemplified by Pramoedya. The Javanese novelist applies an analytic and sombre cast of mind to the political dimensions of colonial modernity. The Indian poet is much less overtly political. His art is gnomic and glancing. It takes the risk of appearing facetious in order to avoid the semblance of earnestness. It risks appearing socially uncommitted. It does not hide its alienation. It also wears its post-modernism

flamboyantly on its sleeve. Yet the aggressive nonchalance of its style barely conceals a troubled sensibility. Kolatkar may be described as flirting with the kind of predicament dramatised by Stevie Smith in 'not waving but drowning'. This unsettling quality can be illustrated from a poem which, after evoking the busy passage of a motorcade through an urban setting, ends on a characteristic note of surreal emptiness that is reminiscent of the urban nightscapes of de Chirico:

... traffic lights
that seem to have eyes only for each other
and who like ill-starred lovers
fated never to meet
but condemned to live forever and ever
in each other's sight
continue to send signals to each other
throughout the night
and burn with the cold passion of rubies
separated by an empty street.
(2004b: 162)

This is both fanciful and desolate, a far cry from Auden's 'September 1, 1939', in which he hoped that the wise, like 'ironic points of light', might send signals to each other and sustain humanity while Europe was darkened by the imago of Hitler. Kolatkar's modernity is a matter of attitude, or rather, of what is half-concealed beneath a habit of uneasy urbanity. He differs from Pramoedya in a number of ways: temperament, choice of genre, tone, and social context. Yet the significance of their writing converges on a common problem. Each accepts European modernity as the agent for the transformation of local sensibility (in Kolatkar's case, his own; in Pramoedya's case, that of the Javanese). Each also tackles culturally specific variations of an ethical question. This question focuses on the fate of values in a society shaped by colonial influence. In what direction are individuals and groups to shape their lives and objectives in light of their specific circumstance in time and place? What is the 'good' life or the 'right' action in the here and now of their society? In Pramoedya's case, the source of the influence is the Dutch imperial system. In the case of Kolatkar,

colonialism is encountered in two ways: positively, as access to new linguistic and formal techniques; negatively, as an internalised colonisation that turns against an older analogue, the Brahmanical imperialism of Hindu India.

Kolatkār's assimilation of modernist influence can be illustrated through a brief analysis of the following poem, whose Marathi version, 'Takta' (alphabet-chart), ends the collection *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita* (1977). I propose to examine the nuances of translation raised by the mimicry of a Shandyeian lesson in children's education through two English adaptations: one by the author, and the other by the US-based academic and poet Vinay Dharwadker. Here is the major part of Kolatkār's adaptation:

Pictures from a Marathi Alphabet Chart

Pineapple. Mother. Pants. Lemon.

Mortar. Sugarcane. Ram.

How secure they all look

each ensconced in its own separate square.

Mango. Anvil. Cup. Ganapati. Cart. House.

Medicine Bottle. Man Touching his Toes.

All very comfortable,

they all know exactly where they belong

Spoon. Umbrella. Ship. Frock.

Watermelon. Rubberstamp. Box. Cloud. Arrow.

Each one of them seems to have found

Its own special niche, a sinecure

....

The mother will not pound the baby with a pestle.

The Brahmin will not fry the duck in garlic.

That ship will not crash against the watermelon.

If the ostrich won't eat the child's frock,

The archer won't shoot an arrow in Ganapati's stomach.

And as long as the ram resists the impulse

of butting him from behind

what possible reason

could the Man-Touching-his-Toes have

to smash the cup on the tombstone?

(Kolatkar 1993: 68-9)

And these are the corresponding stanzas from Vinay Dharwadker's version:

The Alphabet

anvil arrow bow box and brahmin

cart chariot cloud and compost heap

are all sitting in their separate squares

corn cup deer duck and frock

ganesh garlic hexagon and house

all have places of their own

inkpot jackfruit kite lemon and lotus

mango medicine mother old man and ostrich

are all holding their proper positions

....

the mother won't put her baby on the compost heap
 the brahmin won't season the duck with garlic
 the yacht won't hit the watermelon and sink

unless the ostrich eats the baby's frock
 the warrior won't shoot an arrow into ganesh's belly
 and if the ram doesn't knock down the old man

why would he need to smash the cup on the tombstone
 to smash the cup on the tombstone?

(Dharwadker 1994: 116)

The two adaptations relate to one another through an 'original' that is transformed for the reader by the translator's attempt to remain 'true' to an idea of the 'original' poem. The differences between the two adaptations sensitize reading to how the idea of an 'original' holds possibilities of signification in latent form, which the act of adaptation can develop in this or that direction. The poem dramatizes several social issues, while pursuing an apparently straightforward whimsy concerning the surreal possibilities latent in a children's alphabet-chart. This familiar classroom tool introduces to children the basic building blocks of language as sounds and letters by linking them to familiar objects or persons in ordinary life. Each of the first five stanzas from the 22-line poem in Marathi begins with mimicry of a class recitation in which the nouns that correspond to the sounds of the alphabet are enumerated as a list, each sound linked for the child's benefit to an image. The resulting assortment of nouns also produces a set of random collocations, which provide the poet opportunity for playful fantasy. Nouns are placed in subject-object relations by verbs that have no care for the anarchy that results when the rules of grammar are observed without care for plausibility.

The reader has to work out the logic of the enumeration, which follows the traditional Marathi sequence of vowels and consonants. Dharwadker replaces this 'ee aa o ou' sequence with the alphabetical series of English. The logic of 'a, b, c' as a sequence gives him license to invent his own nouns: 'anvil arrow bow box and brahmin'. The words are unrelated except through orthographic and phonological accident. They happen to be nouns that begin with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. Thus 'b' might be illustrated plausibly and randomly not just with 'bow' or 'box' but 'buffalo' or 'brinjal', and so on.

Interesting things start happening when 'b' is illustrated by Dharwadker with 'brahmin'. In an Indian context, this choice is plausible but unlikely. Its subtle inappropriateness for the dramatic context makes it apt for the poetic context, because it prompts the reader to wonder why this particular illustrative noun has been selected. In contemporary experience, brahmins are more ordinary and ubiquitous than anvils or arrows or even buffalos and brinjals, yet those objects do not create the buzz of 'brahmin'. The word connotes caste, which is embedded deeper than class in India, and stirs associations that can be powerful and discomfiting. To introduce the basic divisions in Indian society as part of introducing the basic letters of an alphabet would hinder rather than aid teaching. Dharwadker capitalizes on the opportunity to drop the word into the verse line, like a pebble into a smooth pond, whereas Kolatkar uses the word much later, in his fourth stanza. In any case, 'brahmin' in English is bland and neutral, unlike Kolatkar's 'bhatji', which is comic and derogatory.

This cultural significance might not be readily accessible to readers outside India or Maharashtra. 'Bhatji' is both less and more than 'brahmin'. It refers to a priest who makes his living by performing religious rituals on behalf of other non-priestly brahmins. In other words, his caste has placed him in the indispensable position of

mediating between the community and its religion. In Kolatkar's poetic world, the brahmin is interloper, predator, and parasite. 'Bhatji' inhabits a tonal spectrum somewhere between jocular and rude. Ironically, Kolatkar belongs by birth to the brahmin caste. Marathi-speaking readers are unlikely to miss this irony, since Marathi surnames are indicators of caste affiliations. The irony of an anti-brahmin brahmin might be lost to readers unfamiliar with Marathi.

Dharwadker sharpens the effect of 'Brahmin' in English by introducing 'compost heap' in the next verse line. The recitation of an alphabet-chart is part of a system of socialization whose broader function would be compromised if one were to illustrate sound or letters with the most disconcerting nouns from contemporary society, simply because the ugly or the upsetting is as much a part of reality as the banal and the ordinary. Dharwadker pushes the playful aspects of Kolatkar's juxtapositions into a more threatening posture. Foregrounding 'brahmin' and 'compost heap' is only marginally milder than asking children to recite 'C for car-crash', or 'R for rapist', or 'S for suicide'. It induces a collusion of implications that can leave the reader wondering if Brahmanism belongs in a dumpster, since it has become an outworn and derelict institution.

The poem's satire is more evenly shared between the Marathi and the two adaptations in another respect: the pictorial convention of separating each letter and corresponding image in a box provides Kolatkar with an opportunity for mild subversion. The squares can be taken to stand for the first subliminal lesson in segregation. It becomes the first intimation, in the child's world, of the kind of classification system that created the caste-system of India. Difference and deference, uniqueness and separateness thus come together in Kolatkar's playful twist to the pedagogic exercise that he mimics. The holding of 'proper positions' appears an

innocent exercise, which keeps disorder at bay while introducing reason through the categories of knowledge.

The issue of holding positions is reiterated in the last line of the first five stanzas, like variations on a refrain. It reiterates the need to keep position as the key to ideological integration and social stability. The phrasing is richer in cultural nuance in Marathi, whereas in English, the connotations are flattened out in the interests of a smoother syntax. When nouns are activated by verbs, and grammar permits random positions for subjects and objects, the semantics that gives society its order can be derailed. The poem recognizes that the conjugations that work as grammar are an analogy to the structural or ethical foundations on which society depends for its notion of normalcy and order. The poem opens up such conventions to what we might call additional, poststructuralist conjugations.

These, if actualized, would wrench the orderliness assumed by the chart. In that sense, the poem first arouses, and then allays, fears of which the chart is either ignorant or deceptive. In the poem, the nouns of the chart move out of their secure containers, and once they start interacting, the resulting syntax creates a grammar whose semantics is both possible and inconceivable, or logically realizable but socially undesirable. The result is far more threatening than the linguist Noam Chomsky's example of an utterance that is grammatically possible even if otherwise implausible: 'green ideas sleeping furiously'.

A Shandyeen child, who starts freeing nouns from their boxes in the classroom, could go out into the world and free people from their caste or station and role in life, unleashing a huge potential for fun and disorder. The poet indulges both sides of the fantasy. Thus, mothers might throw their babies into dumpsters, brahmins might

abandon vegetarianism, ships collide with fruit and capsize, and so on. And of course, all these things do occur, though we might not want to tell children that, or at least not when they are still in alphabet-school. The poem speculates fantastically on what is conceivable once the relations that ensure stability in society are set free of conventional codes of conduct. The poem ends on a rhetorical question that remains ambiguous: if the order the child is taught will hold, then there will be no need to smash the cup (that holds and contains) on the tombstone (that bespeaks the dead). Its open-endedness leaves the door ajar for the other alternative: what if all this will not hold? The scope for anarchy inherent, concealed, or latent in the child's world is thus given recognition with a technique that balances modernist angst with postmodern insouciance.

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