



Moving lines

The celebration of impropriety and the renewal of the world in Arun Kolatkar's poetry

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I wish to pay tribute in this paper to the poetry of the bilingual Marathi-English poet Arun Kolatkar, who is still not as internationally read, studied and acclaimed as he deserves to be. Kolatkar could indeed be considered as the sharpest, most mature and talented contemporary voice of Indian poetry in English. He is also the most strikingly political and transgressive, acutely relevant in today's world.

This paper will only explore one of his collections: *Kala Ghoda Poems*, published in 2004, a few weeks before his death¹. The title of the book comes from the artistic and cultural neighbourhood of Bombay: Kala Ghoda (black horse) – the name of which refers to the statue of Edward VII which used to stand there and has now been removed. But not only does Kolatkar's poetry refuse to focus on what *used to be*, it also, like the title suggests, refuses to expurgate language, topography, geography, and identity of its historical influences, imports, so-called foreign elements, but also of the multiple experiences which have altered what India is today.

Kala Ghoda Poems is a kind of contemporary street theatre poetry, which records the successive appearances of the different characters of the Kala Ghoda traffic island - whole families of pavement dwellers, bums and lepers, grannies and crippled, children, dogs and

¹ Arun Kolatkar, *Kala Ghoda Poems*, Mumbai: Pras Prakashan, 2004.

cats, rubbish, old tyres and birds, things and objects abandoned on the sideway, on the margins both of modernization and of our ordinary perception or exclusive vision.

This conversion on the margins would be sufficient to call this work both postcolonial and political. Yet Kolatkar's poetry is, more importantly, a voice challenging all kinds of fundamentalism, which could be defined as a univocal exclusive interpretation of the written word preserved in its homogenous, static and timeless dimension. This written word often refers to a kind of mythical moment in history, or rather *before* history. Every kind of distance or evolution away from that pure, supposedly "original" state is seen as a corruption, an alteration, or an estrangement. That is why fundamentalism could be considered as a-historical, afraid of movement which breeds mixtures and uncertainty.

Fundamentalism also often defines those who believe in radical and unchanging frontiers between what is pure and impure, true and untrue, sacred and profane, self and other, inside and outside, proper and improper. Discourses, realities or modes of perception which challenge these frontiers, which spread and propagate, are thus seen as a menace by those who are afraid of moving lines – and thus of time, ambiguity, complexity. Yet, moving lines are exactly what literature is about², and are precisely the heart of Kolatkar's poetry.

His work celebrates a world and a language without borders or limits, a plastic reality which does not hold. This perpetual and unstable transgression of rigid frontiers is always synonym of creative poetic interlacing. His poetry estranges us from the world and renovates our perception, reveals the otherness and the multiplicity of reality. This estrangement subverts any kind of exclusive appropriation of one meaning, one purpose, one univocal origin, one vision, one history. Arun Kolatkar's poetry thus eludes the cultural tendencies of homogenization, petrification, exclusion and hierarchy which notably characterize the aggressively Hindu nationalist ideology, Hindutva.

In Kolatkar's work and world, everything slips and slides. The radical and immutable frontiers between what is sacred and profane, holy and unholy, but also ordinary and extraordinary are perpetually blurred. « The miracle of life itself becomes a divine thing. The tumbled bricks and broken slabs are not what make the spot holy, but wherever a bitch gives birth is probably a holy place³ », says the poet.

That is why there is undeniably a dimension of parody in his poems, in the sense that what seems like a vulgar, prosaic or commonplace reality is represented with the help of a vocabulary which imitates a "noble" text or subject. The two main "ennobling" registers

² That's also what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière tries to show in his remarkable reflexion. See for example *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible*, London: Continuum, 2004.

³ In the interview of Gowri Ramnarayan with Arun Kolatkar, « No Easy Answers », *The Hindu*, « Literary Review », Sunday, September 05, 2004 .

are taken from the most refined Sanskrit poetry, and from the vocabulary of religion, more specifically and surprisingly of catholic devotion – a way to subvert the construction of an essentialized and monolithic Hindu identity for India. However, this element of parody is not used to criticize or ridicule: it is rather an admiring instrument of transfiguration, which doesn't substitute itself to reality, or conceal it. Unlike Sanskrit poetics, where everything is considered like an image or a reflection of something else, and where poetry aims to recompose the ideal unity of a world beyond appearances⁴, words, here, don't interpret or replace what they represent. Reality is never idealized or crossed over. It is seen as it is but it is also seen through a defamiliarizing eye which renovates our perception. Let's also keep in mind that what *is*, in Kolaktar's poetry, is simultaneously in the process of *becoming*, and thus always also *other*.

The old "pipe-smoking mama" becomes Parameshwari, in the eponymous poem, the other name for the fearsome Hindu divinity, Durga; in the poem "Lice", the young woman delousing a man is sitting on top of a concrete block "as if it were a throne" in front of her courtiers, her fairy fingers dance in the air "like sparrows" and fly over the head of her lover who has become a "harp in her hands". The young girl sitting in the shade of the secular banyan in the poem "Kerosene" is the "pregnant queen of tarts" who has "maids of honour" for friends and who "folds her cards like a Japanese fan". The kerosene boy she runs after is like a worshipping and deferent suitor "[who] bows to the lady, and asks her / to follow him to the back of the cart, / with an airy wave of his hand." In the long central poem "Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda" the woman offering the sacrament of idlis (a kind of Indian rice cake), like the host during communion, received by the whole traffic island community gathering around her, is christened "Our Lady of Idlis". And the idlis themselves are "lying like an infant Krishna".

The parody is quite explicit in the poem "The Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads", where the images used to represent the young woman drying her hair on the pavement are strongly reminiscent of refined classic Sanskrit poetry. These images almost function like lexicalised metaphors. The sun "flutters / like a hummingbird before her navel / and drinks up / a sparkling drop of water / like nectar from a buttercup". The drops of water she scatters around her "dart about like rainbow-tailed moths", and the hair she piles on top of her head is rolled up "like a great white conch".

⁴ « Reality was not to be sought through personal sensory apprehension of our changing empirical world, but beyond it to one that is permanent and ideal. One way the latter could be apprehended was through language that matches the ideal in its permanence and perfection. That language was Sanskrit in its poetic mode. Poems, then, were a way of experiencing the reality beyond appearance », Leonard Nathan, *The Transport of Love, The Meghaduta of Kalidasa*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p. 3. « Nothing stands alone or by itself in Indian art – everything is in some way typical and has an inherent symbolic value », Kapil Kapoor, *Language, Linguistics and Literature, the Indian perspective*, New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 1994, p. 167.

In the poem “Meera”, the sweeper-lady is not only the contemporary embodiment of the woman *bhakti*⁵ devotional poet Meerabai but also christened “Our Lady of Dead Flowers”. And the piles of rubbish become plastic works of art under her feet, kneaded and transfigured by the woman who gets carried away in a kind of extatic trance, “like a Meera before her Lord / a Meera with a broomstick for a luth” The coconut frond becomes the enchanted partner of a bewitching dance which oscillates between tango, waltz and skating: the instrument of a sacred choreography, full of grace. In the two last movements of the poem, the rhythm slowly slackens, dance is transformed into a prayer, contemplative and devotional: « shifting her weight / from one foot to the other, / she turns around herself / by slow degrees, / giving her toes / enough time / to genuflect and offer obeisance ». Time is in a sense suspended, and the sacred litany supposed to recite the theological qualities of God, becomes, through a parodic reversal, the material litany of things, wastes, rubbish, garbage.

As they sink deeper
into themselves,
eggshells and dead flowers,

dry leaves and melon rinds,
breadcrumbs and condoms,
chicken bones and potato peels

start giving off their essence,
exude the wine
of worthlessness, express

an attar of thankfulness
that floods
the cracks on her heels,

licks the soles
and arches of her feet,
anoints

callouses,
and rises
between her toes

This blurring of the frontiers is thus also enacted by the transfiguration of matter – which is typical of Kolatkar’s world and poetry. Reality is plastic, loose and fluid in this collection. Characteristically, what is solid becomes liquid and immaterial. There is a conversion of matter and even, since the vocabulary of catholic rituality is so prominent, a

⁵ North India *Bhakti* is a powerful movement of popular devotion which developed from the 13th to the 18th century. *Bhakti* poets included women and low castes, Dalits and ostracized Brahmins. They expressed themselves in the regional dialects, and not in Sanskrit, in an oral, popular and sometimes rough language. Their poetry has been interpreted as subaltern and subversive, and as representing a compelling movement of opposition against Brahmin orthodoxy. See for example «*The Sants* », *Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, eds. Karine Schomer & W. Hew McLeod, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987 or *Bhakti Religion in North India, Community Identity and Political Action*, ed. David. N. Lorenzen, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995.

kind of transubstantiation taking place. In « Song of Rubbish », rubbish is fertilized and transmuted, just like the grapes and clay which are also present in the poem: « Grapes, / as vineyard wenches crush them underfoot, / aspire to greater glory [...] / Clay, / as a potter treads it, hopes to rise again », or the milk of the young fifteen year old mother in « Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda », who converts the idlis she eats into milk for her baby : « a miracle / she alone / can perform ».

This blurring of the frontiers between what is holy and unholy, ordinary and marvellous is also linked to the point of view or the focalization adopted. The time of Kolatkar's poetry is the utmost contemporary. His writing is characterized by the overwhelming use of the present tense and the present progressive and by the insistence on the simultaneous immediacy of the scenes taking place, almost contemporary to the writing itself.

The sacred is revealed here and now. It is not where it is usually expected to be (enclosed or walled in the limits circumscribed by orthodoxy or by moribund rituals). Reality is exposed in the marvellous immediacy of an immanence which is always also impermanence. By definition, the present is fleeting: you cannot settle or hold to a present which is *in via*. And it is this transient and evanescent locus (not the mummified past nor the ideological future) which is the unstable moving ground on which Arun Kolatkar's poetic world resides.

His writing thus celebrates the temporary and the provisional. In “Silver Triangle” for example, it is the precarious hairstyle of the little girl which attracts the enunciator's attention, through an oxymoric formulation, “that droopy ribbon, for instance, has been **steadily losing** its hold / on what used to be / a pigtail”. What is worthy of attention is not what *used* to be, but what *is*, however precarious, incomplete or inadequate.

Miracles and epiphanies bloom in a flash then disappear - just like these piles of rubbish in the poem “Meera” which never cease to get formed, reformed, deformed, and then evaporate : « The exhibition is open / for no more than about half an hour / every morning. [...] Which is the whole point, really. / To celebrate / the essential impermanence of all art ».

In the long central poem “Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda”, the enunciator records, one after the other, all the successive appearances of the characters of this traffic island, on the stage of which the world converges, appears and vanishes. This sudden gathering « shimmering with the joy of living » leaves behind a kind of aura or reflection: « a sort of after-image, a glow, / lingers behind / for a while after she packs up and leaves » (30). The enunciator blurs the frontiers between what is real and unreal and plays on the miraculous

dimension of this gathering, like a mirage, or like the imaginary vision that would be stirred by the words of a fable or a tale.

The pop-up cafeteria
disappears
like a castle in a children's book

- along with the king and the queen,
the courtiers,
the court jester and the banqueting hall,

the roast pheasants and the suckling pigs,
as soon as the witch
shuts the book on herself-

The poet thus plays on the expectations of the supernatural and of fantasy in literature: the fairy tales or heroic stories of knights, kings and queens. All the necessary « accessories » and characters of this genre are present in the collection. But in Kolatkar's poetic universe, neither the sacred nor the supernatural are to be found in their conventional places, neither in books nor in the world of the wealthy and the powerful. But by the side of all those who live on the pavements of Kala Ghoda - where you, literally, find plenty of kings, queens, princesses, saints, maids of honour, but also ogresses and witches, pirates and hunchbacks. Arun Kolatkar replaces the bookish supernatural by an ordinary and transient enchantment where beauty opens up, displays itself and then fades away, just like the embodied book of the Kala Ghoda neighbourhood or the butterfly which unfurls its wings and vanishes in the collection *Jejuri*⁶ :

There is no story behind it.
It is split like a second.
It hinges around itself.

It has no future.
It is pinned down to no past.
It's a pun on the present.

It's a little yellow butterfly.
It has taken these wretched hills
under its wings.

Just a pinch of yellow,
it opens before it closes
and closes before it o

where is it

Because the impermanent and evolving present is the object of his poetry, Arun Kolatkar's work is also characterized by an extreme vigilance to everything that is. His

⁶ Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri*, Mumbai: Pras Prakashan, 2006 [1978].

meticulous vision takes in all the details of the world. The complexity and heterogeneity of reality in its infinite particularities and singularities is never subsumed or concealed under a kind of organic, compact and total unity or knowledge. Reality does not only perpetually form and deform itself, it is also decomposed, and thus estranged from us. The Russian formalist Viktor Chklovski talks about the defamiliarizing quality of art: “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as vision and not as recognition or knowledge⁷”. Art thus frees the object or the world from the kind of “automatic perception” to which conventions or habits condemn it. It helps us to look at reality as it is, and not as it was, as it is supposed to be, or as we are accustomed to see it. This attention renovates our perception. What seemed to an unpoetic, un-artistic eye, as simple, dull or monotonous is given a new lease of life. Art thus converts our way of seeing to the point of view of the foreigner or of the child – with a naïve vision, in the etymological meaning of the word, like someone who is born to the world, who sees the world anew.

That’s exactly what Kolatkar’s poetry does. Everything which is too massive, too obvious, too general, too transparent, or too monumental is decomposed and detailed.

This may partly help us to understand why light has such an active and creative role in Kolatkar’s poetry. A smooth and static surface is hence transformed into a dramatic choreography. Light tends to sculpt, diffract and pluralize the world. In the poem “The Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads”, for example, the transfiguration of the woman who is “dark as bitter chocolate” is enacted by the play of light and water on her body which becomes a moving and transient work of art. The sunbeams play with the folds and creases of the clothes and the flesh of the young woman, “playing hide and seek / in the scalloped shadow of her petticoat”.

His poetry thus often focuses on the eclectic assemblage of reality and particularly on the different materials which have presided in the composition of an object. Behind an everyday thing, often reduced to its utilitarian dimension or to its plain surface, the poet discovers and reveals another reality, much more composite and ambiguous. And the material otherness of the world is often reflected by the poetic and linguistic opacity of Kolatkar’s poetry. In the poem “Watermelons”, for example, the voice lingers on minute details, ordinarily ignored or silenced: « on a ridgepole / that juts out from under the **tilt** / and doubles as a clothesline, / a skyblue **petticoat** / **flutters** and **flirts** with the wind [...] A **bellyful** of hay / **stuffed** in a lowslung hammock / below the buckboard, / **leaves a trail** of straw, / **all** along the way / from Kalamboli to Colaba ». This exploration of visual reality becomes a

⁷ My translation. See Viktor Chklovski’s article : « L’art comme procédé » in *Théorie de la Littérature, textes des formalistes russes*, ed. et trans. Tzvetan Todorov, Paris : Seuil, 2001[1967] : « Le but de l’art, c’est de donner une sensation de l’objet comme vision et non pas comme reconnaissance », p. 82.

poetic exploration as well with the play on sounds and alliterations, “f”, “l”, “t” and the homophony between the two names “kalamboli” and “colaba”. Reality is “opacified”. The meaning of the poem lies more in the resonant labile quality of language than in the relatively opaque signified of the technical vocabulary (ridgepole, hammock, buckboard) or in the immediate recognition of the designated object.

Just like the reality portrayed in *Kala Ghoda Poems*, and which is seen as a complex composition, language is also considered like a construct. Neither language nor reality are reduced to their instrumental and transparent dimension. They do not let themselves be forgotten. In Kolatkar’s poetry, language always designates itself by puns, games on the acoustic quality of words, or by meta-poetic references. In the poem “David Sassoon” for example, the humorous comparison “as horny as a rhino” plays on different levels of meaning (the rhino has a horn, indeed, which is used as an aphrodisiac in traditional Chinese medicine – thus horny in two ways) but is also relevant because of the phonic equivalence between the two words and the anagram created. The sudden interferences of the poetic voice (who sometimes refuses to choose between different expressions or versions of the text) also free the poem from univocal transparency. In the poem “Meera”, for instance, the broom which is held by the young woman « [is] looking for something / a little more interesting **and** / **or** / useful to do ».

The aim is not to clarify, purify or polish reality and language but on the contrary to estrange us from it. This obscuring vision which accumulates details is also a means to sustain the act of perception, to make it last, in a sense. And we come back to the intrinsic temporal and historic dimension of Kolatkar’s poetry, which reveals the evolving process of reality, its *becoming*. Viktor Chklovski writes: “the artistic process [...] consists in obscuring the form, increasing the difficulty and length of perception. The process of perception, in art, is an aim in itself and must be extended: art is a means to experience the becoming of an object, what has already become does not concern art⁸”.

This revelation of the complexity and the opacity of an impermanent reality also functions like a refusal of definite meanings and visions which can not be harmoniously circumscribed, once and for all. This recalcitrant reality is exactly what the Kala Ghoda traffic island stands for. Bodies are released from the constraints of appropriateness and middle-class conventions. This public space has not been framed, rationalised or annexed. One of the

⁸ Viktor Chklovski, « Le procédé de l’art est le procédé de singularisation des objets et le procédé qui consiste à obscurcir la forme, à augmenter la difficulté et la durée de la perception. L’acte de perception en art est une fin en soi et doit être prolongé : l’art est un moyen d’éprouver le devenir de l’objet, ce qui est déjà devenu n’importe pas pour l’art », in « L’art comme procédé », *art. cit.*, p. 82.

voices in “Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda” thus exclaims, “Boy, am I glad they’ve left / at least / this one tiny traffic island alone; haven’t landscaped it to death / put a fence around it, / and slapped logos all over it”. And if “logos” refers to ads, it also implicitly refers to the rationalized, analytical and systematic discourse which “landscapes” and harnesses the world.

Arun Kolatkar’s poetry privileges the marginal, the peripheral and the intractable dimension of reality: everything which can not be reduced or assimilated – which stays outside or in excess, which doesn’t belong, exactly like the homeless and bums of the Kala Ghoda pavement-dweller community.

This is also why the body has a predominant place in his poetry, insofar as it functions both like an instrument of wonder and of resistance which sabotages all frameworks: the famished or hungry body presides over the collection, since it’s the primordial and sacred energy of food around which the whole Kala Ghoda traffic island community is assembled in the long central poem “Breakfast time in Kala Ghoda”, the body in a trance, the body which is cleaned or adorned, the amputated or mutilated body, the intoxicated body, the erotized body, the defecating body, etc. It cannot be contained in appropriate frontiers. It is free from the rules and conventions of decorum and etiquette. In the poem “The Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads”, for example, the young half-naked woman drying her hair at the crossroads is screened “by / utter contempt / for the voyeur world revolving / around her”. Aren’t bodies, and especially female ones, normally “polished”, made to conform, be disciplined or concealed, here exposed? The intimacy of these pavement-dwellers is public. It spreads.

Kolatkar’s poetry hence often dwells on the erotic urges which stir the body and the soul. David Sassoon, the 19th century Jewish fugitive from Bagdad who rose to become one of the most influent Bombay merchants, reduced to a stone pilloried head above an archway, in the eponymous poem, challenges all kinds of petrification thanks to the fantasized physical reality which his imagination unfolds. Even when the body has disappeared, it continues through a shadow form of presence, through lack and absence, to occupy the whole textual and imaginary space, to probe and stir in him. And these many carnal and embodied reactions of the Kala Ghoda characters sound like formidable defiant reactions both to conventional proprieties and to all kinds of frontiers, barriers and finitudes. The little boy, for example, responds to the bathing ordeal he’s managed to survive at the hands of “The Ogress”, by a gloriously physiological reaction:

[he] looks around
at the whole honking world
that has massed its buildings

menacingly around him
and he already knows –

what his response is going to be.

He points his little
water cannon
at the world in general

and (Right !
Piss on it, boy)
shoots a perfect act of piss,

lust
and luminous
in the morning sun.

The orderliness of the world, in Kolatkar's poetry, is thus permanently flawed. Tyrannical visions, ideologies or discourses which try to sum up reality to some kind of transparent evidence, grid or hierarchy are subverted. Kolatkar's work defies all kinds of contextualisation – if we define the term as does the critic and poet A. K. Ramanujan who also associates contextualisation with the brahmanical vision of the world: « each jāti or class defines a context, a structure of relevance, a rule of permissible combinations⁹ ». And it is these structures of relevance, these permissible combinations, these proprieties which are challenged. “The whole system of *Homo Hierarchicus* (‘everything in its place’) is the target of the irony¹⁰”.

This hierarchical system, which resulted in the caste system, is associated to the two key concepts of pollution and purity. Brahmanism indeed reveals a systematic attitude of repulsion towards every kind of leftovers (mostly alimentary) which are thought to be the main channel or agent for impurity. But *Kala Ghoda Poems* (through the poems “Meera”, “Song of Rubbish”, “A note on the Reproductive Cycle of Rubbish”, “An old bicycle Tyre”, “Lice”, “The Shit Sermon”, etc.) irreverently makes these leftovers and wastes the substance of his poetry. Pollution is not on the side of outcastes or subalterns, of those who live on the fringes of society, but rather on the side of all those who try to purify, monopolize or anesthetize it.

This brahmanical contextualized system is also articulated to certain central notions like the *dharma* (the harmony which regulates the universe and defines the behaviour of each caste), the *rta* (which can be defined by the exact kind of pattern or sequence which

⁹ A. K. Ramanujan, « Is There an Indian Way of Thinking ? An Informal Essay », *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker, Delhi: OUP, p. 47.

¹⁰ This last sentence is also taken from A.K Ramanujan's essay when he refers to *bhakti* devotion : « every pigeonhole of caste, ritual, gender, appropriate clothing and custom, stage of life, the whole system of *Homo Hierarchicus* (‘everything in its place’) is the target of the irony”, « Is there an Indian Way of Thinking ? », *art. cit.*, p. 48.

represents the cosmic and moral order¹¹), the notion of aesthetics and poetics as conformity and propriety (*aucitya*), which also expresses itself through a language that has been made ritually pure: Sanskrit. The Brahmanical system indeed also rests on the belief that language can be sullied, and that it must be preserved exclusively by / for the Brahmins.

What challenges *rta* and generates disorder, is not only, as the eminent French Sanskrit scholar Charles Malamoud explains, “the failure in conforming to obligations, but **also** that one humane or cosmic domain encroaches on the neighbouring domain, that elements, men or kings exceed their limits¹² ». Yet the so-called impropriety, inappropriateness or discordance of the world, is exactly what Kolatkar’s transgressive poetry is all about and it is paralleled or represented by the impurity and inappropriateness of his poetic language – which refuses to conform to a hygienist ideal of correctness and exceeds its proper limits. His insubordinate and carnival-like¹³ poetry ostensibly rejects conventional poetic norms and proprieties, either by the use of an explicitly vulgar, sometimes obscene vocabulary, or by playing on the conflagration of different levels of language, by connecting disconnected words and realities which sometimes border on blasphemy (“the queen of tarts”, “the shit sermon”, etc), by oscillating between the most familiar registers, often borrowed from American and British slang, to the most refined, technical or high-brow expressions¹⁴.

It is because, for the poet, to purify reality through a sanitized language is both to conceal and to perpetrate violence. In the 5th movement of the long poem “Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda”, Kolatkar reveals the insane violence dissimulated behind an ideal of purification and correctness, both linguistic (“human excreta”) but also social and cultural (the hierarchical caste system) which is expressed through the violence of a language which refuses to be polished or neutralised by euphemisms (“shit”):

In Bandagere
in Andhra Pradesh,

¹¹ « L’ordre cosmique, l’efficacité rituelle, la vérité comme adéquation telles sont les principales composantes de la notion de *rta* », Charles Malamoud, *Cuire le monde, rite et pensée dans l’Inde ancienne*, Paris : La Découverte, 1989, p. 73

¹² « Ce qui fait obstacle au *rta*, ce n’est pas seulement la rupture du cycle, la défaillance dans l’exécution des devoirs, c’est aussi qu’un domaine de l’activité cosmique ou humaine empiète sur le domaine voisin, que les éléments ou les hommes (ou les dieux) sortent de leurs limites », C. Malamoud, *Cuire le monde, op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹³ This carnival-like dimension of his work is reinforced by the image of the traffic island as an unregimented public square. Bakhtine defines the public place of the carnival as such: « the laws, interdictions, restrictions which determined the structure and the progress of normal life (outside of carnival) [...] everything which the hierarchical organization [of reality] was closing, separating, dispersing, now comes in contact and forms carnival-like alliances », *Problèmes de la poésie de Dostoïevski*, p. 169 et p. 171

¹⁴ Heterogeneity is one of the means of the poetic text which is also traversed by numerous allusions to pop, folk and mass culture. For example, the title of the poem « Boomtown’s Leper’s Band », inevitably calls to mind the Beatles album « Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club band », and the deafening hymn of the lepers procession, « let the coins shake rattle and roll » parodies Elvis’ song: « we’re gonna shake rattle and roll »...

or may be somewhere else in India,

thirteen high caste Hindus
are forcing four dalits to eat
human excreta,

which is to say,
shit,
right now. (5)

Language refuses to be sanitized. Reality is unlocked. And this disorder, limitlessness or contamination, far from having to be contained or controlled is a formidable expression of creative interlacing. The New Year greeting cards, in “Man of the Year”, which never cease to contaminate each other and to trespass their proper limits bloom in an alternative space which has not yet become an exclusive, appropriated territory – and where this inventive nonconformity is expressed, once again, through an unrestrained tactile immediacy:

Inside the pillar-box,
new year greeting cards are smooching
in the permissive dark.

I hear them billing and cooing,
sighing and moaning,
as if there’s no tomorrow.

They nestle each other
in the zero gravity of pure love and affection

where all laws break down
in the no-man’s-land

This sensual description of transgressive greeting cards parallels that of the idlis in the long central poem, which pile up on top of each other in an extraordinarily expressive orgy: « slipping and sliding / clambering over and suffocating each other » (14), « [they] lie gasping belly to belly or hump each other like turtles in the mating season » (22).

Arun Kolatkar’s poetry celebrates gloriously inappropriate encounters and relationships.

This also explains the predilection of his poetry for the image of leftovers, wastes, scraps and huge garbage land-fill sites which proliferate in the open at the heart of Bombay. The poem « A note on the Reproductive Cycle of Rubbish » opens on the following lines: « It may not look like much, / But watch out / when rubbish *meets* rubbish ». These garbage make things which are totally alien to each other converge; things which are not in their appropriate place, but which keep on mingling and also on fertilizing each other, since the

metaphor of insemination is prominent. This predilection for rubbish parallels that of inventories: these parataxic enumerations which represent the different encounters taking place in the world of garbage, where diversity is exposed, assembled and levelled. In the poem « Kerosene », the young woman...

... grabs an empty plastic jerrycan
from among other things (Oh, odds and ends :

cardboard cartons, pots and pans,
bundles of cloth, a beheaded doll, a small
transistor, a beachball on a Primus stove

This listing practice (which takes the form of a proliferating verbal logorrhoea, with minimal punctuation) also corresponds to another dimension of language, a kind unconscious or pre-conscious language, which is freed from the rational, logical and syntactical conditionings and barriers¹⁵. Words are joined because of the unconscious associations and the phonic equivalences they create. It is also linked to the process of defamiliarization mentioned earlier, which frees the ordinary object or common expression from ordinary uses and expectations, to reveal the links which can exist between things whose functions and contexts of emergence are totally distinct from each other.

Furthermore, this poetics of encounters, of deregulations, impertinent associations and incongruous encroachments, is connected to the metaphoric dimension of language – since metaphors and comparisons are numerous in his poetry. An image brings into contact two elements as distant and heterogeneous from each other as possible, and from this chock, something novel and unpredictable is born¹⁶. Paul Ricoeur shows that the tension between identity and difference is never resolved in the metaphor¹⁷. This metaphorical dimension also represents the theoretical process through which language is given the power to refashion and rediscover reality¹⁸. From this conjunction between fiction and redescription, Ricoeur concludes that the metaphoric « is » means both and simultaneously « is not » and « is

¹⁵ These extraordinary miscellaneous and eclectic lists must be paralleled with the poet's own reading method « it's a browser's approach, not a scholarly one » (in Eunice de Souza, *Talking Poems, Conversations with Poets*, New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 20). An inspiration which, in turn, calls to mind the Pídog's way of looking at the world: « a pirate, rather than a cartographer's regard for accuracy. »

¹⁶ In the first 1924 *Surrealism Manifesto*, André Breton quotes the poet Reverdy : « l'image [...] ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées. Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte », *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris : Gallimard, 1999 [1962], p. 31.

¹⁷ « Dans l'énoncé métaphorique, la contradiction littérale maintient la différence ; le 'même' et le 'différent' ne sont pas simplement mêlés, mais demeurent opposés. Par ce trait spécifique, l'énigme est retenue au cœur même de la métaphore », Paul Ricoeur, *La Métaphore vive*, op. cit., p. 249.

¹⁸ « La métaphore est, au service de la fonction poétique, cette stratégie de discours par laquelle le langage se dépouille de sa fonction de description directe pour accéder au niveau mythique où sa fonction de découverte est libérée », *Ibid.*, p. 311.

like »¹⁹. And it is this metaphoric ambiguity, which is also the heart of literature and literariness – these ambivalent moving frontiers between what is, what is not, what is like, but also this absence of equivalence between the words and the world, that potentially breed uncertainty and chaos in the eyes of the literalists.

Yet in Kolatkar's poetry, lines keep on moving. They are never fixed, rigid or permanent. Perspectives are broken. Structures are made flexible, both literally and figuratively by the transmutability of matter, by the conversion of self into other, by "irrelevant" interruptions and reflections, by oblique and deviant voices.

In the poem « Meera », the sweeper-lady prefers to dance with the floppy coconut frond, as flexible as the pile of wastes on which she dances and treads then with the regular broomstick, « which she finds much too stiff and unbending ». The collection's predilection for fluid and elastic substances is also prominent: water in the poem « The Ogress », for example, where the human substance of the flesh is also supple and pliable. This malleability is, as always in Kolatkar's poetry, expressed by the abundance of dynamic verbs: « she grabs both his feet / with one hand / crumples his face, / pulls his ears, / tweaks his nose / probes his nostrils, / twists his arms / polishes his balls, / plays with his pintle ». And water cascades around the little boy: « swirling galaxies of backsliding foam / that collide / form and re-form / slither up and down / and wrap around / the curved space / of his slippery body, / black as slate ».

Yet we also find frequent geometrical motifs or patterns in the collection. We can mention, for example, the omnipresent triangular motif illustrated by the Kala Ghoda « traffic island », named « trisland » by the Pi-dog of the initial poem: « trisland as I call it for short, / and also to suggest / a triangular island with rounded corners ». What this last quotation suggests, however, is that these geometrical outlines and structures are never inflexible, rigid or sharp-angled. They are made supple, disintegrated or de-structured. In the collection, the successive encroachments of the margin in the centre, or the diffracted sunrays and reflections which isolate one detail over the broad picture, make connections between particular things and realities, constantly disrupt stable and established frameworks. In « A Game of Tigers and Sheep » the sudden appearance of a flower upsets the order of the game. But the impertinence and the inappropriateness (literally "irrelevant") of the yellow flower slowly floating above the pavement, is both an instrument of displacement and of transfiguration.

The rusty shield-bearer,

¹⁹ « De cette conjonction entre fiction et redescription nous concluons que le 'lieu' de la métaphore, son lieu le plus intime et le plus ultime, n'est ni le nom, ni la phrase, ni même le discours, mais la copule du verbe « être ». Le « est » métaphorique signifie à la fois 'n'est pas' et 'est comme' », *Ibid.*, p. 11.

neutral till then,
paradrops a winning flower
- yellow
and irrelevant –

on the checkerboard
drawn on the pavement in charcoal,
cutting off the retreat
of one tiger,
and giving a check to the other;

and quickly follows it up
with another flower
- just as yellow
and just as irrelevant – except
that it comes down even more slowly;

This transgressive and moving dimension is also linked to the temporal or historical process of reality on which Kolatkar's poetry focuses. What Kolatkar is interested in, is not what used to be, what must have been or was supposed to be, and not *only* what is and simultaneously what keeps on moving, but also what moved *away from*. Yet this distancing is never considered like an act of treason, like a perversion or a kind of degradation.

If reality is characterized by mingling, mobility and inadequateness, it is because neither things nor people correspond to their original design. The *idea* behind the creation or the fabrication of something is subverted by the adjustments of reality. The poet exploits the discrepancy between these assumptions and purposes and the context or the situation in which this object or reality really emerges. In « Pi-dog », for example, the introduction of fox terriers in India by a British Lord (« with the crazy **idea** / of introducing fox-hunting to Bombay. / Just the thing he felt the city badly needed ! ») only resulted in increasing the number of stray dogs in Bombay.

Objects and things are permanently altered and pluralized, recycled and decontextualized, distanced from their original function. In “Pi-dog”, the central traffic island is used not just as a traffic island “[it] doubles as a parking-lot”, the silver triangle in the eponymous poem becomes something else in the hands of the little girl « You've worn him like a hat, / walked him like a wheelbarrow, / and played him like a concertina ». And in the central poem “Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda”, the enunciator refers to these multi-purpose blocks of concrete: « a most useful piece of street furniture, / I must say. / Make great road dividers, / great traffic-island markers / and, more to the point, great settees. / By the way, / they make great pillows too » (27). Objects, things and people are never confined, contained or restricted by exclusive frontiers.

Creative discordances are also related to the conception of history as a continuous and inclusive process of interaction and negotiation, and not as a mummified memorial. Univocal origins and lineages are subverted by the transfers and displacements induced by history²⁰. The “Pi-dog” of the opening poem asserts his double lineage: on one side from the only dog which survived the pack of foxhounds imported from England by a British aristocrat and on the other side, to the loyal dog which followed Yudhishthira, one of the 5 Pandava brothers of the *Mahābhārata*, to his death²¹. The direct descendant of these two prestigious alliances (British imperialism on the one hand, and one of the most sacred Hindu texts on the other), an impure mongrel of the Bombay streets, ironically challenges these two so-called unsullied origins.

But what this poem shows is that history proceeds through digressions and uprootings, oblique routes and arbitrary encounters. Things, realities and people are adopted then adapted and, in a sense, converted and “naturalised”. There is no such thing as an intangible a-historical and unadulterated essence or absolute which could be restored. The random course of history and its hazards is what the poem “Meera” is also about. The derelict and rickety “tireless fossil” of the sweeper-lady garbage trolley belongs to the first generation of trolleys « that came to these shores way back / in 1872 or some such date », and which dreams today, amidst the Bombay garbage, « of the softer, / more hoof-friendly roads of Mayhew’s London, / for which it must’ve been designed ».

Of course, one such historical importation is the English language in India. Originally designed to be the language of the British nation-state, and also the cultural instrument through which the colonial exploitation and domination process was enacted. Today, this language distanced itself from its origin and has been indianized. Instead of conforming to its “model”, it is perpetually set in motion, pluralized, estranged. And in Kolatkar’s poetry, the expressive and dramatized language is a material or substance as malleable as reality.

This poetic manifestation and celebration of diversity, this refusal of any intangible monolithic identity, history or reality, of a hierarchical segmentation of the world is acutely relevant because it is linked to a specific context: the aggressive nationalist hinduization of the cultural and political landscape in India, which tries to restore an Indian or Hindu essence, by “cleansing” Indian identity and language of all its heterodox or so-called foreign

²⁰ Edouard Glissant showed in what way the “detour”, or displacement, was creative and dissident. It prevents from returning to a fantasized origin. Wanting to return to some kind of idealized past or to recover and restore a lost identity means sanctioning permanence. « Revenir, c’est consacrer la permanence, la non-relation. Le Retour sera proné par les sectateurs de l’Un », Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais, op. cit.*, p. 30.

²¹ This episode refers to the end of the *Mahābhārata*, where the 5 Pandava brothers die one after the other. Because Yudhishthira, the last brother, refused to leave behind his faithful dog, and was thus true to *dharma*, he was saved along with the animal.

elements (Muslim, but also Christian and British) which have been brought by history²² - as if there was such a thing as an innate “indianhood”, defined by a common nation (*rāṣṭra*), a common race, (*jātī*), a common culture (*sanskṛiti*), but also a common language (sanskritized hindi).

The omission or so-called adulteration of national identity is held responsible for all the problems of India. Nationalist India thus has to come back to itself. In so doing it fabricates imaginary communities, such as the politically instrumentalized and electorally profitable religious antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. Homogenizing the nation enables to unite against the ideological Other (which is also a construct, viewed as homogenous), and to conceal internal dissensions.

Kolatkār’s poetry takes the exact opposite view of such a monolithic and majoritarian vision of the world, of such an exclusive and communalist analysis of history. It subverts the kind of linguistic, regional, religious and ethnic process of invention of frontiers, which characterize the contemporary landscape of India, and all the petrification, “purification” and homogenization endeavours of culture, identity and memory.

You cannot excise history nor otherness and foreignness. You cannot make a tabula rasa of the past, neither literally, geographically or visually (by demolishing mosques, tombs etc...) nor culturally and linguistically. Kolatkār’s poetry, for example, is saturated by often opaque names of people and places. Refusing to translate or to reduce strangeness or opacity is also a way to inscribe difference at the heart of the text, plurality at the heart of the poem, otherness at the heart of identity and prevents from fashioning Indian identity according to a unique shape. The text is freed from the myth of cultural authenticity and of transparency. In the poem « Man of the Year », for instance, which has the same kind of list-like quality than many other poems, the enunciator enumerates feminine names; « Malati, Niloufer, Anjali, Shanta, / Alpana, Kalpana, Shirin, Zarine, Sylvia, Maria, / Harlene, Yasmine, Nina, Kamala, Mona, Lopa ». And this list which gives evidence to all kinds of origins and religions expresses the irreducible cultural diversity of India’s identity, and of the cosmopolitan history of Bombay.

²² Hindu nationalism is a huge conglomeration of different organisms. The three most important are the RSS (the ideological pole), the VHP (the militant branch) and the BJP (the political pole). Hindu nationalists consider that India’s vitality rests on its capacity to come back to its self (which is not characterized by the integration to a Nation-state, but by belonging to a homogenous and millennial civilisation which has been sullied or distorted by successive invasions, Muslim or British), by purging oneself or Hindu-izing the foreign and minor elements. It also means restoring a cultural essence, notably through a kind of linguistic purity, by retracing one’s roots to the prestigious ancestor that is Sanskrit: a vedic language which also corresponds to what the nationalists identify as the “Golden Age” (Aryan) -thus pre-Muslim, pre-British- of India. This communalist re-reading of history fostered outbreaks of insufferable violence, for example during the Bombay riots of 1992-1993 and in Gujarat in 2002 where thousands of Muslims were killed. The dread of Pakistan and the bitter memory of Muslim invasions and of Moghul domination over India contribute to this designation of **the** Muslim as a scapegoat.

It is the composite history of this Indian city which is the subject of this collection. Bombay has attracted people originally disseminated all over the world (Portuguese, British, Jews, Parsis, Iraklis and Persians, western junkies, but also the Indian sub-continent's inhabitants, magnetized as it were, by the metropolis)²³. That is the reason why Arun Kolatkar celebrates Bombay and never Mumbaï as it was renamed in 1995: that would mean essentializing the identity of the city, excising history²⁴.

That is also why Bombay itself, just like the Kala Ghoda reality portrayed in the collection, is seen as malleable. In the "Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads" for example, the accordion-city unfolds and unfurls like a fan, and then refolds and gathers just like the ends of the sari of the young woman:

One end of her sari
(red like the city in May,
with all its gulmohurs in bloom),

say the downtown end,
wrapped around the petticoat, damp no more,
and secured at the hips;

and the uptown end arranged
over the left shoulder,
and left dangling behind,

she holds the sari away from her
at arm's length
at a halfway point along the border,

from where it's a short walk
to the belly
for her three fingers and thumb,

as they collect the sari
along the way
in neat accordion folds

(flip flap, flip flap,
Dadar, Parel, Lalbaug, Byculla, Bori Bunder,
flip flap, Flora Fountain

and flip, we come to Kala Ghoda,

²³ "Bombay is all about transaction – dhandha. It was founded as a trading city, built at the entrance to the rest of the world, and everybody was welcome as long as they wanted to trade [...] After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which cut travel time to the Empire in half, Bombay truly became the gateway to India, supplanting Calcutta as the richest city in the Indian Empire. So they came, from all over India and the world: Portuguese, Mughal, British, Gujarati, Parsi, Marathi, Sindhi, Punjabi, Bihari ... American", Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City, Bombay Lost and Found*, London: Review, 2005 [2004], p. 16.

²⁴ "The state government headed by the regional party Shiv Sena (Shivaji's army) and the Hindu nationalist BJP argued that the renaming was meant to highlight the local origins of the city's name derived from Mumbadevi, a local goddess of Koli fishermen who originally lived on the islands and marshlands that became the city of Bombay ... The renaming aimed at undoing the Portuguese and later British perversions of the name", *Wages of Violence, Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*, Thomas Blom Hansen, Princeton, N.J, Chichester: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 1.

which is where
we've been, all along)

Celebrating, as Kolatkar does in these poems, the gloriously creative “pollution” of the city footpaths, of language, and of identity notably brought about by history and by these perpetual encroachments of the Bombay pavement-dweller community on the public space and hygienist urban middle-class proprieties is a way to denounce all the purification endeavours which breed terror. Sanitizing language is always a synonym of the sanitization of reality – that Kolatkar’s poetry admirably challenges. Didn’t the aggressively nationalist “Shiv Sena” in Bombay not only change the name of the city but also try to *clean it up* and deport alleged *illegal* immigrants – for the most part Muslims and Bangladeshis? Giving a *proper* name and ousting *improper* elements go hand in hand²⁵.

The traffic island of Kala Ghoda in Kolatkar’s resolutely improper collection could therefore be a symbol of the archipelago that used to be Bombay. It is always criss-crossed by movement, people, traffic – it is, literally, at crossroads, and thus a place of displacements, of intrusions and of thresholds²⁶. If the triangular shape is so prominent in the collection, and yet if it is always “softened” (“a triangular island with rounded corners”), it is also because the triangle has often been associated with India itself. Yet here it is not the intangible innate territory or organic entity celebrated by Hindu nationalists and by the theoretician of Hindutva, V.D. Savarkar, for whom the Mother-India triangle was engraved and crystallized as it were in its natural frontiers, contained on one side by the sea, and on the other by the Himalayas --- but a composite, inclusive, moving and borderless island, an open space of circulation, mingling, convergence and adjustments, which perpetually renews itself, and is dynamically involved both with the world outside and with its own histories, diversity, and otherness inside.

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²⁵ Thomas Blom Hansen shows that the Shiv Sena is obsessed by the way Mumbaï is “plagued” by cultural and physical pollution. He quotes one member of the Shiv Sena who writes apocalyptically: “By the year 2000, 50% of Bombay’s population will be slum dwellers. They will be cooking in the open, urinating, defecating, and even procreating in the open! Filth, stench, dirt and human excreta right at your footstep!” and then the author goes on to comment: “The issue of cleaning up Bombay was not limited to the slums. The clearing of footpaths, the removal of beggars, and deportation of alleged 40 000 Bangladeshis living in the city had also been high on the Shiv Sena / BJP agenda for a long time”, *Wages of Violence, op. cit.*, p. 206 and p. 210.

²⁶ “The threshold need not be viewed only as a temporary space, a kind of limbo out of which one would eventually have to emerge to return to normality; it may be regarded as a permanent opening into a world of multiple values. It could also suggest a potential anti-structural questioning of certain fixed categories such as religious identities », Dominique Sila Kahn, *Crossing Thresholds: Understanding Religious identities in South Asia*, London / New-York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, p. 5.

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