

Reimagining Bombay: Postcolonial Poetry and Urban Space

Submitted by Emma Jade Bird to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in December 2012.

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Abstract

This thesis considers the ways in which poets writing in English in Bombay have represented the city and negotiated its particular challenges, focusing in particular on poets starting to publish during the 1950s and 1960s. Examining in detail work by poets whom Bruce King refers to as constituting a “Bombay circle”, this project examines how Nissim Ezekiel, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel and Arun Kolatkar in particular have represented the modernity of the city (*Modern Indian Poetry in English* 45). Despite Bombay’s significance in postcolonial studies, this highly mediated city has been disassociated from its material histories by recent critical and imaginative portrayals. The over-determination of Bombay is countered and nuanced, this thesis suggests, by examining the ways in which poets have represented the city. Evaluating Bombay poetry closely, and considering the relationship between poetic form and language and the articulation of space, this project asks how poetry written in the city contributes to, intervenes in or disarticulates dominant readings of Bombay.

The material contexts in which poetry was written and circulated provide further significant and under-researched sites of engagement with this postcolonial city. This thesis thus turns to a period in the city’s cultural and literary history that has not been extensively documented: to the emergence of its poetry scene from the 1950s onwards. This project combines close, poetic analyses with archival research, examining Bombay’s little magazines and small press publishers, and tracing the various local and international affiliations evidenced in this body of work. In doing so, its aim is to historicize and contextualize the city and the work of its poets, enriching a critical and materialist understanding of this paradigmatic city.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Jane Poyner, and second supervisor Jo Gill, for all their support and guidance. Thanks too to the English department at Exeter, for funding this doctoral project with a departmental scholarship.

Much of the original material was made available on a research trip to India in 2011, and I am deeply grateful to everyone who made this visit possible. In Bombay, I would like to thank: Pavankumar Jain for his help locating vital resources in the city; Eunice de Souza, who disclosed a forgotten period in the city's literary history and offered a timely reminder of the pitfalls of the postcolonial; and Ashok Shahane, who granted me an invaluable insight into Arun Kolatkar's life and writing. In particular though, I would like to thank Adil Jussawalla, who was incredibly generous with his private archive of little magazines and correspondence, and who gave up so much of his time to help me find my way through this rich and fascinating material. For his support I am very grateful. I am sincerely grateful too to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in Allahabad, who opened up his home and study to me, providing access to early magazines and publications that I had not dared to hope I would track down. I am deeply indebted to the library staff at the SCILET library in Madurai, who were always on hand to answer questions during my visit.

During the course of my research, I have established correspondences with poets and academics that have had a significant impact on this current project. Arundhathi Subramaniam, Manohar Shetty and Anjum Hasan have all been especially enthusiastic about exchanging ideas. Finally, Bruce King, who has fielded many questions over the duration of this project – and who always

sends on articles he has come across “just in case” they might be useful.

They invariably are – and I am sincerely thankful for his continued interest in this project.

Friends and loved ones at Exeter and further afield have been supportive in more ways than they could ever imagine. Without Olly, Bianca, Helen and Mick, I would not have imagined starting, let alone finishing, this thesis.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the one person who was not, after all, here to witness the completion of this project, but whom I know was there every step of the way. This thesis is offered in loving memory of my mother, Meryn, who in every way has made everything possible.