

Kavita's Review of *Woman* by Arun Kolatkar, Writers' Hub

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Woman by Arun Kolatkar

a woman may collect cats read thrillers
her insomnia may seep through the great walls of history
a lizard may paralyse her
a sewing machine may bend her
moonlight may intercept the bangle
circling her wrist

a woman may name her cats
the circulating library
may lend her new thrillers

a spiked man may impale her
a woman may add
a new recipe to her scrapbook

judiciously distilling her whimper the city lights
may declare it null and void
in a prodigious weather
above a darkling woman
surgeons may shoot up and explode
in a weather fraught with forceps
a woman may damn
man

a woman may shave her legs regularly
a woman may take up landscape painting
a woman may poison
23 cockroaches

Of the many things a woman may or may not do, these are the images Kolatkar picked for this poem which was first published in a journal in 1960. One of the reasons I am drawn to this particular poem is because it reminds me simultaneously of several unrelated things. I smell Bombay (because I know the poet lived and wrote in that city) and the tropics (with the reference to the cockroaches and the lizards); I remember various cat-loving women I knew, both young and elderly, some of whom adopted whole families of cats (many of these women were also poets); I visualise the 'mobile libraries' that still existed in my early childhood; and strangely enough, my brain conjures up Joan Miro's paintings and sculptures on his theme 'Woman and Bird'. There is no connection that I know of between the origins of the poem and

Miro's inspirations, but the similarities are in the disjointed vocabularies in each art form and the elemental linking of woman and her environment.

The spare and uneven lines, the sometimes peculiar cut-off points, and the confidence of tone and form are emblematic of Kolatkar's style. The poem begins with familiarity and little telling details before startling us in the third and fourth verses, although the phrasing remains conversational. Perhaps there is an undertone of violence in the impaling and the whimpering. Perhaps it is purely sexual. The fourth verse is mysterious. We may hazard a guess at the woman's thoughts, but apart from the poet explicitly telling us that 'a woman may damn/man', we don't know what she makes of her situation. And what is the situation? I see a story of fraught childbirth and other sufferings.

In the sinister insistence of the things a woman 'may' do, I read a narration about what lies within her remit, what is polite and allowed. Perhaps there is a quelling occurring when the woman's pursuits are listed in the last verse. These are the activities that are normal and pragmatic, with 'landscape painting' being a benign and accepted hobby. Perhaps there is another hint of violence and rebellion in the 'poisoning of 23 cockroaches', but the act itself is a practical one and the responsibility of a good housekeeper.

I can't know if Kolatkar meant to convey any of the things that I glimpse in the poem. One of the pleasures of reading poetry is that you can make of it what you wish, especially if the poet's intention has not been explained at any time to the world-at-large. A reader can change his view about a poem too, depending on his mood and current free associations. For all its simplicity, this is a rewarding poem to re-read in that context; it is emphatic in what it states, yet enigmatic enough that it offers up the possibilities of re-imagining.

I have selected this poem from Arun Kolatkar's 'Collected Poems', published by Bloodaxe in 2010. The book itself is a posthumous tribute to friendship, painstakingly edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who has tried to include all of Kolatkar's work in one place – all his poems in English as well as translations of the poems originally written in Marathi.

The poems I most admire are from the collection, 'Kala Ghoda poems', published in 2004, the year Kolatkar died. 'The Ogress' and 'Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda' are particularly poignant about life on the gritty streets and yet filled with verve and humour. The reason I didn't use them for this series is that they are several pages long, which is not ideal for this space. But just as a taster, here is a verse from 'Knucklebones':

Your legs are a matched pair of clasp-knives;
the left one folded in at the knee,
and the right one that, blade out, shows its steel.

I have opted for something shorter and more troublesome. 'Woman' is not to everyone's taste and there may be other interpretations than mine. But if you're intrigued by Kolatkar now, do borrow a copy of his 'Collected Poems' or previous publications to spend some time digesting the longer poems.

Kolatkar was bilingual and wrote in both English and Marathi. He seemed to have believed his skills were equal in both, which is no small thing, if true, and I'm told on authority it is. In any case, it is no small self-belief. Kolatkar tackled his habit of bilingual writing in a long poem 'Making Love to a Poem', a piece unpublished in his lifetime and found among his jottings and papers after his death. As he says in the poem, he 'went merrily along' writing one poem in Marathi after another in English. When exploring his bilinguism he proposes no arguments for or against writing in two languages, stating simply that it is what he has chosen to do. Interestingly, for those Indians who write solely in English, he offers up this excuse, within the poem:

For an Indian robbed of his mother tongue
Who has been robbed disinherited
by his education family background cheated out of his inheritance
there may be no alternative to writing in the only
language he knows English

but Kolatkar felt creatively fluent and free in both Marathi and English.

He made his living as a copywriter and 'visualizer' in the advertising industry. In his life, 'he was enchanted by the ordinary' and to quote his editor, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, in his poetry Kolatkar 'made the ordinary enchanting'.

Kavita A. Jindal

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