Laughing Skeletons and Aging Metaphors: Theorizing the Modernist Avant-Garde in Marathi

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Abstract
In theorizing the modernist avant-garde, there is a widespread tendency to collapse the distinction between modernity as a set of wider social and historical processes, and modernism as an artistic phenomenon. There is also a tendency to think of the modernist avant-garde as a failed attempt to erase the distinction between art as an institution and social life. In the Indian context, as the phenomenon of modernity is intrinsically connected to colonialism and the ' influence of the West', modernism and the avant-garde is often understood, not just as Eurocentric but also as an inauthentic , derivative and superficial phenomenon. Underneath these established ways of understanding the modernist avant-garde and its social context is the reductive Marxist belief that there is a deterministic causality between 'superstructure' (the avant-garde) and base (social and historical condition of modernity). In the current article, I argue in the context of B.S Mardhekar's Marathi poetry, that using the framework of semiotics of culture as developed by the Tartu-Moscow school of cultural semiotics, we can attempt to theorize the avant-gardes afresh, especially in the Indian context and it can yield some significant insights into semiotic mechanisms underlying the phenomenon.

According to this approach as the cultural mechanism underlying all communication as well as all generation of new information (including the modernist agenda of 'making it new' anywhere in the world at any time) involves translational exchange between two non-identical semiotic systems, thus we can *understand the modernist avant-gardes as intrinsically a cross-cultural dialogic phenomenon instead of being merely a Eurocentric one.* The dark surreal imagery of Mardhekar's poetry, accordingly, can be read as *translation of the language of western avant-gardes* into the language of traditional Marathi lyrical poetry that was sentimental and clichéd, and in the process compensating the continuous process of "aging" of the various means of meaning-generation in Marathi culture by the introduction and use of new, previously forbidden, meaning-generating structures. The pervasive and decisive presence of the urban life in the avant-gardes across the world can also be understood in cultural semiotics terms as the city is seen as a complex and powerful polyglot system of meaning generation. As the languages of the new hybrid avant-gardes were unfamiliar in the Indian context in the late nineteen- forties, one can understand the function of the texts like ' Skeletons Laugh' as ' text-codes' that seek to codify this avant-garde poetic idiom in Indian languages, thus opening up spaces for later postmodern avant-garde literatures to emerge. Using this framework, one can understand Modernism, an umbrella term for various avant-gardes, as the one which deliberately models the languages of art on the everyday semiotic heterogeneity of the contemporary semiosphere and deliberately introduces 'explosive' processes, the elements of chance and unpredictability, in the languages of art.

Keywords: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Marathi, semiotics of culture

In 1948 a collection of poems innocuously titled *Kahi Kavita* was published in Marathi, a language of more than seventy million people in Maharashtra state in Western India. It included poems like 'Haadanche Saapale Haasati' or 'Skeletons Laugh'. It had lines like:

Skeletons laugh

At the flesh that is falling away.......

Ask them, "What's so exhilarating

About love-making?"

And they will point at an empty hole

Where there once used to be a fleshy penis

(translation mine)

The poet Bal Sitaram Mardhekar (1909-1956), who a decade before this collection had brought out a collection of popular conventional love poems titled *Shishiraagama* ('The Arrival of Winter'), was charged and tried for obscenity. The poet, by then, had also brought out experimental novels such as *Raatricha Divas* (1942), *Tambdi Maati* (1943) and *Paani* (1948) that often employ the stream-of-consciousness technique. More significantly, the poet had already published books on aesthetics like *Arts and Man* (1937), *Vangmaiyeen Mahatmya* (1941), *Two Lecture on an Aesthetics of Literature* (1944). He had also published some musical plays. The poet was freed from the obscenity trial in 1952, and four years later he died at the age of forty-six. Marathi poetry, however, was no longer what it used to be. Mardhekar's *Kahi Kavita* had brought modernist avant-garde into Marathi poetry with a bang.

While it is a commonplace to assert that modernism as a literary and aesthetic phenomenon is distinct from modernity, a social and historical phenomenon, most of the discussions of modernism tend to see it as an epiphenomenon of modernity. While modernity in India has received significant attention from the various left-leaning postcolonial scholars like Sudipto Kaviraj, Arjun Appadurai and Partha Chatterjee, the category of 'modernism' as a *literary* movement/s has not received the theoretical attention it deserves. There is a tendency to take 'modernism' for granted in the discussion of modernity in India. Very often, the major theorists of modernity and modernism across the world tend to collapse the distinction by reducing modernism, an artistic and cultural category, to modernity, a social and economic category as if the relationship between these two categories were causal, linear and deterministic. This tendency to conflate these two categories resembles the classical Marxist project of reducing 'superstructure' to 'base'. This reductive approach to the modernist avant-garde can also be found in Fredric Jameson's view of postmodernism as 'the cultural logic' (the superstructure) of 'late capitalism' (the economic base) (1991). Probably the absence of critical distinction has promoted the assumption that theorization of modernism will be subsumed under the theorization of modernity. While the relationship between the categories might be complex, the absence of this distinction would make us unable to distinguish between poetry, poetics and politics of Keshavsuta (1886-1905) and Mardhekar (1909-1956) in Marathi and end up erasing the critical difference in their historical context, poetics and politics. Such an erasure would not be helpful to an understanding of their place in the cultural history of these literatures.

The reductive theorization of cultural modernity also does not take into account the fact that cultures are constituted of heterogeneous systems that change at varying rates, and in various ways, and at various points in time. They visualize modernity as a single monolithic and linear process of movement from tradition to modernity, moving from, in Raymond Williams' terms, the ' archaic' to the 'residual' to the ' emergent' cultural forms and practices (1977). It would fail to explain why the semiotic systems of caste (is it residual or is it archaic?) would be as much functional and active as the languages of social media and the digital cultures. Besides,

seeing modernism as a consequence of modernity also raises the serious questions of its place in Indian society where modernity is often perceived as a superficial byproduct of colonialism, a postcolonial mimicry. This reductive understanding has resulted in the postmodernists as well as traditionalists accusing modernism as an inauthentic and derivative phenomenon or a mere passing fad. (see Meenakshi Mukherjee, 2006)

It can be argued that the key to theorize modernism (and also postmodernism) would be to theorize the phenomenon of 'the avant-garde' in Indian contexts. Most widely used theorization of the avant-garde has been by influential critics like Renato Poggioli (1968) and Peter Burger (1974). For Poggioli the aesthetic appropriation of the political insurrectional vanguardism by the artistic avant-garde was largely metaphorical and risked bad faith in exaggerating the circumscribed effects of artistic innovation, and hence it was a 'failure'. For Burger, central to the concept of avant-garde are the twin principles of the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionizing of life as a whole and the failure of avant-garde was the failure to accomplish both.   As the editors of 'New Literary History' (2010, volume 41), Eburne and Felski, argue, while Experimental aesthetic and political movements continue to form and develop throughout the world, it is time to question " the pervasive tendency to personify the avant-garde through a biographical narrative of birth, youthful insurrection, and death—a narrative that translates psychologically into a predictable arc of anticipation followed by disappointment, and politically into the lexicon of a radical oppositional force that cannot escape its subsequent co-option" (VII).

In a significant attempt to theorize modernism, EV Ramakrishnan (1995) uses Peter Burger's distinction between the High Modernist and the 'avant-garde'. He argues that the use of the term modernism to describe all types of experimental writing is bound to misrepresent the literary scene. He points out that it is necessary to distinguish between the conservative (like Mardhekar) and the radical strains within the modernist camp, and accordingly he terms the former strain as 'High Modernist' and the later by the term 'avant-garde' (4-5). He notes that"If our use of the term 'modernism' is haunted by bad faith in the Indian context it is because of the large segment of Indian reality it cannot be accommodate within its aesthetic matrix" (34). However, Ramakrishnan's distinction between 'radical' and ' conservative' strains of the experimental writing becomes extremely problematic when one considers Mardhekar's creative writing that blends urban despair, explicit evocation of sexual frustration, hybridized Marathi and rather quaint use of the traditional Bhakti poetics. While Mardhekar the critic seems to be a rather conservative formalist, Mardhekar the poet is radically avant-garde. Not just that, Mardhekar's stylistic and poetic gestures outlined above can also be found in later poets like Kolatkar , Chitre and Namdeo Dhasal (who would qualify as 'avant-garde' in Ramakrishnan's reading).

Hence, to theorize modernism in India, we need a theory of culture and cultural historiography that is non-reductive, non-linear and complex. Such a theory would not reduce the cultural to the economical or political or conceptualize their relationship in a simplistic way. The required theory would not perceive cultural change as a linear movement from the archaic to residual to the emergent. We also need a theoretical framework that explains the mechanisms underlying the poetics and politics of modernist Indian avant-gardes instead of seeing it as superficial, derivative and inauthentic phenomenon ('bad faith').

It is possible to read Mardhekar as an instance of what Dionyz Durisin terms 'interliterary phenomenon' (1984). Mardhekar's works belong to the international modernist movements, and shares some of its basic features like the metropolitan background, impact of Euro-American

avant-gardes, the themes of alienation, sexual agony, myths, existential angst, rebellion against the middle-class values, cultural decadence and the desire to invent a tradition and so on. After earning his BA in English Literature degree from Pune University, Mardhekar left for England in 1929 and lived there for four years. These biographical details point towards what Durisin would term as interliterary 'genetic-contactual relations' instead of the idea of 'influence' which invariably brings in normative hierarchy between the influencer and the influenced, placing the latter on a lower or secondary position.

Moreover, it also exhibits its affinities with other modernist poets on the Indian subcontinent too like critical engagement with the questions of caste, religion and gender repression in India. Thus, it is also possible to understand languages and literatures across the world having significant avant-gardes as forming what Durisin terms 'interliterary community' sharing interliterary processes at the local level (including regional and national levels) as well as at the level of "world literature" as a historical hypostasis of interliterary processes. Obviously, this space of world literature would be hetrogeneous and asymmetrical instead of being homogenizing and horizontal.

In my writings on Gujarati modernism and avant-garde, I have argued about the significance of using the theoretical framework of cultural semiotics or semiotics of culture as developed by the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics under the leadership of Yuri Lotman. (Ketkar, 2016) Here the distinction between 'semiotics' or 'semiology' as formulated by Saussure and what is termed as 'semiotics of culture' or 'cultural semiotics' needs to be clarified. Semiology or 'a science that would study the life of signs in the life of society' as propounded by Saussure is based on the axiom that the only function of any semiotic system is to transfer the invariant message adequately. This model, explicitly formulated by Jakobson, became the basis of most of the later models of communication. It is assumed that the addressor and the addressee share not just the same language, but also a completely identical code, a common linguistic experience, and identical cultural memory. The most desirable condition for the adequate transmission is a complete overlap of codes between senders and receivers of messages. However, in everyday life, this happens only in rare or trivial instances. Semiology also fails to explain how 'new' messages and information is generated, which, as Lotman points out, is the very 'nucleus of the intellectual act' (Lotman 1979: 86) A distinctive semiotics of culture was delineated when 'the problems were posed about the functional interdetermination of different semiotic systems, the nature of their structural asymmetry, their mutual untranslatability. From the moment when it became clear that the separate semiotic systems form a structural whole, thanks to their mutual distinctions, a special object of research began to emerge, an object that was not amenable to the semiotic study of the isolated communicative system (87). Separate sign systems, while they are immanently organized structures, function only in combination, in dependence on each other. No one sign system possesses a mechanism which allows it to function in isolation. Accordingly, the chief characteristic of culture is the principle of polyglottism and the act of communication should be seen, "not as a simple transmission of a message which remains adequate to itself from the consciousness of the addresser to the consciousness of the addressee, but as a *translation* of a text from the language of my 'I' to the language of your 'you'" (91). Since the most desirable condition for the adequate transmission is the complete overlap of codes between senders and receivers of messages is virtually impossible, an intermediary is developed, which Lotman terms the "text-code." As summed up in his translators' note, "the text-code, of which the Bible is the most obvious example, serves an interpretive and prescriptive role in the transmission of texts." (Lotman et al. 1994:377)

The dark surreal imagery of Mardhekar's aged and decrepit 'Laughing Skeletons' who , on being asked about what was exciting about lovemaking point to the gaping holes where their genitals would have been, can thus be read as *translation of the language of western avant-garde* into the language of traditional Marathi lyrical poetry that was sentimental and clichéd. Mardhekar's later poetry generated new information by using what Lotman terms as 'the semantic trope,' that is, a pair of mutually non-juxtaposable signifying elements, between which, thanks to the context they share, a relationship of adequacy is established. Semantic trope is the essence of creative thinking and is a mechanism for producing semantic diversity, a mechanism which brings into the semiotic structure of culture a necessary degree of indeterminacy (1990: 44). The metaphors produced by juxtaposing such languages were very often seen as 'scandalizing metaphors' which are 'principally innovative' and which are "treated by the carriers of traditional meaning as arbitrary and offensive to their feelings". Such metaphors "compensate the continuous process of "aging" of the various means of meaning-generation by the introduction and use of new, previously forbidden, meaning-generating structures" (Lotman,19). Hence the image of the aged skeleton can be seen as a metaphor for the aging languages of art that have become hackneyed and formulaic and the 'scandalizing metaphor', intended to introduce indeterminacy and generate new unpredictable meanings, becomes a characteristic and defining feature of the language of avant-garde.

Besides, as the languages of the new hybrid avant-gardes were unfamiliar in the Indian context in the late nineteen-forties, the texts like 'Skeletons Laugh' also function as 'text-codes' and function to establish this avant-garde poetic idiom in Indian languages. As this theoretical approach holds that the cultural mechanism underlying communication as well as generation of new information (also the modernist agenda of 'making it new') involves translational exchange between two non-identical semiotic systems, it can be of great help in *understanding the cross-cultural dialogic nature of modernist avant-gardes in India.* This approach can help us to understand the cultural mechanism underlying the phenomenon of English- Marathi bilingualism and its relationship with modernism. In the past sixty years bilingual writers such as Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), Dilip Chitre (1938-2009), Vilas Sarang(1942-2015), Gauri Deshpande (1942-2003) and Kiran Nagarkar (1942) among others have played a considerable role in establishing modernism in Marathi literature and in Indian writing in English. These writers including Mardhekar are deeply connected to the urban metropolitan setting of Mumbai. The pervasive and decisive presence of the urban life in the avant-gardes across the world can also be understood in cultural semiotics terms.

While theorizing about the role of cities like Mumbai in thinking about modernism from the cultural semiotics perspective, Lotman's observations about the role of the city as a space for generation of new information are extremely pertinent. He remarks, "The city is a complex semiotic mechanism, a culture-generator, but it carries out this function only because it is a melting-pot of texts and codes, belonging to all kinds of languages and levels. The essential semiotic polyglottism of every city is what makes it so productive of semiotic encounters. The city, being the place where different national, social and stylistic codes and texts confront each other, is the place of hybridization, recordings, semiotic translations, all of which makes it into a powerful generator of new information. These confrontations work diachronically as well as synchronically: architectural ensembles, city rituals and ceremonies, the very plan of the city, the street names, thousands of other leftover from past ages act as code programmes, constantly renewing the texts of the past. The city is a mechanism, forever recreating its past, which then can be synchronically juxtaposed with the present. In this sense the city, like culture, is a mechanism

which withstands time (1990: 194-195)." The semiotic polyglottism of Mumbai has made it probably the most semiotically cosmopolitan of all cities in Maharashtra.

Cultural semiotics demonstrates that culture and semiotic systems (such as varied languages of art and literature) change in two ways: they change gradually, i.e. linearly and predictably, or they change abruptly, non-linearly and unpredictably or, in his terms, 'explosively.' Lotman notes, "Culture, whilst it is a complex whole, is created from elements which develop at different rates, so that any one of its synchronic sections reveals the simultaneous presence of these different stages. Explosions in some layers may be combined with gradual development in others. This, however, does not preclude the interdependence of these layers. Thus, for example, dynamic processes in the sphere of language and politics or of morals and fashion demonstrate the different rates at which these processes move." (Lotman, 2004: 7-12). This conceptualization of 'explosive' cultural change illuminates the notions of modernism and more significantly 'the avant-gardes' as modernism understood as in the beginning. Using this framework, one can understand Modernism, an umbrella term for various avant-gardes, as the one which deliberately models the languages of art on the everyday semiotic heterogeneity of the contemporary semiosphere and deliberately introduces 'explosive' processes, the elements of chance and unpredictability, in the languages of art.

Revolutions or explosive changes do not happen in all languages and in the entire culture simultaneously *en bloc* and *en mass* as the revolutionaries would like to believe. Hence if the agenda of the avant-garde was in Peter Burger's words, "the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionising of life as a whole (2010: 696)", there is little wonder on why it failed, for art is never autonomous – it is always contingent on other semiotic systems for its existence as semiotics of culture shows, and cultural life as a totality can never be "made new". Marcel Duchamp's celebrated introduction of a porcelain urinal into the semiotic frame of art as 'Fountain' (1917) is not actually a challenge to the autonomy of art (as no art is autonomous at any point in history) or even an attempt to scandalise or shock the bourgeois (as the bourgeois loves nothing better) but actually what Lotman has theorized as a bilingual semiotic trope, a metaphor, of juxtaposing two unjuxtaposable mutually untranslatable languages (the established to evoke 'illegitimate' associations and newer interpretations and bring about the explosive processes of change in the language of art by introducing unpredictable elements). Hence, instead of lamenting its failure in its professed agenda as Burger and his followers do, it would be more useful to analyse what the avant-garde modernism actually accomplished and what its contribution is. And this is precisely where the semiotics of culture can help us.

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