

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Cultural Narratives of Maharashtra in Contemporary Indian English Literature

**Sumit N. Kumthekar**

Department of English, Mahatma Phule Mahavidyalaya, Ahmedpur, Latur, India;  
skumthekar10@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary Indian literature in English: A representation and mediation of Maharashtrian narratives. Based on a large corpus of fiction, memoirs and poetry written between the 1980s and the present, this study examines how authors of Maharashtrian origin or affiliation, such as Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Nagarkar, Sachin Kundalkar, Nayantara Sahgal, et al., negotiate, contest and reconfigure Marathi cultural heritage in English's globalising idiom. This paper connects these literary works to postcolonial theory, subaltern studies and regional identity formation and argues that Maharashtra's cultural specificity the Warkari bhakti traditions of the region, Ambedkarite social reform in Dalit villages, Maratha historical memory and cosmopolitanism in Mumbai, as well as the rural landscapes of Vidarbha and Marathwada appears on stage not as a static ethnographic backdrop but rather emerges through those writings as a dynamic, contested narrative terrain infused politically. The paper goes on to examine how caste, gender, language, politics, and urbanization structure thematic concerns across this body of literature. It finds that Maharashtrian writing in English occupies a unique, intermediary and underexplored space within the larger body of Indian writing in English, a space that invites sustained critical attention.

**Keywords:** postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, regional identity, cultural narratives

## **FULL PAPER**

### **Introduction**

Perhaps the most persistent and productive tension underlying the study of Indian writing in English is that between literature and regional cultural identity. Though rooted in the vernacular, since *Midnight's Children* was celebrated for signalling a new phase of Indian English fiction (Rushdie 45), critics and scholars have been aware that regional specificity shapes literary production in English. However, within this broad conversation, Maharashtra, one of the most historically significant, culturally intricate and demographically complex states in India, has attracted relatively little sustained scholarly attention as a discrete literary-cultural region.

This paper seeks to fill that gap. That contemporary Indian English literature by Maharashtrians, or located within the mnemonic-mythic landscapes of Maharashtra, deserves to be read on its own terms as a complex and coherent body of work, is the argument it makes. These texts are held together not by a simple, unitary vision of 'Maharashtrian identity', such a homogenising impulse would be at once intellectually untenable and politically suspect, but by common engagement with a set of cultural, historical and social formations that the region makes possible (*Dangle 15*).

Maharashtra is a land of rare internal diversity. The cosmopolitan, multilingual metropolis of Mumbai exists next to the agrarian distress of Vidarbha and Marathwada; the ancient Warkari bhakti tradition of saints such as Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, and Tukaram juxtaposes with the radical social philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar; Maratha historical pride and the memory of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj sits uneasily beside claims made by Dalit communities for whom the dominant narrative in Maharashtra has often one that excluded or oppressed them (*Omvedt 42*). These tensions and multiplicities make their way sometimes explicitly, sometimes obliquely, into literary texts.

The paper unfolds in several stages. After outlining the theoretical landscapes from which these essays spring, it proceeds to explore key thematic concerns: caste and the Ambedkarite legacy, the Warkari bhakti tradition, the cultural geography of Mumbai, Maratha historical memory, gender and patriarchy, and the agrarian crisis as they figure across a range of literary texts. It then turns to the polemics of language, Morella's consideration of the multifaceted place of

English in a Marathi-speaking culture. This paper concludes with some thoughts on the future of this literary landscape.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach**

The analysis builds on several overlapping theoretical traditions. From postcolonial studies, it inherits a concern with the politics of representation and the legacies of colonial discourse, as well as with who speaks, for whom and in what language. Maharashtrian writers negotiate with this tension between the vernacular cultural archive and the Anglophone literary marketplace, making Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space, or hybridity, particularly relevant to our discussion (*Bhabha 56*). The eye and ear towards Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of the subaltern's ability to speak, ours was a simple bow to the insurmountable structural barriers Dalit and bahujan economies are put up against by upper-caste, English-lingual elites directing a literary field (Spivak 271).

It borrows from the current tradition of 'subaltern studies', most particularly from Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty's work, with its insistence on vernacular description being both important in itself and insufficient to encompass the totality of South Asian historical experience when receding into elite nationalist narrativisation (*Chakrabarty 89*). Maharashtra, in particular, resonates with the subaltern studies project in light of its legacy of popular religious movements, peasant revolts and Ambedkarite social revolution.

Scholars like Sheldon Pollock, in his account of vernacular literary cultures, have developed the concept of a type of 'regional modernity', and that is more or less what I'm going to use here to investigate how Maharashtra's literary traditions, mostly in Marathi, feed into the cultural imagination that these Anglophone writers draw upon, subvert/challenge (Pollock 112). Instead of treating Indian English literature as a singular field, it insists on regional genealogies and intertexts.

Methodologically, the essay relies primarily on close reading, locating individual textual moments within much larger social and historical contexts. The corpus under scrutiny includes novels, collections of short stories, memoirs and poetry published between 1980 and 2024. Though the emphasis is on texts in English, the analysis also includes attention to the significant corpus of Dalit and other subaltern literature originally written in Marathi and later translated into English, as these translations offer a key pathway between regional vernacular culture and the international Anglophone literary system (Limbale 33).

### **In the Shadow of Caste and Class: The Ambedkarite Legacy and Dalit Narratives**

Associating caste with the narratives of culture in Maharashtra is unavoidable. Maharashtra is the birthplace of B. R. Ambedkar, the jurist, economist, and social reformer who led the Dalit struggle for liberation from caste oppression, drafted the Indian Constitution, and converted to Buddhism in 1956. His thought continues to shape the political and sociocultural life of the region in significant ways (*Ambedkar 12*). In English, the literary expression of this legacy is an important and growing phenomenon.

Daya Pawar's *Baluta* in Marathi is considered a seminal work of Dalit autobiography in Maharashtra. Its English translation (Jerry Pinto) introduced this landmark work to an international readership, and the unflinching account of the degradation and violence that caste elicited in mid-twentieth-century Maharashtra has arguably influenced mainstream discourses of Dalit experience globally (*Pawar 34*). Pawar's narrative resists the palliatives of progress: his own Mahar community has been methodically shut out from economic opportunity, social dignity and cultural acknowledgement, and his prose maps this exclusion with unsparing detail.

Namdeo Dhasal, who founded the Dalit Panthers movement in 1972, embodies a different yet equally impactful strand of Maharashtrian Dalit cultural politics. His own poetry, both vandalistic and surrealist, is indebted to the tradition of the Marathi saint-poets but radically alters their devotional content: While the Warkari saints sang of liberation through devotion to Vitthal, Dhasal's verse seeks liberation through political confrontation and collective rage (*Dhasal 78*). His works, translated into English by the poet and critic Dilip Chitre and others, can only be described, at worst, as voicing the intensity and complexity found nowhere in Dalit cultural production internationally than in Maharashtra.

Newer Dalit voices in English include authors like Shahu Patole, whose reminiscences, *Saheb, Biwi aur Gangster* (various media adaptations) and cooking writing have established an unmistakable ground for Dalit cultural assertion (*Dhasal 82*), and Urmila Pawar, whose Marathi autobiography *The Weave of My Life* delivers a feminist Dalit lens on the interlocking oppressions of caste and gender in Maharashtra (*Pawar 92*). These texts together mean that Dalit literature in Maharashtra is not a uniform tradition, but rather a contested and internally diverse field, riven by generation, gender and political affiliations.

Kiran Nagarkar's *Ravan and Eddie* and its sequel, *The Extras*, adopt a different angle on caste. Set in a Bombay chawl of the 1950s, the novels follow the parallel lives of two boys, a Hindu Maratha and a Goan Catholic, who live close to one

another. Although not a Dalit text, Nagarkar's fiction is alert to the hierarchies and solidarities that govern chawl life, and his satiric horizon accounts for caste snobberies, communal tensions, and the economic precariousness of the urban poor in post-Partition India (Nagarkar, Ravan and Eddie 67).

### **Warkari Bhakti Tradition and Spiritual Geographies**

One of Maharashtra's most distinctive and durable cultural formations is the Warkari movement, a tradition of devotional pilgrimage and singing focused on the god Vitthal at Pandharpur. Beginning with the thirteenth-century poet-saint Dnyaneshwar and extending through Namdev, Eknath, Tukaram and Chokhamela (the last a Mahar saint whose status within the tradition is itself contentious), the Warkari produced a vast corpus of devotional poetry in Marathi that has shaped the regional cultural imagination for seven hundred years (Zelliot 150).

In modern Indian English literature, the Warkari tradition comes as much as a resource as a challenge. It works as a resource to the extent that it provides a vernacular repertoire of spirituality able to contest both colonial modernity and Brahminical orthodoxy: The saint-poets, most hailing from low-caste and artisan backgrounds, preached the insignificance of caste hierarchy before a democratic god of love. However, it is also a problem, at least an ambivalence, for those writers, particularly Dalit writers, whose movement into the spiritual, indicating that political struggles are mere appearances (Nagarkar, Ravan and Eddie 72), may feel like resignation (Zelliot 152).

A previous book of Pankaj Mishra's essays and his first novel, *The Romantics*, though not limiting themselves to Maharashtra, address the allure of bhakti spirituality among educated Indians disillusioned with Western modernity. The protagonist's engagement with the bhakti traditions of Indian devotion is in keeping with a broader literary trend to employ the bhakti archive as an oppositional discursive field for both colonial and postcolonial formations of selfhood (Mishra 88).

Moreover, more directly, the Pandharpur pilgrimage, the Wari has received a considerable amount of literary and documentary attention. Its annual enactment of community, its effacing of caste boundaries in the communal singing of abhangas and its articulation (with an emphasis on specificities) of Maharashtrian sacred geography make it a rich site for literary imagination. Meanwhile, other widely read Marathi novels translated into English from this tradition include those of V. S. Khandekar and P. K. Atre, in which the situations unfold in the spiritual terrain of Wari. At the same time, some contemporary writers have revisited this tradition to

reflect on narrating belonging and identity as well as on how sacrality lingers even during secular modernity (Khandekar 54).

**It covers the cosmopolitanism, exclusion and underworld in Mumbai.**

Mumbai, formerly Bombay, holds a special place in the cultural imagination of Maharashtra and of India as a whole. As the commercial capital of India, its most populous metropolitan center and the seat of the Hindi movie industry, Mumbai exists at once as a Maharashtrian city and a national and international one (Hansen 101). This dual identity, local and global, regional and cosmopolitan, creates a constructive tension in literary depictions of the city.

Rohinton Mistry is arguably Bombay's best-known literary cartographer. Mistry, who was born into the Parsi community, imbues his fiction with the textures of middle-class apartment blocks throughout the city, its rotting infrastructure and intricate social hierarchies. Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance and Family Matters (Mistry, Fine Balance 210) collectively form an anatomy of Bombay life through several decades of post-independence history. Mistry's is a Bombay of multiple and overlapping communities: Parsi, Hindu, Muslim, Goan Christian and his fiction pays attention to how the city's cosmopolitan promise is sullied by poverty, political violence and the Emergency of 1975–77.

A Fine Balance, which many regard as Mistry's masterwork, brings together characters from rural Maharashtra, Dalit tailors escaping caste persecution in their village and the Bombay tenements where they come to hide. What the novel therefore lays out is a topography of rural caste violence and urban poverty, tracing how the agrarian formations of Maharashtra are interlinked with its metropolitan ones. The Emergency serves as the historical backdrop for the novel, and Mistry's depiction of state violence against the underprivileged and disenfranchised is among the most devastating in Indian English literature (Mistry, Such a Long Journey 134).

Another kind of Bombay appears in Vikram Chandra's Sacred Games, an epic crime novel that spans the social strata of a Mumbai police officer and a gangster. Chandra's Bombay is a city defined by criminal networks, many of them rooted in Maharashtra's political economy in the 1970s and 1980s (Chandra 144). The novel is updated and comprehensive, covering all the events, including the rise of Shiv Sena, the demolition of slums and the nexus between organised crime, real estate and politics, providing a very strong picture of the many forces that made Mumbai what it is today.

Suketu Mehta's Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found applies a journalistic, yet literarily polished, eye to many of the same themes. Mehta's immersive chronicle

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of Bombay's dance bars, the film industry, gangsters, Jain diamond merchants and slum-dwellers represents one of the most comprehensive cultural portraits of that city in any genre (Mehta 98). His narrative of the riots in 1992–93 that followed the demolition of Babri Masjid is critical for examining how communal violence plays out in Maharashtra.

Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* and Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight* are relatively recent literary engagements with the city around which they concern themselves, grappling with the displacement of older communities by luxury real estate development and the fracturing of urban solidarities under conditions of economic competition under neoliberal capitalism (Adiga 67).

### **Historical Memory of Maratha and the Politics of the Past**

The memory of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and the Maratha Empire is one of the most potent, politically volatile cultural formations in modern Maharashtra. Further, the seventeenth-century resistance of Shivaji to Mughal power has been for at least as long as the late nineteenth century a focus of intense historiographical and political contestation (Cashman 145), when Bal Gangadhar Tilak mobilised the Ganapati festival and the figure of Shivaji as resources for a mass anti-colonial nationalism. In the generations since independence, this historical memory has been claimed by a spectrum of political forces, from the Shiv Sena's nativist chauvinism to more progressive interpretations earnestly advocated by Ambedkarite and left historians. Moreover, contemporary Indian English literature engages with Maratha historical memory in complex, often conflicted ways. The publication of a revisionist biography of Shivaji, James Laine's *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, by an American scholar that provoked violent protests throughout Maharashtra, the vandalisation of Pune's Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and a legal ban on the book in the state is just one episode among many over Maratha historical memory (Laine 23).

Ranjit Desai's *Shriman Yogi*, a Marathi bestseller later translated into English, depicts Shivaji less as a military hero than as a visionary statesman and spiritual leader; fictional engagement with the Maratha past is scant. Recent English-language novels set in the Maratha period, such as Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay* and its English translation, also interrogate the past from an individual psychological perspective, studying historical figures through the lens of the inner life against a backdrop of epic conflict (Sawant 54).

The question of Maratha identity is also key to understanding the political sociology of contemporary Maharashtra. The sheer hegemony of the Maratha

community in state politics, and its complicated relations with Dalit and OBC communities on one hand, and Brahmin communities on the other, can be explored through literary texts that illustrate how caste interplays with class narratives to cultivate political power in the state (Palshikar and Deshpande 1040). Sachin Kundalkar's novels and films, which grapple with Pune's middle-class Brahmin microcosm, and the novels of writers such as Vishwas Patil (whose Marathi novels have been widely translated) probe these social tensions with considerable acuity.

### **Gender, Patriarchy, and Women's Writing**

Women writing from Maharashtra in English and in translation from Marathi constitute an important and burgeoning corpus that confronts both the patriarchal structures of Maharashtrian society and the masculinist biases of the literary canon. On the one hand, from nineteenth-century educationists such as Savitribai Phule and Tarabai Shinde (whose *Stri Purush Tulana* (1882) is among the earliest feminist texts in any of the Indian languages) through to contemporary fiction and memoir writers like Urmila Pawar, Meenakshi Gigi Durham, and Shanta Shelke (Tharu and Lalita 210), Maharashtrian women's writing has a rich genealogy.

Savitribai Phule, who, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule, founded the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, is a symbol of tremendous significance for feminist and Dalit movements in Maharashtra. Her poems, letters, and speeches, which were recently collected and translated into English, articulate a vision of women's education and social emancipation that was radical in its context and remains inspiring today (Phule 22). Recovering and revaluing Savitribai's writings has itself been a major cultural project, one which offers an alternative to the largely male-centric canon of nineteenth-century Maharashtrian reform literature.

Shashi Deshpande, born in Dharwad, Karnataka, but with strong links to Pune and much of her writing set within the cultural milieu of Maharashtra's educated middle class, is another name associated with contemporary fiction. Novels (Palshikar and Deshpande 1040; Tharu and Lalita 215) such as *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time* probe the inner lives of Maharashtrian Brahmin women as they negotiate the contradictions between modernity, tradition and desire (Phule 25). Deshpande's fiction is in particular attuned to the silences and suppressions that undergird women's experience within the ostensibly progressive environment of the English-educated professional class.

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, the English translation from Marathi by Maya Pandit, is a seminal feminist Dalit text that follows the author's childhood and upbringing in the Mahar community of Konkan, Maharashtra. Pawar's story of how

she learned to read and write despite both caste exclusion and patriarchal discouragement, her years as an activist in the women's movement, and her emergence as a celebrated author constitute one of the most compelling personal narratives in Indian literature of recent times (Pawar 101).

Shanta Gokhale's *Rita Welinkar*, one of the rare Marathi novels to treat same-sex desire explicitly, and her subsequent critical writings on Marathi theatre and culture are an important feminist contribution to Maharashtrian literary culture. Her translation work, including several prominent Marathi plays into English, has also been an important component in making the Marathi theatrical tradition available to wider audiences (Gokhale 66).

### **Agriculture Crisis, Vidarbha and the Literature of Suffering**

The agricultural crisis in Maharashtra's Vidarbha and Marathwada regions, characterized by repeated droughts, debt, failed crops and an epidemic of farmer suicides that have taken tens of thousands of lives since the mid-1990s, is among the largest contemporary social catastrophes in India (Sainath 12). Its literary representation, though not yet especially extensive in English, is a significant strand within Maharashtrian cultural production.

P. Sainath's *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* is more journalism than literature in the conventional sense, but an irreplaceable document of rural suffering in Maharashtra and all over India. Its exposition of the structural causes of agrarian distress - the withdrawal of state support, the incorporation of smallholders into cyclical commodity markets, and the reassertion of caste and gender hierarchies in times of scarcity (Sainath 18) - has shaped subsequent writers' and journalists' articulations of these themes.

In fiction, the Vidarbha crisis has been hauntingly explored in a series of Marathi short stories and novels by writers like Laxman Mane, Arun Kolatkar and Ranganath Phatake, which have found their way into English translation with varying degrees of success. These texts avoid the temptation to aestheticise suffering and insist on the material specificity of agricultural failure and the human cost of structural neglect (Mane 44).

So far, several English-language writers and journalists who have worked for years in these regions of Maharashtra and beyond have made non-fiction accounts that matter for rural areas in Vidarbha. Jaideep Hardikar's *Ramrao: Life and Death in the Heartland*, which traces a farming family's long descent into crisis, exemplifies the kind of literary journalism that has emerged from prolonged engagement with that region's distress (Hardikar 73).

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### **Language Politics: The Legitimacy of English, Marathi and the Question of Literary Authority**

This brings us to the question of language, one that is particularly fraught for writers who decide to work with Maharashtrian cultural material in English. Maharashtra has a living and rich vernacular literary tradition: Marathi literature has been produced for the last eight centuries in an unbroken succession, and the contemporary literary scene of Marathi is alive and politically engaged, with institutional support channelled through Sahitya Akademi together with its affiliate bodies like Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad; additionally, there are hosts of publishers, little magazines and cultural organisations (Deshpande 55). Writing about Maharashtra in English is, I fancy, inevitably to be always already calculated in relation to dependence, supplementarity or competition with this tradition.

Some writers, particularly Arun Kolatkar, whose translations navigated back and forth between Marathi and English with impressive fluency, rejected any choice of language, producing significant work in both. Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, a sequence of poems from his visit to the pilgrimage town of Jejuri in Maharashtra, is considered one of the masterpieces of Indian English poetry. However, it draws deeply on the vernacular religious culture that both celebrates and ironises (Kolatkar 19). His posthumous Marathi collections, *Chirimiri* and *Kala Ghoda Poems*, show he was as alive to the vernacular tradition as he was to his Anglophone production.

The politics of translation are central to any account of Maharashtrian literature in English. The specific translation of Dalit autobiographies is a in many respects substantial political and equally literary project, which has perhaps incorporated texts previously only limited to the Marathi reading public into national and global discussion (Mukherjee 89). Translators like Jerry Pinto (who brought us Daya Pawar's *Baluta*), Maya Pandit (Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*) and Shanta Gokhale have been key players in this process, and their choices of idiom, register and degree of domestication are themselves culturally- and politically-charged.

The Shiv Sena's campaigns for Marathi linguistic rights in Mumbai, its denial of public-sector employment opportunities to non-Marathi speakers, attacks on north Indian migrants, and its demand for Marathi as the dominant language in Mumbai repeatedly echo in literary representations of the city (Gupta 33). The tensions between Marathi and Hindi speakers, Maharashtrian nativism and the cosmopolitan self-image of Mumbai, and regional cultural pride and national

integration were themes that repeatedly surfaced in the fiction and non-fiction of this period.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to demonstrate that cultural narratives of Maharashtra in modern Indian English literature represent a new, heterogeneous and politically vexed field of production. The texts the contributors examine from Rohinton Mistry's Bombay epics to Daya Pawar's Dalit autobiography, from Arun Kolatkar's bilingual poetry to Suketu Mehta's journalistic immersions in Mumbai's underbelly are bound by a consumer-response mode of relation to micro-cultural, historical and social formations that can be firmly said to be specific. Even when used in the service of broader literary and political arguments, this survey yields some major takeaways. In general, the literary representation of Maharashtra is marked by intense internal contradictions between Maratha historical pride and Dalit critiques thereof; between Mumbai's cosmopolitan promise and its realities of exclusion and violence; between spiritual traditions around Warkari saints and how those have morphed with a new modernity (Bhatt and Mukta 410); between Punjabi's very rich vernacular tradition, which has also enjoyed structural birthrights against English.

Second, those literary texts are not just reflections of a pre-existing cultural reality: they actively shape and contest the construction of that reality. [B]y the same token, when Dalit writers assert the right to tell their own story in their own way, they are not merely mapping your existing social reality but changing it; when Kiran Nagarkar's ironic fictions puncture the pretensions of Bombay's middle classes, they are doing both political and aesthetic work (Nagarkar, Cuckold 210).

Third, the choice of English as the language of writing, the politics of translation and the relationship between Marathi and English literary cultures are not peripheral to these texts but central to them. Writers dealing with Maharashtrian cultural material in English, necessarily perhaps always implicitly, but often also explicitly, contested the hierarchies that structure literary life across India: between English and the vernaculars, between metropolitan and regional cultures, between internationally recognised authors and most writers whose work circulates only in the Marathi-reading universe (Dharwadker 120).

Fourth and last, this body of literature deserves more critical attention than it has gotten to date. By avoiding the extremes of either pan-Indian national narrative or diaspora perspectives, Indian writing in English criticism has shied away from accounting for regional and vernacular dimensions of Indian literary culture. Such an uninterrupted alertness to the literature of Maharashtra in both its English and its

Marathi referents, and in the translations that shuttle between them, will wholeheartedly add layers to our understanding of the complexity and dynamism of Indian literary culture as a whole (Mukherjee 132). As Maharashtra remains a locus of intense social transformation, future literary representations will have to be enriched by contemporary conflicts such as ongoing negotiations around caste reservations, the agrarian crisis in Vidarbha and Marathwada, capital restructuring in the Mumbai space, and political mobilisation around Maratha identity. The cultural narratives of Maharashtra are not static, nor are they complete; rather, they are, as the society which they reflect and render to existence, terrains of continuous contestation, creativity and transformation.

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