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Review of Jayant Kaikini's *No Presents Please* (trans. Tejaswini Niranjana)

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Kaikini, Jayant. *No Presents Please: Mumbai Stories*. Translated from Kannada by Tejaswini Niranjana. Scribe, 2020.

The Australian imprint of a collection of Jayant Kaikini's Kannada-language short stories in English by subcontinental translation theorist, Tejaswini Niranjana, is an event in the Alain Badiou sense. In 2018, *No Presents Please* (Harper Perennial 2017) won the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature at the Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet and the Atta Galatta-Bangalore Literature Festival Lifetime Achievement Award. Recently, it received the 2021 National Translation Award in the United States of America, where an ethos of homogeneity, notwithstanding prolific multilinguality, has trouble grappling with the profligate profusion in even thinking about the languages that exist in India, making such a recognition even more remarkable. In Badiou's formulation, any truth is constituted by rupturing the order which supports it, so when Scribe, the multi-time winner of Small Publisher of the Year award in Australia, picks up Kaikini's stories in Niranjana's translations, it is an acknowledgement of the truths of multilingualism that interrupt Anglophone publishing regimes and demonstrate both its global dominance and its localised defences. Independent English-language publishers making the all-important decision to foster and nurture heterogeneous story-telling is a necessary move to transform the predominantly Anglospheric preferences of the Antipodean literary scene. However, in this venture, many of the critical non-European genealogies that bring such translations into being are submerged in the oceans that separate climate, content and communication. This review is a brief attempt to shine a light on such translatory forays and the routes they traverse; moreover, it privileges the ecosystems of plurality that constitute the rainforests of Indian writing in translation, rather than individual texts or translators.

After quarter of a century of postcolonial independence, the terrain of Indian literature began to be divided between those who read and wrote in the vernacular tongues routinely, and those who were beginning to do so preponderantly in English. Derived from the Latin *verna* (slave born in the household rather than abroad), the word 'vernacular' in the context of Indian publishing certainly attests to the place that literatures in the twenty-plus officially recognised languages of India had been relegated to, in its print market share. This does not mean that the so-called vernacular story-telling traditions had disappeared in the face of a dominant English-language industry: to the contrary, prolific *bhasha* (language) literatures enjoyed enormous readership, in the north, south, east and west Indian languages. But the imperial dictum in the 1835 Minute on Education by British politician, Thomas Babington Macaulay, that a "single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" had left behind the detritus of a certain colonial cringe.[1] Under British Rule, the Minute provided justification for an English language pedagogy policy for the subcontinent that would produce brown sahibs necessary to administer the Jewel in the Crown of the Empire. After independence, Anglophony became an aspirational ambition, and the price of passage into the putative metropolitan centre, for postcolonial elites who had inherited the fruits of freedom.

[1] Kumar, Anu. "Thomas Macaulay won the debate on how to shape Indian education. So who were the losers?" *Scroll.in*. Feb 04, 2017, 11:30 am IST. Accessed Dec 30, 2021. https://scroll.in/magazine/821605/thomas-macaulay-and-the-debate-over-english-education-in-india

Thus was born a divide between English-proficient and non-English proficient citizens of the brand new nation state. Those chasing the upwardly mobile dream in independent India were educated in English-medium schools, if they could afford it, while the vernacular medium came to occupy contested place in the hierarchised space of such a global *lingua franca*. Despite state-sponsored support for vernacular literatures via prizes and publication outlets, and a faithful following by those who had been schooled in formative anti-colonial convictions, Indian Writing in English (IWE) made inroads into the imaginations of later generations like mine. Buttressed by the efforts of Penguin Books India that had become a singular force for promoting subcontinental literatures in English in the 1980s, especially after Salman Rushdie won the Booker Prize in 1981, we were 'into' IWE.

In the Masters of English Literature that I undertook at Delhi University, the English literary canon reigned supreme: from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf. It was not until I enrolled in an MPhil that the first trickles of postcolonialism and translation studies entered the dry channels of my consciousness. My introduction to Jayant Kaikini's work happened soon after, when I interned as an editorial assistant at Katha in New Delhi in the mid-1990s. In the lead-up to fifty years of independence in 1997, India was experiencing an efflorescence of sorts in all things Indian, part nativist, and part an interrogation of nationalism which entailed delving into the roots of such sensibilities. Katha burst into this space with the audacious assumption that we English-educated postcolonial elites, in the age of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, bopping in equal parts to Bob Marley and the Beatles, changing from jeans into sarees for a SPIC-MACAY concert on classical Indian dance and music, were interested in reading *bhasha* literatures. Started as a grand experiment by the powerhouse Geeta Dharmarajan, this not-for-profit translation publishing house was an attempt to re-ignite interest in the subcontinent's multilingual narrative traditions among new generations not familiar with contemporary vernacular stories. The word *katha* means "story" in many South Asian languages and also "words" (loosely translated) in my mother tongue, Bangla. Creating an enormous network of newspaper and magazine editors, literary groups and local librarians, and calling upon their expertise to nominate the best story in that *bhasha* for the year, Dharmarajan inaugurated, in 1990, what would become an eagerly awaited annual event of the *Katha Prize Stories* series. Connecting writers with readers interested in vernacular stories who happened to be bilingual but did not necessarily have any prior experience of translating, she started training a motley crew, including me, who were fluent in English but also miraculously possessed any vestigial reading proficiency in our own *bhasha* literatures. While multilingual translators did their job of translating that year's 'best' story to go into that year's volume, we, the fledgling editorial team, collectively set our minds to work out those pesky quintessential questions: to italicise or not, to provide a glossary or not, parallel translations etc., to a readership that was Indian and, yet, not *au courant* with contemporary *bhasha* literatures in other regional languages. Our approach was diametrically different to Macmillan India's *Modern Indian Novel in Translation* series, launched in the heady excitement of that decade, which had chosen to italicise Indian words that would be available to most Indians, and of providing glossaries for those readers who might need help. Thus was born the Katha 'school' of translation that spawned a legion of translators like me, and a network known as Friends of Katha, who set about to co-create the *kathas* being spun out by myriad *bhasha* writers.

To return now to the task at hand after that elaborate backdrop above to the mise-en-scène of modern Indian translation practices (a colleague of mine often complains about the interminable weight of "too much history" that any subject from the subcontinent carries). Circa 1995: the best fiction published in 12 Indian languages in 1994 was to appear in *Katha Prize Stories* Volume 5. The collection included Kaikini's story "Amrutaballi Kashaya" from the magazine, *Sudha*, Yugadi special issue, endorsed by two doyens of the Kannada language

literary scene. Translated as “Unclaimed” by my colleague, Keerti Ramchandra,[2] who is fluent in 5 Indian languages, this story is titled “Unframed” by Niranjana in her curated collection, *No Presents Please*. Another story in this prize-winning edition appeared in a youth imprint of Katha’s, *Yuvakatha Book One*, translated by Padma Ramachandra Sharma in 2000: “Dagadu Parab’s Ashwamedha”[3] which appears as “Dagadu Parab’s Wedding Horse” in Niranjana’s 2018 treatment. I want to parse the distinctions between these translations by way of providing an insight into the multiple ‘truths’ that are produced in these interpretations and interventions: truths not of veracity or verisimilitude, but truths of the sites and the situations that produced them. As Niranjana explains in the “Translator’s Note” at the end of *No Presents Please*, in choosing to re-translate three previously-translated stories, she was, on the one hand, matching “the language and style of the rest of the stories” in this collection, so as to provide a site-specific coherence within the boundedness of its covers; and on the other, signalling the various geo-specific situations in which the translations took place during her “regular Bombay visits” to a city that she saw “with the same affection and curiosity that Jayant displays” (Kaikini 263). In that very sentence lies an instance of the multiplicity of truths: Bombay as the city for which both writer and translator, both outsiders to it, share a particular affinity, and the Mumbai in the subtitle of *No Presents Please* that gestures towards the politics of renaming of a new resurgent India. It may be apropos to ask if it important at all for a lay (in the sense of non-specialist/non-insider) reader to grasp the subtleties of these nomenclatures, and if not, what is the purchase of writers and translators as careful as Kaikini and Niranjana to indicate them? Niranjana provides a clue:

> Undertaking this translation was for me a coming to terms with the ruse of the ordinary that Jayant Kaikini has mastered. While “ruse” is often understood as subterfuge or deception, I read it as a gentle narrative trick, so evident in every single story of this collection…. the ordinary often reveals itself as surreal—…. The challenge for me, then, was to maintain the ordinariness of the narrative until it could be maintained no longer, and to let the translation lead the reader along without drawing attention to itself. At the same time, when the surreal began to seep into the story, and the ruse of the ordinary opened out onto a different terrain of engagement for the characters, the translation had to find the right words to signal this “turn”. (“Translator’s Note”, Kaikini 261-262)

The ruse of the ordinary inflects every corner of the island-archipelago today known as Mumbai. Continuously inhabited since the South Asian Stone Age, Bombaim passes into English hands through the marriage treaty between the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza and Charles II of England in 1661. A seat of the British Presidency and one of the largest seaports in the Arabian Sea after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Bombay becomes the Indian Ocean conduit that connects all of Empire’s outposts, including Australia. Postcolonial India makes it the financial capital and famed site of Bollywood, temples of desire as Vijay Mishra calls it, and ‘Bambai’ for the ordinary persons from anywhere/nowhere in India to make their way to, to make their fortune.[4] That is the locus of Saadat Hasan Manto’s *Bombay Stories* too, translated from the Urdu by Matt Reek and Aftab Ahmad and compiled together by Vintage

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[2] Kaikini, Jayant. “Unclaimed”. Translated from the Kannada by Keerti Ramachandra. In Geeta Dharmarajan & Meenakshi Sharma eds. *Katha Prize Stories* Volume 5. New Delhi: Katha, 1995. pp 173-184.

[3] Kaikini, Jayant. “Dagadu Parab’s Ashwamedha.” Translated from the Kannada by Padma Ramachandra Sharma. In Geeta Dharmarajan & Keerti Ramachandra eds. *Lukose’s Church and Other Stories* (The Yuvakatha Series Book One). New Delhi: Katha, 2000. pp 65-75.

[4] Mishra, Vijay. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. London & New York: Routledge, 2001.

Books in 2012. As the blurb of that collection states, "Arriving in 1930s Bombay, Saadat Hasan Manto discovered a city like no other: a metropolis for all, and an exhilarating hub of license and liberty, bursting with both creative and helpless despondency" (Manto n.p.). Finally, it is the twenty-first century megalopolis at the site of another wave of global capital that we arrive at: it is this Mumbai that Kaikini's stories are set in and curated through Niranjana's translations. It is a Mumbai that writer Suketu Mehta calls *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, where dreams travel with nightmares on a regular basis, where informal settlements flank the highest skyscrapers.[5] *No Presents Please* invokes the sea of fervid, fevered, fecund humanity that heaves in Mumbai, and introduces us to "photo framers, flower markets, and Irani cafes, revealing a city trading in fantasies while its strivers, eating once a day and sleeping ten to a room, hold secret ambitions close" (Kaikini blurb).

Allow me to take up the first story I mention above, translated as "Unclaimed" and "Unframed" by Ramachandra and Niranjana respectively, in order to think through these manoeuvres. Kaikini's Kannada title emphasises the medicinal decoction (kashaya) that the central character's mother conjures up from herbs like amrutaballi and punarnava, thereby metaphorising the nectar (amrit) of care that gives renewed life (purnarnava). However, both Ramachandra and Niranjana choose to erase the regular themes of rebirth, regeneration and revivification implied in this ordinary human sentiment. They pivot instead on the prefix 'un' to indicate the negative of belonging (Un claimed) and structuring (Un framed). Gangadhar, the son, and owner of a frame shop, has to deal with orders whose owners never arrive to collect them: in these destitute portraits are mirrored the million lives of a megacity that is both enterprising and devouring. As one customer says, "he was an orphan who had grown up in the city's armpits without a mother or a father. He had caught the pulse of the city and shaped his life according to the clocktower's hands" (Kaikini 44). But in the move from Ramachandra's title "Unclaimed" to Niranjana's "Unframed", readers might perhaps detect something of the schemata of an unscaffolded city where meaning has to be unanchored from sentimentality; or as Gangadhar's mother argues, "Why put a frame around memories" (Kaikini 40)? This is where Niranjana's nuanced translation of Kaikini's narratives of the ruse of the ordinary becomes poignant and pointed.

In this same city, as coexisting citizens of a claustrophobic population overflow, the other story I mentioned provides us with an even more interesting example of signalling the "turn" that refers to Niranjana's efforts to capture the ruse. Sharma's 2000 translation uses the original word from the Kannada title, Ashwamedha, a Vedic practice to assert imperial sovereignty that involved a royal horse being left to wander unharnessed throughout lands that the ruler could then claim. This is the dream that any migrant arrives into Mumbai with: to become a Mumbaikar and reign in it. Niranjana's title uses much the more prosaic words "Wedding Horse" that grooms strut on their way to the bride's home: those in the know can identify this is as part and parcel of marriage processions in many communities, while those not familiar with this routine ritual can still intuit that the horse is the vehicle of choice to make possible the union desired in the said wayward wedding. While Ashwamedha cues up insider readers to the larger-than-life nature of the struggles of Mumbaikars, of the journeys that down-and-out denizens of Bombay make on a daily level; to those who might be peeping into it as outsiders, the use of the ordinary words, "wedding horse," bring home the contrast of Dadagu Parab's life, humble and heroic at the same time to just be able to survive the city. These 'turns' illuminate the multiple 'truths' of every translation in *No Presents Please* and inhabit the in-between space of history and no-history in an urban landscape that reinvents India every day. The lack of any 'ancient' etymology or everyday mythology evidencing linguistic history in

[5] Mehta, Suketu. *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004.

the word "wedding horse" is a testimony to the intellectual challenge entailed in translating the continuities and discontinuities of such postcolonial places.

In the ferment of the 1990s, a number of studies in postcolonialism emerged, among them was Niranjana's ground-breaking theoretical monograph in 1992: *Siting Translation: history, post-structuralism and the colonial context*, that posited translation itself as a site that "shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism" (773). One of the aftermaths of this asymmetry is the continued need to go behind the translation of words that are not readily available and accessible to the global *lingua franca* of the English language. In such a context, new translations like Niranjana's point to the necessity of expanding our vocabularies such that we would understand the references to Ashwamedha just as readily as we do to Odysseus's epic voyages, and at the same time connect with the 'turn' of words like "wedding horse" into an aggregation of meanings. The stories range a span from 1986 to 2006, the twenty-year period during which India turns from a socialist republic to an open economy, paving the way for neoliberalism and urban reorganisations of various kinds. This transitory time is signalled through items of daily use that employ a specific turn of phrase, advertisements, snippets of Bollywood movie songs, changes in locales and local landmarks. Not chronologically arranged, these stories introduce us to characters who seem to be proximate enough but not related through blood ties or localities that seem to exist in several generations: everyone seems to be an *arrivant* into Mumbai and has the potential to both forge relationships with other migrants, or melt at any time into its netherworlds. By making the decision to formalise a sustained diction for them throughout, Niranjana also imparts in her translation "the flavour of the speech, the hybrid Hindi-Urdu-Dakhani speech that is the cultural vernacular of Bombay and is signalled prominently in all the stories" (Kaikini 265). This claim in her "Translator's Note" made me desperately want to read the original and note that auditory différance the Konkani-speaking Kaikini would have made in Kannada in which he writes (of which I know not a word), and one which Niranjana herself draws attention to, "thinking about which might tell us more about the relative lack of Kannada critical writing on his work" (Kaikini 266).

> Hence, though Jayant writes in Kannada, people may wonder if he is a "Kannada writer." The language of Jayant Kaikini's fiction—as well as the characters who populate the stories—exceed the post-Independence dynamic that ties language to identity. In doing this, they speak to the experience of the city that smoulders in these pages. ("Translator's Note" 267)

One of the interesting compository strategies that this compilation uses is *not* to indicate section breaks (in the Katha style, this was done by highlighting opening words in bold). Niranjana's (or the publisher's) choice to not differentiate temporal or spatial shifts of locations renders the experience of reading these stories more aligned to the inexorable movement of the global city, while also tendering the local orality of the narration audible. Each of the stories in this collection pulls us along with the narrative, only to stop us in our tracks at that turn, that demands of us to excavate its genealogy via myriad hyperbolic megalopolises that seemingly could float anywhere from Mexico City to Manila to Mumbai, but which intimate their utter specificity through such translatory ruses.