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The Use of White Space in Poems: Meaning and Affect Making Through Manipulation of Space in Contemporary Indian Poetry

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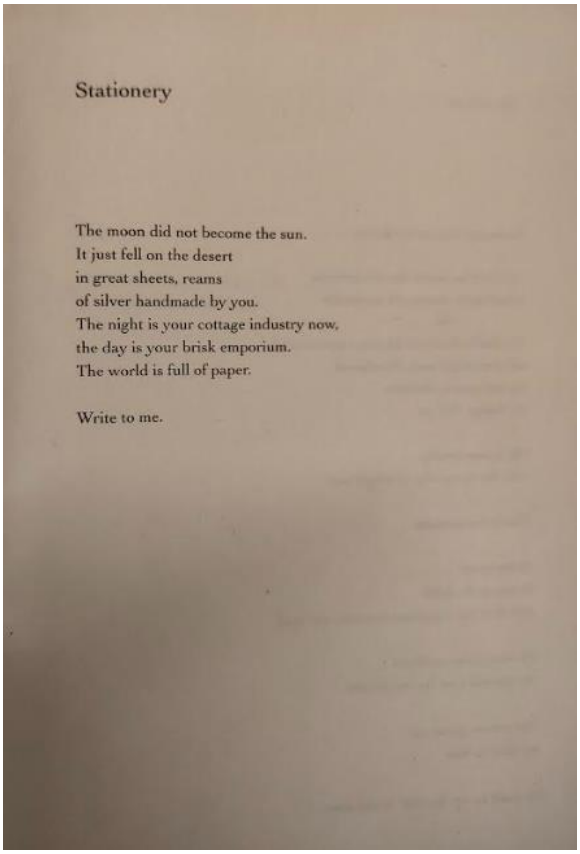
Abstract

In poetry, line-breaks "shape meaning." Poets use them to "encourage the interpretations they desire." While several and often overlapping reasons may undergird the choice of a particular line-break in a poem, including "speed, sound, syntax, surprise, sense, [and] space", this article explores the meaning-making and affect-making practices through the manipulation of *white space* in poetry. The archive that it draws from is of contemporary Indian poetry, particularly the works of poets Arun Kolatkar (b. 1932), Agha Shahid Ali (b. 1949) and Aditi Rao (b. 1985). Furthering Wagner's argument that white "space between and around lines create[s]…expectations that are fulfilled or countered by the text" and that organisation of space in poetry "create[s] a sense of drama," this article studies the varying tactics through which contemporary Indian poets use the device of space to manage meaning and affect in their work.
Keywords: Contemporary Indian Poetry, Space in Poetry, Affect, Arun Kolatkar, Agha Shahid Ali, Aditi Rao, Line-breaks

What is a poem if not black ink on white space? When we read a poem, we scan a page or move across pixels on a screen. This is the fundamental physical form a poem always takes both in its writing and in the manner it is read. In other words, we can say *a poem is ordered space* wherein such an ordering is precipitative of meaning and affect. In the reception of any poem, the reader's eye moves. If a poem is written in a West Germanic language such as English, the reader will move their eye (more or less) from left to right and top and bottom. On the other hand, if it is in a Semitic language such as Arabic or an Indo-Aryan language such as Urdu, then the horizontal movement of the eye will be the opposite, right to left. What is common and interesting in both these instances, however, is for the eye to move at all i.e. its movement *across space* is crucial to the cognitive perception and absorption of a poem. A poem is always suspended in space. One of its key axes of meaning-making and affect-making is spatial. Both the writer and the reader actively participate in this spatial arrangement of a poem.

In her essay 'Learning the Poetic Line: How Line Breaks Shape Meaning', the poet and scholar Rebecca Hazelton scrutinises the many effects of line-breaks in contemporary free verse and how they can significantly alter the reading of a poem. Lineation, according to her "is one of many devices poets use to emphasise or subordinate meaning" (ibid.). How you choose to end a line, where and on precisely what word, varies the possible interpretations of a poem. Lineation "orchestrate[s] ambiguities…shapes readers' involvement in and understanding of a poem" (ibid.). We should remember that such a study of *where the poetic line ends* is another name for a study of *where blank space (of a page or a screen) begins*. Line-breaks are part of a larger ecology of space in a poem, the primary organising principle of space overlays them. Line-breaks are, after all, spatial manoeuvres a poet performs in order to emphasise some specific word, some particular sound, some peculiar effect, over others. "As a writer of poetry," Hazelton writes, lineation is "one of the best ways to steer readers' experience of language and different potential meanings" (ibid.).



Stationery

The moon did not become the sun.
It just fell on the desert
in great sheets, reams
of silver handmade by you.
The night is your cottage industry now,
the day is your brisk emporium.
The world is full of paper.

Write to me.

A simple example will suffice to demonstrate the line-break, or spatial ordering of a poem, as an effective affect-making device. The Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali's poem 'Stationery' from his collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987, 2009) is an apposite example. The poem is about nursing a passionate longing across enormous distances, spatial and temporal. In the tradition he was deeply familiar with, i.e. of the Urdu ghazal (he had begun translating Faiz in the same decade), Shahid imagines the beloved as faraway, unresponsive and even haughty. The poet-lover, on the other hand, belongs to the canonical literary register of desire, desperation and complements the distance from his beloved by his uncontainable wish to bridge it. 'Stationery' is indicative of Shahid's reliance on this Urdu poetic register which only deepened in his subsequent editorial and creative work around the English ghazal. The piquancy of the poet-persona's longing is captured in the manner the poem ends, both discursively and spatially. In the text of the poem, the world is imagined as offering the beloved endless opportunities to respond to, to communicate with the poet-lover none of which the beloved employs. Each surface of the world is waiting to be written on. In an eight line poem, almost all of the first seven lines, enmasse, are devoted to what the beloved could do, with the means available to

him to initiate contact, to answer, to reach out. In the last eighth line, *spatially distanced* from the preceding seven, standing on its own, alone, in a separate, lone one-line stanza, the poet performs his final plea. The poem reaches its crescendo (Latin *crescere* is to 'grow') through the means of this spatial manoeuvre.

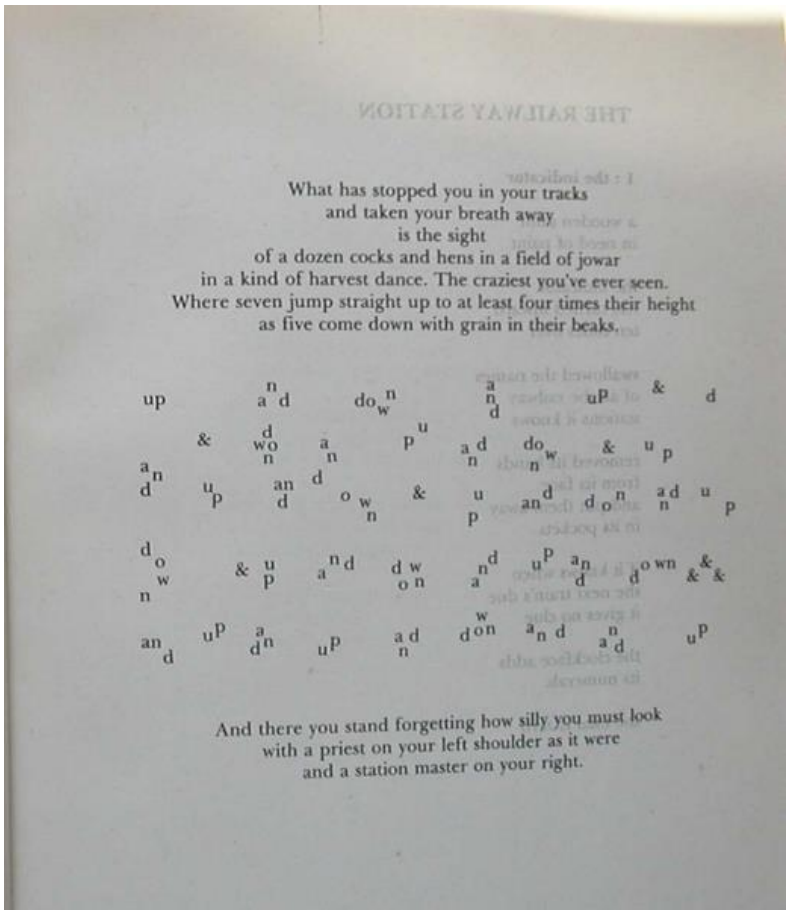
The spatial distancing i.e. the separation of the last line from the rest, *on the page*, is necessary to this affect-making in the poem. It is, as Wagner had claimed, responsible for the "sense of drama" of the poem (ibid.). It mimics the necessary breach, familiar in Urdu literary convention, between the beloved and the poet-lover. The poem is small, contained, a tiny seven line block followed by a one line slice, both of these suspended against the giant white of the page. This enormous, silent white swathe of the page around the poem-text, almost overwhelming it, can be said to be of the same material as the "great sheets" within the poem that fall "on the desert", "reams / of silver handmade by" the 'you', the subject of the poet's longing (Shahid Ali: 2009, 71). This empty white space, I propose, is also a part of the poem, integral to its semantic and affective work. "The world is full of paper" (ibid.) as indeed is the page which the reader looks at *is* mostly white paper and very little printed text. It is mostly desolation against which the black ink of the poem's print is set in relief. As is clear by now, this is a spatial universe of meaning and affect. The longing and the distance it covers is performed *in* space, *on* the page. The breach is articulated through where the stanza breaks off and launches a separate, lone line. Its loneness has both a discursive and a spatial coding. One that is *understood* and *seen* by the reader at the same time.

There is a persuasive case to be made for taking into account the spatial arrangement as integral to the craft and capacities of poetry. This argument has been made most strongly for the genre of 'concrete poetry' which explicitly "exploit[s]," in R.P. Draper's definition, "the possibilities, not only of sound, sense and rhythm — the traditional fields of poetry — but also of space, whether it be the flat, two-dimensional space of letters on the printed page, or three dimensional space of words in relief and sculptured ideograms" (1971, 329). Such poems, according to Draper, actively take "advantage of the extra impact which can be given to words by visual lay-out". Popular, canonical examples include George Herbert's (d. 1633) 'Easter Wings' whose text's width *thins out* when the poet-persona experiences the withdrawal of divine grace, and *thickens* when such grace is in plenty, or poem about the mouse's tail/tale from *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (d. 1898), where the *tale* of the mouse is shaped like (its pun) the *tail* of the mouse, and tapers into almost indecipherability.

In this article, I propose that the considerations of space in the meaning and affect producing work of the poem need to be made not just for the more overt disorderliness and playfulness vis-a-vis space common to the genre of concrete poetry, but for most free verse poetry. After all most contemporary free verse takes the left-aligned indentation as an almost invisible given even as the right margin

remains an open field with varied kinds of manoeuvres, that the unjustified text performs in terms of line-lengths, spacing between words, staggering the words of the same sentence into multiple lines, and attendant to most of these, remarkable acts of enjambment, often counterintuitive to syntactic expectations. We need to read this left-alignment of most free verse text as a spatial convention in literary print, silently contributing to the construction of the poem rather than letting it remain unseen and unaccounted for. Similarly, the horizontality of the poem's line (which many concrete poems upend) is a spatial feature whose conventionality in print is highlighted, when broken by free verse. This article calls for defamiliarizing our view of the usual horizontality and left-alignment of reading poems, as only their *usual* but not *necessary* features. Once space is taken into account, other than sense and sound, the poem's expressive capacities, and our capacities to read it, multiply. The poem is meaningfully revealed as a physio-optical form.

In the penultimate poem of his *Jejuri* series, 'Between Jejuri and the Railway Station', the English and Marathi poet Arun Kolatkar defamiliarizes the usual spatiality of the free verse poem (favouring a more concrete manoeuvre in Draper's sense), in order to do the work of epiphany (1974, 2005). Headed to the railway station, he is about to leave the Maharashtrian pilgrim town of Jejuri, a stone's throw from Pune, where the poet has spent a day. A contemporary of Kolatkar's, the poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, said of Kolatkar's poem-sequence that the "presiding deity of *Jejuri* is not Khandoba, but the human eye" (qtd. in Chaudhuri, xviii). What this meant was that the lyric poet is able to elevate the ordinary through the gift of his observation. In a temple town, Kolatkar's eye rests not devotedly on the idol of the main deity, but instead on a parade of small, otherwise insignificant animals, people, objects and structures. These could be black eared puppies or dung beetles, fallen pillars or dried out water taps, doors with broken hinges or the very transient chalk patterns drawn by old men the day before. Kolatkar's lyric projects significance onto the little, extracts epiphanies from the everyday, instead of looking vertically upwards towards the divine. With a temerity reminiscent of Bhakti poets (Kolatkar was a translator of Janabai and Tukaram) his deities are on the eye level, not in a sublime out-of-reach upwardness. As he leaves Jejuri, the penultimate poem's spatial tactic



What has stopped you in your tracks
and taken your breath away
is the sight
of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar
in a kind of harvest dance. The craziest you've ever seen.
Where seven jump straight up to at least four times their height
as five come down with grain in their beaks.

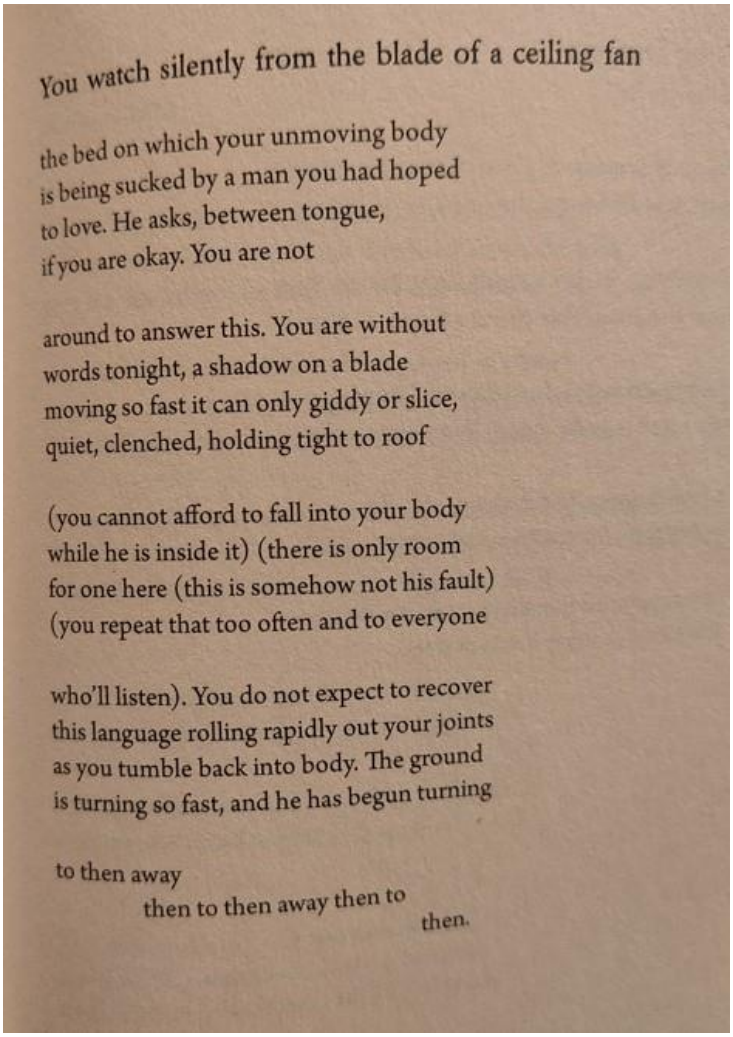
up and down & down & up
and up and down & up
down & up and down
and up and down up
and up and down up

And there you stand forgetting how silly you must look
with a priest on your left shoulder as it were
and a station master on your right.

has the breakthrough effect of turning an ordinary mofussil, agrarian site into one capable of unexpected epiphanies.

Epiphany comes from the Greek *epiphainein* which means to *reveal*. Kolatkar uses a spatial tactic to do the work of revelation in this poem. Almost at the end of *Jejuri*'s sequence, here, the poet-persona finds himself standing "still like a needle in a trance", in a moment of "perfect balance", stopped "halfway between / Jejuri on the one and the railway station on the other hand" (1974, 50). It is in this zone of liminality that the epiphanic strikes him. It takes his "breath away" (ibid. 51). The site of the epiphanic in the poem is "the sight / of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar / in a kind of harvest dance. The craziest you've ever seen." (ibid.). It is at this crucial moment that the poem's printed text explicitly captures and concretely performs the 'dance'. The conventionality of horizontality of the rest of the lines in the poem is abandoned and the words begin to mime the movement of the "hens and cocks" on the wide, white surface of the page. The phrase "up and down" is repeated several times in a manner where both the horizontal and the vertical adhesion of the letters of words is broken and the letters jump, as it were, in the directionality determined by the very semantic content of the phrase — *up and down*, away from each other in a kind of liberatory trance. The spatial manipulation is key to advance the revelatory content of the poem, it sets it in relief against expected alignment of the rest of the lines in the poem. It actively captures and becomes what "the human eye" of the poet sees (Mehrotra ibid.). The unexpected spatiality of the phrase *up and down* jumps out from the poem text and constitutes its epiphanic moment. It is key that this unprecedented play of the shape of words is attributed to the ordinariness of the harvest dance of "hens and cocks" (ibid.) rather than to the divine doings of Khandoba. It is precisely the act of spatial manipulation that raises the ordinary to the event of the epiphanic. The lyric project of finding significance in regular observable entities rather than in metaphysical objects is completed through a spatial manoeuvre. It is this spatial bedlam on the white page that stupefies the poet-persona "[l]ike a needle that has struck

a perfect balance between equal scales / with nothing left to add or shed" (ibid. 50). *Jejuri* reaches its crescendo through a spatial strategy.



You watch silently from the blade of a ceiling fan

the bed on which your unmoving body
is being sucked by a man you had hoped
to love. He asks, between tongue,
if you are okay. You are not

around to answer this. You are without
words tonight, a shadow on a blade
moving so fast it can only giddy or slice,
quiet, clenched, holding tight to roof

(you cannot afford to fall into your body
while he is inside it) (there is only room
for one here (this is somehow not his fault)
(you repeat that too often and to everyone

who'll listen). You do not expect to recover
this language rolling rapidly out your joints
as you tumble back into body. The ground
is turning so fast, and he has begun turning

to then away
then to then away then to
then.

The Delhi-based English poet Aditi Rao's collection *A Kind of Freedom Song* (2019) establishes a slow bildungsromanic arc, in six sections, from self-erasure to self-consolidation, from a lyric interiority wracked by doubt to one informed by constant self-discovery, and from experiences of violence by men to ones of care offered within sisterhood. The larger arc of feeling in the book moves from being asked by overbearing (male) presences to "hide" one's "six or eight arms" (ibid. 1) i.e. to arrest one's potentiality as a woman and to quieten, to one where this poet-persona finds solidarity among women and their friendships that teach her "how to beat the sinisters" (ibid. 88) and give her "the [all too important] permission to explode" (ibid. 89). In an early poem in the collection, 'You watch silently from the blade of a ceiling fan', the poet-persona experiences disassociation from the self because of, it is strongly suggested, a difficult experience of sexual intimacy. In the earlier lines of the poem, the capacity of intimate sexual violence to cause a sudden and disturbing splitting of the self is made evident. The poem, written in second-person to a 'you', engages in a sort of self-talk, where the poet-persona addresses her own disassociated self. Consequent to the difficult sexual experience, she seems to have stepped outside of her body, and is like a shadow hanging on the ceiling fan, looking at its own body lying on the bed below; "[y]ou watch silently from the blade of a ceiling fan // the bed on which your unmoving body / is being sucked by a man you had hoped / to love" (ibid. 27). In setting up such an interior dialogue, as it were, in addressing one's own split self as a way to navigate sexual trauma, the poet uses two separate spatial tactics to mark the distinctive event of dissociation of the self.

One of these tactics is a crucial and an overlapping line-break and stanza-break at the end of the poem's first stanza. This spatial organisation of the sentence that straddles the first and the second

stanza implicates a very significant usage of enjambment and white space on the page. The male partner on the bed "...asks, between tongue, / if you are okay. *You are not // around to answer this.* You are without / words tonight…" (ibid., emphasis mine). The line break and stanza break after "[y]ou are not" and the swathe of white space between this and the next stanza create a resonant doubling of meaning. It allows the reader not just a minor pause in reading, instigated usually by a line-break. Instead, a infinitesimally but importantly longer temporality of a pause is ensured by this break also being a stanza break that implies more white space between lines. Through this spatial strategy, the poet-persona becomes two things at once. She is both "not" okay and she is "not around to answer this" question about whether she is okay or not. The detachment of the self from the trauma unfolding in real time is captured by this spatial organisation of the enjambment. In the interior dialogue, the entity of consent is withheld. In the same breath, however, the capacity of clearly offering or withholding consent, one way or the other, while one is embedded in the real time of the traumatic experience, is recognized as difficult to command at a moment's notice. It is as if both answers, above and below the white spatial breach of the stanzas, are true.

The second spatial tactic employed by Rao is in the manner in which she ends the poem. At the end of the sexual trauma experienced by the poet-persona, lies not the shoring up of the self or the act of trustful communication with him who has been responsible for this trauma, seeking accountability or apology. Instead, there is a dispersal of such a possibility. As she "tumble[s] back into [her] body", "language [is] rolling rapidly out [of her]...joints" (ibid.). It is near the end that the spatial arrangement of the poem maps the dispersal of any certainty of self-recovery that the poet-persona could have hoped for. The earth slips from under her feet and the partner slips beyond the reach of any meaningful communication. "The ground / is turning so fast, and he has begun turning // to then away / then to then away then to / then" (ibid.). Whereas the earlier four stanzas of the poem, of about thirty words each, resemble sturdy blocks made up for four full lines, this last thin stanza is only three small lines, all together amounting to only ten words. This sparseness is coded spatially. The ten words are staggered and spread over three lines in a rough downward slope, the last line having only one word "then" as the tapering point of this sloping dispersal. The poet-persona's voice tapers, fades, falls. The partner rolls away, an unmitigable breach expanding between them. The ground turns on its axis disorientedly. This is performed by the spatial scattering of words, unlike the previous stanzas. Here, this scattering mimes the dying movement of a blade of a fan, slowing down in circles, "to *then* away / *then* to *then* away *then* to / *then*" (ibid., emphasis mine) The rebuilding of the sense of self that is attempted in subsequent poems of Rao's collection reckons with such a debilitation and erosion of the self that is mapped here spatially.

This article has argued that our usual focus on sound and sense while doing close reading of poems needs to be supplemented by attention to how space works in and around the poem text. This

additional point of focus will help us establish a more engaged and exhaustive account of the affective and meaning-making strategies of the poem. In reading contemporary Indian poets such as Kolatkar, Ali and Rao, each of whom explicitly put white space to meaningful work in their poems, this article has proposed a reading mechanism attentive to such spatial-textual strategies. It has argued that the affective work of free verse poems is not done only by the sense-making devices such as images/metaphors, or the rhythm-making devices as a metre/rhythm. Instead, a poem's spatial coding on a white page is deeply contributive to the effect it has on readers, to the many ways they develop emotional responses to the poem text. The article has argued that once this otherwise usually unseen dimension of space is opened up for consistent scrutiny, our reading of poetry in general, and of contemporary Indian poets more specifically, will become more sensitive to the affective and discursive tactics any poem performs.

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