

Citizenship of Poems: A Poetics of Cosmopolitan Space in Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*

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Abstract

The advancement in the concept of space as experienced and imagined in Contemporary Indian English poetry, allows it to transcend boundaries of various kinds. New additions to the concept of space in poetry, in the form of typography and structure; long-lined couplets, and enjambments; visual rhymes, and the intended and unintended placement of whitespace provide guidance to the reader as they navigate through the text. Concentrating on the representation of space, place, and time, in a real and imaginary universe, the article intends to focus on the concept of 'citizenship of poems' and cosmopolitan space, in the epic retelling of Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions*. The article delves deeper into how poetry transcends geographical barriers, travels with people, technology, translation, images, and whitespaces to become a global language and engage readers with some of the most pressing social and cultural issues on a global scale.

Keywords: Citizenship; Cosmopolitanism; Culture; Poetic forms; Poetry; Space.

Introduction

Too often, we limit our reading and comprehension of poetry to regional or national contexts, neglecting the vast amount of cross-cultural exchange of traditions, emotions, sensibilities, and histories that happens across national and international borders. Poetry can provide insight into the complexities of the human experience and can help people understand the diversity of the world's citizens. By transgressing the concepts of narrow borders and limited identity, poetry emerges as a powerful voice of the disenfranchised margin. It becomes a metonym for the fecund celebration

of diversity and interconnectedness; for shared social spaces and pluricultural ethos. And that is why the notion of cosmopolitanism assumes a far greater significance in contemporary poetry.

The term Cosmopolitanism is defined in the Collins dictionary as being “free from local, provincial, or national ideas, prejudices, or attachments; at home all over the world.” According to John Dryzek, cosmopolitanism is a way of thinking and living that transcends the boundaries of nation-states and local identities. It is a concept that values shared humanity and global interconnectedness over narrow allegiances to one’s nation or locality. Cosmopolitans see themselves as citizens of the world and strive to create a world that is based on mutual understanding, cooperation, and respect. They recognize the benefits and challenges of global integration and strive to create a world that is equitable and just for all. Cosmopolitans practice a type of intersectional thinking that recognizes the interconnectedness of all people and cultures and works to create a world that is free of local, provincial, or national prejudices.

The concept of cosmopolitanism should not be confused with humanitarianism and universalism as it emphasizes the importance of global citizenship and a sense of belonging to a global community. It is based on the idea that individuals should identify with a global community and see themselves as citizens of the world, rather than citizens of one particular nation. In contrast, humanitarianism is focused on providing assistance to those in need, while universalism seeks to promote shared values and beliefs that are applicable to all people, regardless of where they are from. Additionally, cosmopolitanism focuses on expanding an individual’s understanding of the world and creating a sense of global empathy, while humanitarianism and universalism tend to be more focused on providing aid and upholding shared values. And when we remap cosmopolitanism with poetry, several questions arise – How do poems travel? What makes poetry leave home and return? What makes it possible for the poem to cross borders? And how does poetic travel differ from other modes of transportation in this digital world? Hence, with particular reference to Karthika Nair’s epic retelling of the *Mahabharata* in *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* and the transnational criticism theory as propounded by the leading theorist of poetry and postcoloniality Jahan Ramazani, in his book *A Transnational Poetics*, the paper intends to answer the above-mentioned questions by critically focusing on the concept of ‘citizenship of poems’, and cosmopolitan space across uneven global terrain in the context of Nair’s *Until the Lions*.

Cosmopolitanism, particularly in terms of poetry comes in various forms. In poetry, it is the expression of a global worldview in the medium of verse. It is the celebration of the interconnectedness of all people, places, and things. It is the recognition that we are all part of one big, diverse, and ever-changing global community. From the exploration of different cultures and perspectives to the celebration of diversity and inclusion, cosmopolitanism thrives in various shades in poetry. One form of cosmopolitanism in poetry is to explore global cultures and perspectives. This type of cosmopolitanism in poetry is often expressed through vivid imagery and metaphors to provide a window into another culture. Another form of cosmopolitanism in poetry is the celebration of diversity and inclusion. This type of cosmopolitanism in poetry celebrates the beauty and strength of diversity and encourages readers to embrace the differences that make us unique. Lastly, cosmopolitanism in poetry can also be expressed through the exploration of the interconnectedness of people, places, and things. This type of cosmopolitanism in poetry often takes the form of a globalized worldview, which celebrates the interconnectedness of all living things.

Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions* is cosmopolitan in its attempt to bring together multiple cultures and perspectives to create a complex and nuanced narrative. The collection draws on a variety of sources, including Indian mythology, folk tales, and classical literature, to explore themes of identity, gender, power, and violence. It also explores the tension between the traditional and the modern, and between the personal and the political. Nair's use of multiple languages, including Hindi, Marathi, and Sanskrit, further emphasizes the global nature of her work. The poems are a testament to the power of literature to transcend time and place and to create a shared cultural experience for readers around the world. The book draws from a range of sources, both historical and contemporary, to explore the stories of characters from an array of cultures, religions, and regions of the world.

From the *Mahabharata* of the heroes to the *Mahabharata* of the outcaste warriors, the book spans multiple locales and perspectives to examine the complex and intertwined relationships between men and women, gods and humans, and violence and justice. Its cast of characters includes a variety of people from different backgrounds, including Hindu warriors, Muslim princesses, handmaidens, and nameless soldiers. Through the juxtaposition of these characters, Nair's work offers an insightful exploration of the human experience and its implications for modern society. Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions* employs a variety of poetic forms from

different cultures to construct an intercultural landscape. Drawing from a wide array of sources, *Until the Lions* incorporates texts from ancient Sanskrit epics, Indian folk tales, Greek classics, and modern Western poetry. These inclusions lend a cosmopolitan flavor to her work as she is able to draw from different poetic forms to create a unique synthesis of different cultures and traditions. These poetic forms are also a reflection of her belief that poetry can both unify and enrich cultures and that it can be a powerful tool for creating a global dialogue. By drawing on poetic forms from around the world, Nair encourages readers to think beyond the boundaries of their own culture and to appreciate the diversity found in the world.

As put forward by Jahan Ramazani in the third chapter of his book *A Transnational Poetics* titled ‘Traveling Poetry’, “the sonic qualities of poetry in themselves constitute a form of travel”. He writes, “In poetry, travel—not merely the plot-driven excursus into a foreign land—may occur at the level of a substituted letter, a varied rhythm, a pivoting line” (Ramazani 59). Poetry’s “place-leaping lineation, cross-cultural symbols, and aesthetic hybridization . . . affords a remarkable freedom of movement and affiliative connection” (Ramazani 62). Jahan Ramazani’s concept of ‘citizenship of poems’ and Karthika Nair’s *Until the Lions* are related in that they both explore the idea of citizenship through the lens of poetry. For Ramazani, the concept of citizenship is a poetic practice, exploring how language can be used to create meaningful connections between citizens and the state. He argues that language has the power to create a shared identity and a more equitable vision of citizenship. Nair’s work takes this concept a step further, exploring how the power of poetry can be used to challenge oppressive and unjust systems.

Her work examines how the stories of the marginalized and oppressed can be given voice and power through poetry, giving them a form of citizenship that is not bound by state or national boundaries. By doing so, she highlights the importance of stories and language in creating an inclusive and equitable society. Furthermore, Jahan Ramazani’s concept of citizenship of poems emphasizes the idea that poetry is a universal language that transcends national boundaries and can be used to bridge divides in order to create cosmopolitan citizenship. This concept is built on the idea that poetry can help people to view the world beyond their own experience and to make connections with people from other cultures, creating a sense of solidarity that can help to break down barriers of prejudice and racism. Nair’s *Until the Lions* builds on this concept of cosmopolitanism by using poetic language to explore themes of love, violence, and power

across different cultures, eras, and geographical locations. Nair's poems in *Until the Lions* create a sense of interconnectedness between different cultures. Jahan Ramazani's concept of 'citizenship of poems' and Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions* are related in that they both explore the idea of citizenship through the lens of poetry. Nair's poem creates a sense of interconnectedness between different cultures, while also highlighting the shared experience of oppression and marginalization that people of all backgrounds can relate to. Through her poetic language, Nair creates a poetics of cosmopolitanism that encourages readers to think beyond their own experience and to view the world from a broader perspective. Through her exploration of the intersections of cultures through various poetic forms, Nair creates an understanding of the vastness and complexity of the world. In Ramazani's work, he uses a combination of traditional and experimental forms to explore how the cultural boundaries of different countries and cultures intersect and clash with one another. Similarly, in Nair's work, she uses her own personal experiences as well as those of other cultures to create a more inclusive, global perspective.

Additionally, Ramazani's concept of traveling poetry involves the idea of poems being written in response to different geographical and cultural contexts. This has allowed for the creation of a poetics of cosmopolitan space, whereby writers from different cultural backgrounds can come together to create a dialogue through their words. This concept of traveling poetry has been used by Nair as well in *Until the Lions*. By taking existing poetic forms and blending them together, Nair has created a unique work of art that speaks to the global nature of literature. Through these types of poetic forms, readers can experience a variety of cultures and perspectives, and gain a better understanding of the world around them.

Continuing on this note, this paper is further divided into two sections. The first section explores different poetic forms to understand the poetics of space in a cosmopolitan setup. This section examines the large array of poetic forms from all over the world used by the poet under consideration. The second section deals with the physical and imaginary world that emerges through the poetry of Karthika Nair. The section further explores the impact of these emerging concepts of space in contemporary Indian English poetry and demonstrates how these poems through their form and content engage the readers with some of the most urgent social and cultural issues.

Citizenship of Poems: How Poems Travel?

Jahan Ramazani in his book *A Transnational Poetics* uses the phrase “citizenship of poems” to explore how poems travel and how poets and readers can travel with these poems. This section examines the various types of poetic forms that enable extraterritorial imaginative travel and analyses their implications for the poetics of cosmopolitan identity. With a riveting melange of prose poetry, abstract poems, lyric poetry, fragmented aphorism, Spanish Glosa, Persian Rubai, Provencal Sestina, and Canzone, Nair creates a vibrant cosmopolitan poetics that foregrounds a sentiment of compassion across boundaries and helps in the remapping of the poetic world. Nair has used poetic forms from all around the world to subtly club western or global poetics under one roof and blend and refashion them to thematically enact the poetics of cosmopolitanism. The poems here are filled with cross-cultural insights, and the poetic forms act as a vehicle for sharing experiences and emotions globally. The focus here is to explore the cultural flows bearing witness to the change in traditional and cultural spaces due to the movement and resettlement of people, their ideas, and their materialistic things. More specifically, the paper investigates how these cultural flows (myth, folklore, traditional art forms, and artifacts) can be manifested in various poetic forms from across the world.

Poetic Forms

Nair in her book *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* – a powerful retelling of the epic, uses more than a dozen poetic forms to highlight the individual voices of the characters, and cover the broad spectrum of incidents. Nair breathes new life into the central plot of the *Mahabharata* with her multilayered and intense interpretation. As the marginal figures take center stage, we get a glimpse of the lives and stories of lesser-known characters, whose names and stories have never been given respectable space in the epic. In this powerful retelling of the *Mahabharata*, Nair has given voices to nineteen marginalized characters including a dog. From taking up the issues of patriarchy, misogyny, women abduction, rape, sexism, casteism, and barbaric killing of animals, Nair speaks for the subaltern. In a nutshell, Nair uses different poetic forms to express the personality and mood of her characters and also to capture their tones and expressions. For instance, the epic character Kunti’s persistence, relentlessness, and anger have been conveyed through an Italian verse known as Canzone in the section ‘Ossature of Maternal Conquest & Reign’ (Nair 223). This form is used for individual lyric expression and philosophic contemplation. In this section, Kunti is sharing some of the most difficult moments of her life with Draupadi. She shares everything- from her relationship with the Sun God to Karna’s birth, her fear of accepting this “unplanned move”,

to sailing the child in the river “Ganga’s arms”. This section is more like Kunti’s confession where, as a reader, we get to understand the dilemma of a mother, a young lover, and a wife. To quote a few lines from the poem ‘Ossature of Maternal Conquest & Reign’ (Nair 224):

Life moved between our thighs, taut and sinuous. But sons,
like pleasure, should serve a purpose: I had moved
Karna from my sphere for I saw none, moving
swiftly before my faithless heart could disown
good sense. I sailed the child away from his own
kismet, down Ganga’s arms – first having removed
all signs of kinship, save his father’s lighted
armour and earrings, bequest to save, to light,
his life.

In the next section, ‘Testament: Vrishali with Duryodhana’ (Nair 227) the character of Karna’s wife Vrishali, her endless grief on losing her husband and eight of her nine sons in the Kurukshetra war has been expressed through a cycle of events. Like Karna, Vrishali too seems to be trapped in the endless spiral of grief. Nair employs Rimas Dissolutas – a French troubadouric verse, build-in sestets to express Vrishali’s pain, which increases with the length of each sestet. In this section, she mourns Karna’s death. The ‘Testament: Vrishali with Duryodhana’ unwraps Vrishali’s agony, the betrayal that she has received from her husband, and her husband received from his own family and friends. She shares the story of Karna’s birth, his humiliation, his relationship with Duryodhana, ‘Karna’s last plea’, Krishna’s politics, and Partha’s determination to kill him in this section. She also expresses her anger at Bheeshma for not sharing the true story and “untie the sightless mess of his bizarre birth and bloodline”. To quote a few lines from the poem ‘Testament: Vrishali with Duryodhana’ (Nair 227-31):

He *is dead*. He, who’d defy
gods in their heaven, who could mar
the pride of monarchs, who had dared
reshape caste’s vile coil, could not freeze
Yama’s gross tread. Yet, would Death’s sting
be mild, for so doomed a hero?

One of the most striking and impressive sections of the book is 'Landay for Doomed Siblings' (Nair 165) where Nair brings all the nameless and faceless Kaurava siblings alive. She uses Landay – a highly versatile Pashtun form of oral poetry sung by Pashtun women for mourning, persiflage, and heartbreak to express Dusshala's emotion. The recurring themes of this form are war, erotic banter, and separation. Nair uses Landay to bring forth Dusshala's grief, on losing all her famous and infamous brothers. Nair doesn't only successfully mount the names of all the Kaurava brothers but also has written one or two lines descriptions for them. To quote a few lines from 'Landay for Doomed Siblings' (Nair 167):

You wouldn't spot Durmarshana – lithe
and small – in a crowd. But no target could miss his scythe.
Sulochana was a bully, though.
Sarasana too. Neither was good with sword or bow.
Dussala, Dushkarna, Durmukha,
savants, urged us all to forsake the path of dukha.

Nair's *Until the Lions* is one of the very few versions of the epic *Mahabharata* that carries the name of all the hundred Kaurava brothers. In an interview with Supriya Nair, Karthika Nair says:

Landay for Doomed Siblings in Dusshala's voice was something I wanted to attempt from the beginning. To name, then to remember the dead as more than just names and numbers, more than a collective noun or evil. Even though the epic itself just lumps them as numbers and, sadly, indicates very little about the 100 Kaurava brothers. ... So—more than any other poem—this one is an act of invention because there was so little to go by. (*Livemint*)

In the 'Amba/Shikhandi' (Nair 37) section, where there is the occupation of two bodies, two voices, by one soul, Nair uses two different forms – Petrarchan Sonnets and Si Harfi respectively to suggest the shift from past to present. Amba, the eldest princess of Kashi, is abducted by Bheeshma for his brother Vichitravirya on her wedding day. This abduction ruined Amba's life; her betrothed rejects her on the grounds of being defiled, Vichitravirya does not accept her, and even Bheeshma refuses to marry her citing his vow of celibacy as an excuse. Finding herself in such desperate circumstances, she decides to invoke the gods. After years of austerity, Lord Shiva grants her the power to kill Bheesma, but only in her next life. Enraged at her humiliation, Amba kills herself to hasten her retribution

and is later reborn as Shikhandi to kill Bheesma. Nair skillfully captures the changing emotions and moods of these two bodies and voices through different poetic forms. Shikhandi's devotion to his purpose, the war manual in his voice is expressed through Si Harfi – a Sufi and Punjabi mystic form to convey piety. Nair uses Petrarchan sonnets to bring Amba's past. The trauma of abduction, the humiliation, and the rejection that she has to face are expressed in free verse, broken and repeated lines without any pauses or punctuation in 'Manual for Revenge and Remembrance'. To quote a few lines from the poem 'Manual for Revenge and Remembrance' (Nair 37):

Air old wounds adorn eyes and scars with kohl with curcuma
armour head to shank in ancient hate in cast-iron memory
anchor the earth to both feet align the zenith to the spine
bow bow eastward to destiny then south to death who is
patient kind and constant buttress the sinews of thighs brace . . .

Similarly, she uses Malay Pantoum for Gandhari's ruminations of the past, the Persian Rubai for Ulupi's rage, helplessness, and pain of losing her son, Rondeau for Uttara to express the condition of women trapped within male ownership. Shunaka (dog), the only fictional character plays an important role in Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions*. Considered a literary descendant of Ugh (a canine narrator who opens Arun Kolatkar's *Kala Ghoda* poems), Shunaka warns her kin against a close association with humankind in the section 'Shunaka: Blood Count' (Nair 47-48). She says, "But men / kill and kill again, / scorch the rivers, rape the earth / and deluge jungles with death, all to prove manhood." (Nair 48) She then asks her kin to remember the incident of Khandava forest which was put on fire by Arjuna. She then describes the atrocities and violence committed by mankind on innocent animals. We also find the use of Vedic meter Pankti from Vedic literature here. In this form, the poems comprise 40 syllables and are written in five lines of eight syllables each (Moriz Winternitz). She used the pankti for expressing the emotions of Dhrupad's wife in the section 'Dhrupada's Wife: Queen of Panchala, Mother of Shikhandi, Draupadi & Dhrishtadyumna, Woman without a Name' titled 'Sustenance' (Nair 65). To quote a few panktis (lines):

Anger. We eat anger at each
meal, night and noon—mostly Dhrupad,
monarch of Panchaal, and our three

children, though I have to swallow
my share too: this is staple.

Thus, we see that Karthika Nair uses a variety of poetic forms to cover the spectrum of characters, their moods, their secrets, power, wisdom, and pain in her retelling of the *Mahabharata*. By using poetic forms from all around the world, she recaptures the lost history and creates a poetics of cosmopolitanism.

Karthika Nair's retelling of the Mahabharata in *Until the Lions* also differs from other contemporary retellings in several ways. First, Nair departs from the traditional linear narrative of the Mahabharata, instead weaving together stories from multiple perspectives and timelines. This creates an interwoven and intricate narrative that reveals the Mahabharata as more dynamic and complex. Second, Nair emphasizes the stories of the women of the Mahabharata, giving voice to characters who often remain on the sidelines in other retellings. By exploring the experiences of these characters, Nair creates a more complete picture of the Mahabharata that allows readers to gain new insights into the epic. Finally, Nair's writing is lyrical and poetic, creating a dreamlike atmosphere that further immerses readers in the story. This literary approach to the Mahabharata is unique and provides a distinctively vivid experience of the epic.

In addition to this, as a reader, we get to know about various cultures, traditions, and people through these poetic forms. For example, through the poetic form "Pashto Landay" we understand the Pashtun Culture; the lives of the Pashtun women. The "Pashto Landay" is primarily an oral poetic tradition of the Pashtun provinces of Afghanistan and Pakistan and is compressed of couplets of 22 syllables. These are folk couplets created and sung by the Pashtun women in Afghanistan where the recurring themes are war, separation, grief, or love. Similarly, we understand Malaysian culture through Malay Pantoum. Mark Nowak in his book *Social Poetics* writes:

As a poetic form, the pantoum is, indeed, constantly critiquing history and proposing alternatives for the future... perhaps it is best suited as a form for looking back to and moving forward against the very legacies of imperialism and colonialism... (Nowak)

Similarly, we get to know about the Provençal court poets who traveled to Italy and Spain to present the various forms of canso and ballade through Canzone. Similarly, the Spanish literary tradition is explored through

Spanish Glosa, while the Punjabi and Sufi literary cultures are expressed through Si Harfi. Posted in Jabberwok, in an interview with Jai Arjun Singh, Nair says:

The book is in nineteen voices, and form can be a handy tool to transform tone and cadence, and consequently, tenor; and I needed to persuasively inhabit several voices in rapid succession. I do believe, firmly, that content defines form, so the forms were chosen based on the emotional/ narrative trajectory of the voice in question, and how the given form could carry that voice... I've used forms from all over, so there isn't much geographic fidelity – there are pankti and padam, rubai and pantoum, acrostics and villanelle and triolet, haibun and tanka, concrete poems and some others.

Karthika Nair's assertion that "content defines form" is certainly true in her work *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*. Nair has taken the traditional content of the Mahabharata and has used it to create a new form, one that gives voice to previously unheard female characters. This approach is echoed throughout the book, as Nair shifts the focus away from the traditional heroes of the Mahabharata and towards the stories of the female characters whose tales are often left untold. In this work, Nair uses the Indian epic poem Mahabharata as the source material for her narrative poetry, selecting a variety of characters, stories, and themes to explore the epic's complexity. In doing so, she reworks the traditional narrative form of the Mahabharata, using it as an inspiration to create a new form and content. Nair's work stands in stark contrast to traditional retellings of the Mahabharata. Rather than simply recounting the epic's stories, she uses a variety of poetic techniques to explore the characters and themes of the Mahabharata in a new way. Her use of repetition, fragmentation, and imagery to explore the complexities of the Mahabharata demonstrates how content and form are inseparable; her content informs her form, and her form emphasizes her content.

Additionally, the poem makes use of the African oral tradition of storytelling, further demonstrating its cosmopolitan nature. By combining all of these elements, Karthika Nair is able to create a collection of poems that is both global and local, creating a sense of connection between cultures that is both heartfelt and powerful. these poetic forms from around the world, Nair is able to give her poem a cosmopolitan citizenship—a sense of belonging to more than one place and time. By using these forms, Nair is able to tell the story of the Mahabharata in a way that is accessible

to readers from all cultures, and that resonates with the experiences and emotions of people from all over the world. The concept of citizenship of poems is particularly relevant in this context. Ramazani argues that the very act of engaging with a poem is a way of becoming a citizen of its space, thus creating a sense of belonging and connection. He suggests that by engaging with a poem, readers can internalize its meanings, and thus become citizens of its space. This is particularly relevant in the context of Nair's *Until the Lions*, as the Mahabharata is a text that has been interpreted and reinterpreted over the centuries. By engaging with the Mahabharata, readers can connect to a shared heritage and become citizens of its space. This concept of citizenship of poems is an important part of Nair's poetics of cosmopolitan space, as it allows readers to connect to a shared heritage and gain a sense of belonging.

Thus, we see that by exploring the poetic forms from all over the world as a cultural symbol, Nair digs deep into the threads that record the transitions and symbiotic existence of tradition and culture of the corners that are so easy to forget. These poetic forms help in understanding the changing face of society, politics, cultural histories, and traditions over time. Nair, through the voices of 19 marginalized characters presents a diverse landscape not merely in terms of countries and topographies, but also issues related to politics, racism, and sexism. In a nutshell, these poetic forms act as a vehicle and connection between different cultures, citizens, their situations, voices, narratives, and lifestyle.

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