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The Poetry of Arun Kolatkar: The Vision of an Experimentalist

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The advent of the British brought with it their language that became an integral part of Indian culture, and such was the influence of the language that Indians started to write their own literature in English. Even before Macaulay's famous recommendations for English education, and the British Government's subsequent decision on March 7th, 1835 to implement English education in India there was a keen desire to study and use English in poetry and prose forms among Indians. However being a foreign language that got adopted, the beginnings of Indian Writing in English saw a pronounced imitative style that never allowed the Indian English to become a vehicle of the true expression of "Indian-ness" so closely was it linked to the Byronic and Tennysonian cadences. Therefore the only way to claim authenticity and stand up to the accusation that, Indians could not write poetry in English that could match up to the ranks of British, American or Irish poetry, was to write poetry about the lives and conditions of Indian society. Modern Indian English poetry has been much neglected because it bears no direct relationship to the cultural movements that led to national independence because the concern of the new poets is their relationship to and alienation from their social realities.

There are clearly marked periods in Indian English poetry when it took new turns and led to new directions. With each decade the awareness of actual Indian experience got heightened and there emerged a sense of increased immediacy. It was only at the time and after national independence that Indian English poetry started to get reformed into a more modern literature by incorporating the themes and techniques of such major twentieth-century modernists as T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound. Indian English poetry also got shaped by the influence of the vast body of French experimental poetry of Rimbaud and Lautreamont of the nineteenth-century, to the twentieth-century Dadaists and surrealists, while Neruda's political poetry also had its impact. It is here that the names of such bilingual poets as Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar need mention.

Arun Kolatkar indulged in the experimental poetry that began to appear in the later '60s and early '70s. Not only has he lent a new dimension to Indian English poetry but also has been active in translating from regional language, in his case Marathi. The non-realistic poetic mode seems to have found favour with Kolatkar, whose poetry is imbued with surrealism and constructivism and freed from a superior kind of logical and emotional communication.

Thus in this paper the purpose would be to explore the trends observed in Kolatkar's poetry which ranges from the experimental to post modernist, the fascination with techniques play an essential role where aspects from disparate genres are clubbed together to create new concepts in poetry. This paper would also dwell on the most famous works by Kolatkar, whose study would help establish him as an experimentalist both in form and view of reality. At first he might seem unconcerned with empirical reality however this mode gives way to a more nuanced observation of local life or his relation to India. Kolatkar being an experimentalist writes in the non-realistic mode, so his method is obviously distinct from that of the realists. According to Bruce King, the relationship of the experimentalist with social life is "more oblique, more ironic, more in doubt, or secondary to the attention given either to processes of imagination or to the poem as construction, art object or work in progress." (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*, pp162-63)

Experimentalism began in Indian regional-language poetry during the 1940s when writers became familiar with the English modernists and the French romantic-modernist tradition. This trend continued into Indian English poetry, though later. Kolatkar as mentioned earlier, being an active translator began his own speedy progress through various kinds of experimental verse, alternating between Marathi and English, often translating from one language to the other. His poems have appeared in magazines and anthologies since 1955 but surprisingly enough he has published only a handful of books, *Jejuri* (1976), *Arun Kolatkar's Kavita* (1976) and *Sarpa Satra* and *Kala Ghoda Poems* until very recently in 2004. Few would be aware that some of his early poems in English appeared in *An Anthology of Marathi Poetry: 1945-65* (1967) edited by his contemporary bilingual experimentalist poet Dilip Chitre himself. He regards his early Marathi poems as 'cluster bombs', densely packed with sounds and metaphors. Most of his early verse, ventures into the realm of the surreal, does not yield easily to interpretation and channels the subconscious into images, stopping

short of any emotional engagement with the outside reality. Experimental poetry always delves into the uncommon, hence treats the common world and environment trivially or in strange and unconventional ways. Similarly in Kolatkar, the extraordinary treatment of emotional anxieties and the incongruous juxtaposition of images akin to metaphysical poetry ushers the reader into a different experience altogether. Far from being transparent Kolatkar seems to have aimed at purposeful opaqueness. In such poems as ‘The Renunciation of the Dog’ there is the combination of the spiritual and the surreal:

Tell me why the black dog died
Intriguingly between
God and our heads. (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*, pg 163)

Such deliberate use of the reversible words ‘dog’ and ‘god’ brings out the significance of the repudiation.

If one were to trace a change of style in his poetry during the 1960s one would see the transition from a highly imagistic, opaque, uninterpretable private poetry to a styleless anti-poetic form being consciously employed. Also the inclusion of colloquial and common speech in his poetry was his reaction to his use of hyper-modernism in earlier poetry. Chitre has also commented that such poetry could be considered as an Indian equivalent of the humorous pop poetry and the neo-Dada poetry of the 1960s. Such poetry lacks depth and openly uses stereotypes coupled with humour and portrays reality by way of popular culture. An example of such poetry would be ‘Three Cups of Tea’, originally written in Bombay-Hindi later translated by the poet into parody tough-guy American speech:

i want my pay i said
to the manager
you’ll get paid said
the manager
but not before the first
don’t you know the rules? (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*, pg 164)

Another technique that Kolatkar uses for being a visual artist and designer by profession is that he makes much of his work interesting by injecting commonplace events with unusual

perspectives or by the addition of imagined details. The surreal gets invested with a new kind of power for the poet, where the possibilities of the poet's mind can be explored to depict day to day life. No longer does the surreal stand in the way of getting into the poem's meaning. Two characteristics of Kolatkar's poetry since the mid '60s are the inclination to play with vision or a scene for its abstract qualities by virtue of being a designer and the cool, non-committal tone adopted in conveying his thoughts. In 'Temperature Normal' there is both a conscious manipulation of vision like an artist or a cameraman and an attitude of rejection towards the subject matter:

i lean back in the armchair
and bombay sinks

the level of the balcony parapet rises
and the city is submerged (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*, pp 164-165)

In another significant verse of 'The boatripe' Kolatkar goes even further in disposing off with the 'poetic' from his work. Both 'Three Cups of Tea' and 'The boatripe' are non-poetic in subject matter and style. The latter is about an ordinary trip around Bombay harbour which is treated as both incredibly boring and wondrous by the poet's observation and fantasy about the trivial and stereotypical. Kolatkar as a visual artist is fully aware of the fact that a slight manipulation of sight lines and angle of vision can transform something dull and monotonous into art. The mundane is turned into an aesthetic experience by Kolatkar by using the ordinary as the basis of art. The visual pattern in the poem also gets traced through the use of broken sentences and adds to the spatial dimension of the object portrayed, emphasizing on the distance between the boat and other objects. The poem consists of eleven sections describing a tourist trip that ranges from satirizing absurd social behaviour to surrealist fantasies:

because a sailor waved
back
to a boy
another boy
waves to another sailor (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*, pg 165)

The scene is broken into compositional parts that can be understood by the sailors waving and this is self-reflective post-modernist poetry which seems to say that art is made by the artist and not by reality. Reality in the poem is how the poet chooses to perceive and describe it. However the poet never allows reality to become familiar, rather he turns the familiar into art. 'The boatride' ends:

an expanse of
unswerving stone
encrusted coarsely
with shells
admonishes our sight. (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*, pg 166)

Delights in free association and visual design are the high points of the poem.

These poems though significant remain less dwelt upon because of *Jejuri*, the poem that won him the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977, the poem Kolatkar came to be identified with. It is undoubtedly his magnum opus that contains thirty one sections and the last of which consists of six sub-sections. The poem renders itself to deeper levels of meaning than many critics have observed. Thus a lengthy and detailed analysis of the poem is warranted. M.K. Naik is of the opinion that *Jejuri*,

has almost uniformly been regarded as a 'quest poem', as a presentation of modern urban skepticism impinging upon ancient religious tradition. The general acceptance of this view has however tended to obscure the thematic complexity of the poem. A close analysis reveals that while a scrutiny of ancient religious tradition is certainly a theme in the poem, it is not the sole theme but only a part of a larger thematic complex, which is actually a conscious attempt to present in sharp contrast three major value-systems ---viz., those of ancient religious tradition, modern industrial civilization and ---a value system older than both these --- the Life – Principle in Nature and its ways. (*Perspectives on Indian Poetry in English*, pg 169).

The religious theme is evident even to a casual reader because while *Jejuri* does subvert the conventional notion of the pilgrimage, it offers one with a glimpse of the sacred even if it is in the most unexpected of places. The title is an unmistakable pointer to it, for *Jejuri*, thirty miles from Pune, is renowned for the temple of Khandoba, one of the most prominent

temples in western Maharashtra and a pilgrim spot for many. Again a noticeable change in Kolatkar's style is observed as he refrains from using the astonishing and the surreal in *Jejuri*. The poem is about a skeptical tourist who arrives in the ancient place of pilgrimage and at the end he is waiting impatiently for a train so he can depart. The opening poem 'The Bus' establishes themes of alienation and perception. The fractured self in quest of wholeness is ironised:

Your own divided face in a pair of glasses
on an old man's nose
is all the countryside you get to see. (*The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, pg 62)

The recognition of split identities is expressed by Ramanujan when he says: "I resemble everyone / but myself" when he looks at his reflection in shop-windows; also by Kamala Das who writes: "I am a million, million people / Talking all at once"; and irony is something that is abundantly available here. There is a wry acknowledgement of a deep social stratification too:

you seem to move continually forward
towards a destination
just beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows. (*The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, pg 62)

There is conveyed a sense that the destination will never be reached and in any case the idea of a circular journey that ends where it begins is the oldest theme in pilgrim's literature. Starting with the three line stanza form he also experiments with other verse forms as the poem progresses. The narrative style is more prosaic than poetic.

'The Priest' is the second poem in the sequence. Once again Kolatkar uses language that effectively aids in subverting the sacred notion of a pilgrimage, because the priest who should supposedly be the most trusted person here or a spiritual guide to pilgrims turns out to be a materialistically inclined person. He awaits the arrival of the bus in the hope of a getting a "puran poli in his plate." There is skepticism too when the poet says that the tour bus stands:

purring softly in front of the priest.
 A catgrin on its face
 and a live and ready to eat pilgrim
 held between its teeth. (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*, pg 167)

The human and the animal world get interlinked through the use of metaphors and similes as in Ramanujan's poems, however Kolatkar here tries to depict the binary of a predator and prey, pointing towards the gullibility of superstitious people who get victimized easily in religious organizations. The inconsistency between appearance and reality gets captured in the next poem 'Heart of Ruin' where the commercialization of the ruined places of worship and the divine according to the speaker form two sides of the same coin. Further the thread of thought is led into a post-modernist territory in the poem 'The Doorstep', where again the poet seems to be reiterating the notion of how reality gets formed ----- the uncertainty between what has been seen and the way reality can be re-perceived or re-visualized:

There's no doorstep.
 It's a pillar on its side.

Yes.
 That's what it is. (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*, pg 167)

Contrasted to skepticism and reality are the three Chaitanya poems, that represent a life force or dynamism and is an attempt to personify faith. Chaitanya, a Bengali Vaishnavite saint had come to Jejuri to reform. The initial colloquialism serves to explain the intimacy between Chaitanya and the idol, also to set off the contrast between the red painted stone and simple worship with flowers:

come off it
 said chaitanya to a stone
 in stone language

wipe the red paint off your face
 i don't think the colour suits you
 i mean what's wrong

with just being a plain stone
 it'll still bring you flowers
 you like flowers of zendu
 don't you
 i like them too (*The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*,
 pg 64)

In the next Chaitanya poem the 'Life Force' that is inherent in all forms of life, a hidden potential, gets recognized by the saint when "he popped a stone/ in his mouth/ and spat out gods." The paradoxical manner gets imitated here when the saint is shown to transform a lifeless stone into the divine. The third Chaitanya poem reinforces the idea of the dynamic Life Force much like the poem 'The Butterfly' where life is viewed with renewed appreciation, unconventionally and differently. It is as if in *Jejuri* the artist achieves the saint's vision in the ability to give value to what is conventional and dead. In 'Between Jejuri and the Railway Station' the dance of the cocks and hens puts the themes of divine dynamism and perception into visual terms and in the end the self-discovery comes not through religion but through skepticism, humour and emotional withdrawal. The spirit of the place resides not in any shrine but in the 'mangy body/ of the station dog.'

Hence his poem disturbs as the traditional meaning of a pilgrimage is completely overshadowed by the secular view of Jejuri. The long poem about Jejuri is fraught with paradoxes. It is not so much a modern wasteland's loss of faith than a poem that contrasts the numbness of perception with the ability to perceive the divine in the natural vitality of life.

If *Jejuri* represents the discrepancy between appearance and reality and ironical perspectives then *Sarpa Satra* is a long poem based on an episode from the *Mahabharata*. The poem is about King Janamejaya's snake sacrifice performed to annihilate the Nagas from the face of the earth. There is a persistent accumulation of detail and use of modern world terminology like secret police, blank cheque, business, plum job, editor are woven into the texture of the mythical subject of *Sarpa Satra*. Kolatkar's disgust about violence-ridden worlds whether mythical or real is evident in this poem.

Pitted against the rage of death in *Sarpa Satra* is the brimming life in *Kala Ghoda Poems*. Kala Ghoda is the area that runs from the Regal circle to the University of Mumbai forming a

crescent. Over the years, Kala Ghoda has come to be impulsively identified with its festival an interactive cultural blend spanning across the months of November to January, which brings works from varied fields of music, dance, theatre, film and art from across the country for citizens of Mumbai. In Kolatkar's poetry we get to see quite a different picture of this much famed art district of Mumbai. The lives at the periphery gradually start coming to the fore, there is a resurrection of the rubbish, the rejected. It is a much darker world than what is shown to us in *Jejuri*. The dramatis personae of the poems are humble folk, a parade of social outcasts, the one-eyed baby bather, the dog, the crow, the tart, the leper, the blind man, the rat poison man, the hash-seller and so on.

However it is an impoverished, unjust, ruthless world that survives not on hope but on something more primeval----- perhaps the regenerative power of life itself. For this is a world that is haunted by the omnipresent demon of hunger, though the restaurants at Kala Ghoda serve steaming breakfasts, there is the close presence of another world where Dalits are being force-fed on shit by high-caste Hindus. In Kolatkar's characteristic style he sharpens and renews the experiences of your everyday life and lends you an alternative eye to investigate into the apparently irrelevant things. If excellent poetry changes the way we chart our world then one wonders whether idlis can ever be the same again for he writes:

islands of idlis float

belly up

or splash about

in seas of sambar,

among the wreckage

of red chilli peppers (*Kala Ghoda Poems*, 'Breakfast at Kala Ghoda')

The irrepressible humour is one of the assets of the poet and what lends innovation to his poetry is the setting off of crowded local details against Hindu religious spiritual ethos. Also the social consciousness that gets reflected in his poetry unfolds itself to startle readers. Kolatkar seems to be striving to find a socio-cultural identity, a search that goes deep to the level of universality of all life. His style is dominantly satirical and he takes recourse to sarcasm quite often. Hence what we can see by keenly observing his poetry is that the vision

of an artist takes precedence and manipulation of the real and virtual gets perpetuated in almost all of his works. This brings us to a recurrent trope in his poetry where we can trace the existence of an ephemeral dividing line between the mundane and the miraculous, the accidental and the epiphanic. Another trend that is noticed in his poetry is that a single theme runs through the entire length of his books. The surreal and obscure seem to be his forte, and a lack of rhythm coupled with colloquialisms lends a native idiom to his works.

Therefore, Arundhati Subramaniam writes, “Kolatkār’s poetry transforms what it witnesses, not by depriving detail of its whimsicality and uniqueness, but by recognizing and honouring its idiosyncrasy, and finding a place in a worldview that is arrestingly quirky but unfailingly hospitable and inclusive. It is a great legacy to leave behind” in memory of Kolatkār. In all of his poetry one gets the proof of a meditative mind and it is the keenness to belong to everything that is part of our age that makes Kolatkār the poet of our times.

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