



ARUN KOLATKAR'S *JEJURI*: A QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Arun Kolatkar is a Maharashtrian poet who has written poems both in English and Marathi. Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977. It is a collection of thirty one poems which deals with a day pilgrimage to the sacred shrine of Jejuri. Written in an age when metanarratives have lost their significance, there is no urge for emancipation; Kolatkar through his poems in *Jejuri* tries to search for a new identity for the man of postmodern age. In the poems of *Jejuri*, he tries to explore the relationship of man and his society, his connection with the past heritage and his disinterestedness in the myths and traditional rituals of his society. He ironically satirizes the religious superstition and social hypocrisy which he witnesses at the shrine of Jejuri, a place where Lord Khandoba is worshipped, in order to reveal the nakedness and degradation of Indian society.

KEYWORDS: Commonwealth, Metanarratives, Emancipation, Identity, Postmodern, Myth.

Indian poetry since ancient times, has voiced the urge for human salvation and the need for search of real identity of man. The motif of quest has long been one of the important themes of Indian poetry. Starting from the early age (Vedic period), when the great epics Mahabharata and Ramayana were written, through the middle ages, the reign of the Mughal Empire, the era of British colonialism, numerous poets hitherto have relentlessly made efforts for the upliftment of mankind and betterment of society through their poetry. The branch of Indian poetry which emphasizes human salvation as the supreme and noblest act of man, is lesser seen and heard today. Post-independence Indian English poetry was marked by a shift towards individuality and self-expression. M.K. Naik in his *A History of English Literature* points out:

It is in poetry that the post-independence period witnessed most crucial developments. In the fifties arose a school of poets who tried to turn their backs on the romantic tradition and write a verse more in tune with the age, its general temper and its literary ethos. They tried, with varying degree of success, to naturalize in the Indian soil the modernistic elements derived from the poetic revolution affected by Eliot and others in the twentieth century British and American poetry. (Naik 192)

The term postmodernism "takes on very specific cultural significations within particular discourses, in its wider popular reception it appears to be a rather vague, nebulous, portmanteau word for everything that is more modern than modern" (Woods 3). In the postmodern age, where 'metanarratives' are no more believed, the glorious heritage of the golden past appears incredulous to the current generation. The current trend of poetry, which boasts itself of sceptically questioning the roots and traditions, where the motif of 'emancipation' is not needed, as the worth of human life itself is enquired, though is different from our ancient noble trend of poetry, yet still it manages to help man by making him search for his new identity- an identity



which is never founded upon the mercy of social, historical, political and ideological forces. In this latter trend, comes the poetry of Arun Kolatkar who through his postmodern classic *Jejuri* tried to search for an identity conducive for the man who belongs to the age of mechanization and globalization.

Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar (1932-2004) is a Maharashtrian poet writing both in English and Marathi. His poems in English and Marathi caught the attention of critics and readers at National and International levels. His collection of poems *Jejuri* published in 1976, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977. It is a long collection consisting of thirty-one poems. It is based on Jejuri, a small town at a distance of thirty miles from Pune. It is pilgrim place of Khandoba and other gods carved out of stones and cast in bronze. Maharashtrians have deep faith in the miraculous powers of Khandoba. Most of the poems are based on the legends and myths of Khandoba and other deities. At Jejuri, people from all sections of Hindu community, especially from Maharashtra and North Karnataka visit the holy shrine of Khandoba throughout the year. Khandoba is the god of nomadic and pastoral tribes. Khandoba has gradually evolved from the status of a folk hero and is generally accepted as a family god (Kuldaiwat or Protector). He is accepted as protector god and the devotees believe that he bestows wealth, health and children. It is a common belief that in order to please Khandoba suitable offerings should be made to him. The offerings made at the Jejuri shrine consist of sacrifice of animals like goats and fowls and sweets made up of lentil and jaggery. There is a popular conception that as Khandoba protects his devotees, he also becomes angry if the devotees fail to propitiate him or worship according to the age old conduct of worship. The important rituals and occasions in a family are only completed peacefully and sacredly if Lord Khandoba is offered a proper worship or else the devotees are expected to face the wrath of their beloved deity (Patil 34; ch. 3.1).

This mode of worship in Indian tradition is known as 'Sakam Bhakti' – that is devotion to god with expectations as regards the fulfilment of the worldly demands. Generally, it is believed by the devotees that Lord Khandoba is the combination of Shiva, Bhairava and Surya. Three types of his images and vehicles namely a formless stone, a linga, a four handed icon with the attributes, a sword, a trident, a damaru and a drinking bowl as well as a horse and a bull vehicles indicate the above reference. There are two shrines located at Jejuri – one located on a hill some four miles south-west of Jejuri village called 'Kade-Karhe Pathar' and the other shrine is situated on another spur of the same hill, popularly known as Jejuri God. As Lord Khandoba was in love with Banai and married her, a shrine is also dedicated to her (35; ch. 3.1).

JEJURI

The volume of poems *Jejuri* contains thirty-one poems. The narrator starts his journey with the poem 'The Bus' and his journey ends with 'The Railway Station'. Throughout this volume, Kolatkar sceptically tries to explore the relationship between man and his society based on the ideals founded by religion and culture. He also tries to examine the past legends and cultural myths. The journey which ranges across various poems from beginning till the end symbolically represents the journey of human life where a man tries to discover his real identity free from religious, cultural and social constraints. It is an allegorical representation of man's spiritual quest leaving the end on an ambiguous note. Kolatkar throughout tries to disclose the human society caught amidst religious degradation, social hypocrisy and spiritual perversion. The tone of these poems is satirical and is marked by the use of irony, tries to reveal the common but troublesome condition of modern man who trapped between his cultural past and future prospects, attempts to chalk out the balance by wilfully submitting to the social norms and traditions. For instance in the following lines from the poem 'Yeshwant Rao' he satirizes the Hindu tradition of worship:

Are you looking for a god?
I know a good one.
His name is Yeshwant Rao
and he's one of the best



look him up
 when you are in Jejuri next
 Of course he's only a second class god
 and his place is just outside the main temple. (Kolatkar 80)

Another element superstition, which is one of the commonly found evils in the Indian society, is ironically treated in these poems. Two different perspectives – one of the western educated individual who fails to relate himself with customs and traditions, and on the other hand the traditional Indian man who without any resistance accepts his native tradition and rituals; are presented through stark contrast in few poems of *Jejuri*. The narratorial voice in these poems tries to search for a new ground based on which a new identity of man could be formed in the postmodern world where myths and legends have no values, where grand narratives are no more to be believed and where tradition and culture have lost their significance. Kolatkar is often considered to be a postmodernist poet. Manifestation of postmodernist techniques like parody, pastiche and irony itself are not enough to claim a poet to be totally postmodernist. Kolatkar's poetry lies somewhere between the modernist lamentation of the loss of ideals and values and the postmodernist celebration of the loss of the same, caught in the trap of dejection and exaltation of one's own self. Sometime he appears to be lamenting the present state of corrupt and degraded society; meanwhile at times he appears to be celebrating the scepticism and satirical vein of the narratorial voice which mocks the religious superstitions and spiritual decay. For instance, in the following lines from 'The Priest', his scepticism towards religious rituals is clearly seen:

to look at the long road winding out of sight
 with the eventlessness
 of the fortune line on a dead man's palm. (Kolatkar 14)

Again his contempt for the priest who waits for the bus to eagerly to make his living is clearly seen in following lines from the same poem:

A catgrin on its face
 and a live, ready to eat pilgrim
 held between its teeth. (Kolatkar 16)

Kolatkar very well plays the role of a social critic by exposing the hypocrisy and religious evils which prevail in our society. He depicts how man safeguards his future by getting indulged into superstitious religious practices and social corruption. The religious priests readily trick gullible people, making them believe the religious stories and traditional myths, leading to their exploitation. Kolatkar mocks at this tradition where people living in a society, are exploited by a section of people. The people who are gullible are shown dreams of getting rich and prosperous, a childless lady is shown the dream of having a child, dreams of happiness for a newly wedded couple and tales which tell that even some gods like Yeshwant Rao offer limbs to the physically disabled people. In return, these people have to bestow large amount of offerings to their respected gods. The following lines from 'Yeshwant Rao' depict the belief of people and the satirical tone of the narrator:

I've known gods
 Prettier faced
 Or straighter laced
 Gods who soak you for your gold.
 Gods who soak you for your soul.
 Gods who make you walk
 On a bed of burning coal
 Gods who put a child inside your wife
 Or a knife inside your enemy.



Gods who tell you tell to live your life,
 Double your money
 Or triple your land holdings
 Gods who can barely suppress a smile
 As you crawl a mile for them.
 Gods who will see you drown
 if you won't buy them a new crown. (Kolatkar 80)

French philosopher Jean – Francois Lyotard in his work *The Postmodern Condition* explains the formation of society upon the base of metanarratives which further justifies the social bond and relationship of science and knowledge to it. The metanarratives are the grander and socio-cultural stories or principles that justify the existence of society and feasibility to its vision and its future prospects. Lyotard identified two controlling modes of metanarratives which have dominated human thinking hitherto- mythic and emancipatory narratives. Mythic narratives, according to Lyotard, invited and allowed the domination of the species by religion. Further he asserts that humankind has liberated itself from tyranny of myth. But still the emancipatory narratives embodied within 'Enlightenment' exert their totalitarian impulses. So, for Lyotard the postmodern condition is the condition of disillusionment with the grand metanarratives which follows his famous definition of postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives" where he asks his readers to expect a series of mininarratives which are local and heterogeneous in nature (qtd. in Waugh ch. 27: 412).

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who, gave the concept of 'Simulacra' in his book *Simulations*, uses the term to refer to representation which carried with it a sense of the fake, the counterfeit. Baudrillard, who also uses a term 'hyperreal' which is situation when everything becomes real, there is no copy and no original, all is surface without any depth (qtd in Waugh ch. 27:413).

Keeping these two above mentioned conceptions of postmodernism into consideration, it can be concluded that Kolatkar through his poems in *Jejuri* certainly opposes the socio-cultural tradition and mythological past of Jejuri and its grandnarratives associated with Lord Khandoba. Unlikely, as the case is in postmodernism, where not only the narratives which fabulate the ultimate truth are denied, the possibility of the truth itself is rejected; in the poems of *Jejuri* though the grandnarratives encompassing the truth about Jejuri and Khandoba are sceptically treated, Kolatkar never explicitly asserts the non-existence and impossibility of eternal truth. Ashutosh Dubey points out about Kolatkar: "Kolatkar seems to have an apathy towards the traditional myths. Strikingly, he exhibits a rare capacity to create myths out of the mundane" (Mitra 381; ch.29). The basic difference marks Kolatkar's departure from post-modernist stance of nonexistence of truth, which further provokes his readers to search for a new identity which is not only free from the traditional past but is also in contradiction with the assertion that no truth exists at all. In the following lines from 'Heart of Ruin' the poet asserts that god is there where social customs and traditions cease to have a god, somewhere like a broken temple where no more worship is done:

No more a place of worship this place
 is nothing less than the house of god. (Kolatkar 18)

Again in the following lines from 'Chaitanya' Kolatkar asserts his claims against religious hypocrisy when he asks a red painted stone to wipe out its holy colour:

wipe the red paint off your face
 i don't think the colour suits you
 i mean what's wrong
 with being just a plain stone
 i'll still bring you flowers
 you like the flowers of zendu



don't you

i like them too. (Kolatkar 26)

In lines from 'A Low Temple' he satirizes the authority of Brahmin class who are blindly accepted and respected by one and all in the society:

Who was that, you ask.

The eight arm goddess, the priest replies.

A sceptic match coughs

You can count

But she has eighteen, you protest.

All the same she is still an eight arm goddess to the priest. (Kolatkar 28)

People in India are so blindfolded in accepting the religious traditions that sometimes they forget to question those rules and traditions which have become obsolete. This is visible in the following lines from 'Manohar' where the character Manohar goes to worship in the temple but finds later that the temple is not a temple but a dirty cowshed:.

It isn't another temple,

he said

it's just a cowshed. (Kolatkar 34)

At some instances, Kolatkar's poems in *Jejuri* reflect the existential crisis, which is synonymous with the philosophy of existentialism. Eugene Ionesco, one of the famous French absurd dramatists, who was influenced by existentialism, said "cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd in Abrams 2).

Depicting the same disconnection between man and his past, the pointlessness of his future, the futility of his existence, of man in alienation isolated from his culture past and illusionary future. In the following lines from 'Water Supply' the senselessness of life is depicted:

a conduit pipe

runs with the plinth

turns a corner of the house

stops dead in its tracks

shouts straight up

keeps close to the wall

doubles back

twists around

and comes to an abrupt halt

a brass mouse with a broken neck. (Kolatkar 22)

Again the meaninglessness of human existence is revealed in following lines from 'The Butterfly':

It hinges around itself.

It has no future.

It is pinned down to no past.

It's a pun on the present. (Kolatkar 48)

The crisis of existence reflected in above poems urges its readers to find a deeper meaning of life, to search for his genesis which should be devoid of any iniquitous influence of society, religion, culture and politics. Kolatkar urges his readers to cross the social, cultural, mythical and religious boundaries to find anew a land wherein lies the hidden truth; where there is no suppression of minorities and underprivileged; no religious hypocrisy;



no social attire and no bestowing of insignificant offerings on the stone gods. Rajeev S. Patke says in *A Concise History of Indian Literature* emphasizes about Kolatkar:

The gods and the faith that are no longer there do not interest Kolatkar; the nothing that abides does, and to its minutiae he attends with sardonic wit, as if verbal panache were sufficient to elide all bitterness, even if it left the mouth dry, and lips grinning in a grimace. Stevens has described the condition of modernity as that of a need for belief, in which one chooses to believe in a fiction, knowing that there is nothing else to believe in. Kolatkar's poem is like a screen so fascinating in its effects that it disguises almost adequately that which is screened off, an absence. (Mehrotra 288)

In some of the poems of *Jejuri*, Kolatkar has satirized poverty and impoverishment which prevails in the Indian society. He seems to sympathize with the poor class for their pitiable condition where he targets religion and god who never comes for the betterment of these people. Through his poems, he has also tried to give a strong message against the prevalent caste and class system of the Indian society. In the following lines from 'An old woman', his sympathy for the character of old woman is seen in these lines:

When you hear her say,
 ,What else can an old woman do
 on hill as wretched as these? (Kolatkar 36)

The plight of prostitutes is revealed in the following lines from 'Between Jejuri' and the Railway station':

You pass the sixty fourth house of the temple dancer
 who owes her prosperity to another skill.
 A skill the priest's son would rather not talk about.
 A house he has never stepped inside
 and hopes he never will. (Kolatkar 88)

In some of the poems of *Jejuri*, Kolatkar incorporates traditional Indian myths and gives them a proper ironical treatment questioning the legacy and sanctity of the traditional myths. The poem 'Ajamil and the Tiger', the longest poem in *Jejuri*, is a poetic rendering of a folk tale. The story of Ajamil and his dogs appears in 'Jayadri Mahatmya'. The first chapter of the seventh book of the *Bhagvata Purana* too contains the same story. The story is about a shepherd devotee of Martand called Ajamil who owned a fearful dog which defeated all the tigers (Patil 51; ch. 3.4).

In the poem 'A Song for Vaghya', the story is again related with the myth of 'Ajamil and the Tigers'. The mythological story states that Vaghya must kill a tiger, his mother, to make a pouch in which he has to carry turmeric powder. The poet says:

Killed my mother
 for her skin. (Kolatkar 58)

In 'A song for a Murli', Kolatkar uses the myth associated with Murli which is a nocturnal creature and associated with moonlight and the way in which the moon, that touches the top of the hills is transformed in to Khandoba's blue horse thereafter which Khandoba kills demons Mani and Malla (Patil 52; ch.3.4).

In poems like 'The Temple Rat', Kolatkar targets our religious tradition where people for fulfilment of their worldly desire, not only bestow large amount of offerings, but they indulge in such superstitious acts and practices that puts a question mark on sanity of human society and wisdom of man. In the following lines from 'The Temple Rat', Kolatkarian revolt against the ossified tradition is seen where a teenage bride is crushing bananas on the stone linga in order to propitiate her god so that she could have a child which she couldn't:

bangles massed in the hands
 of the teen age bride on her knees,



crushing bananas on the top
of the stone linga. (Kolatkra 70)

Kolatkra even satirizes the Hindu religious system where there are different gods to cater to various types of demands of people – a kind of system where trading of offerings and blessings is done- a mutual exchange scheme. In the following lines of ‘Yeshwant Rao’ Kolatkra’s dislike for this kind of tradition is seen, where a traditional belief regarding Yeshwant Rao is revealed:

Yeshwant Rao
He’s the god you’ve got to meet.
If you’re short of a limb,
Yeshwant Rao will lend you a hand
and get you back on your feet.... (Kolatkra 82)

The human predicament and conflict of existence which has been serving literature as a motif for hundreds of years is incorporated by Kolatkra in his poems of *Jejuri*. The existential crisis of man and dilemma of human life which is best exemplified and portrayed by Shakespeare through the character of Hamlet in the play *Hamlet*, as for when Hamlet speaks to himself pondering over the meaning of human life:

To be, or not to be- that is the question;
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
And, by opposing end them? To die, to sleep- . . . (“Ham. 3.1.56-60”)

Although the idea and scale of representation of human dilemma through the character of Hamlet by Shakespeare is grand as compared to Kolatkra’s presentation of the same through his poems in *Jejuri*; nevertheless the genesis and conception of the human dilemma has always the one source – the human life and it’s so called futility and worthiness altogether. M.K. Naik has said about *Jejuri*:

Jejuri is hardly an Indian waste land (as some of its admirers seems to claim), since it lacks both the impressive social and religious dimensions and the complexity of that modern classic, but it is certainly an experiment in a fruitful direction already indicated by AK Ramanujan – viz, a serious by a modern Indian English poet to review his ancient heritage. *Jejuri* could have been a far more substantial achievement had the poet’s vision been less fragmentary and had he not remained content with scratching the surface of the problem. (Naik 208)

I agree with the opinion of M.K. Naik, that due to excessive fragmentation and Kolatkra’s failure to offer a solution, the collection *Jejuri* can never be considered as an Indian Waste Land. T.S. Eliot in his modern epic “The Waste Land” talks about the ills of machine civilization and spiritual degradation of modern man but tries to offer a solution at the end of fifth section of the poem as:

Datta Dayadhvam Damyata
Shantih shantih shantih. (Eliot 8; sec. V)

These lines which T.S. Eliot took from *Brihadaranayaka Upanishad* signify the three virtuous principles meaning – giving, compassion, and self-control. According to Upanishadic tradition, these three virtues are required by modern man to get salvation by rejuvenating his spiritual life. Being an Indian, Kolatkra never felt like going back to his great ancient tradition of his country to get modern man rid of his predicament and dilemma.

Possibly, Kolatkra’s disbelief in tradition and glorious past might have hindered his approach to offer a solution to his readers. But still, his scepticism and his rebellious poetical attitude against the culture and tradition, makes his work *Jejuri* one of the classics of contemporary literature. Dr. M. Sivaramakrishna in his paper ‘Arun



Kolatkār's *Jejuri: An Appreciation* writes, "While it (Commonwealth poetry prize) is a tribute to the individual talent evident in the poem, it is also an unmistakable pointer to the fact that Indian poetry in English has attained a distinct identity of its own. It is no longer a hybrid of Victorian sentiment and obsolete metrics" (qtd in Mitra 31; 395).

Once in 1978, an interviewer asked Kolatkār if he believed in God, and he replied: "I leave the question alone; I don't think I have to take a position about God one way or the other", (PoemHunter 4). He not only lived his life as an artist but his portrayal of the human world is also artistic and convincing. His poems add artistic flavour to the boredom of mechanized human life drawing sharp lines between an artist on one side and the conventional, dogmatic world on the other.

Kolatkār's 'search for truth' attitude present in the poems of 'Jejuri' motivates his readers to find the truth which stands apart from the messy labyrinth of religion and culture. His poetic voice is the voice of protest – the protestor, who urges his readers to go on a pursuit for truth, to start a quest for man's real identity. In the postmodernist tradition, where the authority and cultural legacy are no more held intact, Kolatkār advocates senselessness and meaninglessness of life, not just because he is ideologically opposed to the ossified tradition and sacrosanct religious rituals, but he questions the sanctity and supremacy of tradition and culture for betterment and upliftment of mankind. Throughout the history of mankind, man has transcended his temporal and spatial existence either by following 'Gyan Marg' or by adhering to 'Bhakti Marg'. 'Bhakti Marg' is complete submission of one's own self to the supreme being of the universe, accepting whatever comes in the due course of life. On the contrary, 'Gyan Marg' is all about questioning and negating self, god, society, tradition, culture. This path is about going against whatever exists and reaching to the extent of questioning even the existence of the world. The bottom line of human life and existential crisis is though being an issue of philosophical debate, self-experimentation and scholarly writings or metaphysical treatises – only a few people have been able to give impeccable solution to the problem of human life (Adagadanand 122, 307; ch. 4, 12).

The greatness of Arun Kolatkār's *Jejuri* lies in the fact that it portrays the human dilemma which the poet himself had felt and its implicit acceptance of the truth that the poet himself had failed to find the answers of human life. But rather than showing servility and slavishly referring to what others have found out, Kolatkār remains content with the mediocrity of his poetry, deciding to be with the bare naked truth rather than forming his poetic legacy on the heap of lies.

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