



Arun Kolatkar's Jejuri: A Socio-Religious Critique

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Abstract

Indian Writing in English is one of the most significant treasures of literary works produced by Indian authors, poets and dramatists who introduced Indian Cultural, social and political ethos. It is full of wisdom, imagination and enlightenment. There are many writers who produced their works in regional languages and later translated in English. Arun Kolatkar is one such an Indian poet who through his poetic creations has left a long lasting impact on Indian people. His collection of poems entitled 'Jejuri' is a famous literary creation which assesses and criticizes religious dogmas, social traditions and hypocritical dimensions of Indian people. Kolatkar's poetic career began in the early 1960s with his first collection "Jejuri" published in 1976, which highlighted his unique voice and deep engagement with human experiences. This research article attempts to assess and criticize some of the poems in Jejuri from religious and cultural point of view.

Keywords: Socio-cultural ethos, religious dogmas, imagination, literary creation.

Introduction

Indian writing in English has given many outstanding poets, who through their critical and creative insights infused the Indian ethos. Arun Kolatkar is one of those poets who straightforwardly questions religious practices in India. He attacks over and blind religiousness. He isn't atheist. He does not discard all the religious practices. He wants to combine religion and rationality. Jejuri is not only a collection of poems but it is a picture of Indian society in which the poet very realistically pens what he has seen as a pilgrim. Jejuri is full of pictures of aridity and ugliness, decay and neglect, fossilization and perversion. In Kolatkar's poems, inanimate objects often from a parallel world constantly endeavoring to defeat human beings. Their behavior often assumes ironical human ways. His Jejuri first appeared in the opinion Literary Quarterly in 1974. It contains 38 poems. The title of the collection Jejuri refers to the place situated in Maharashtra. It is well known for the temple of Lord Khandoba who is considered to be the avatar of Lord Shiva. Lord Khandoba killed the demon Mani and forgave Malla on the promise that he would do no wrong to people and serve them. These demons used to torture people. Hence, Lord Shiva took the avatar in the form of Khandoba and terminated the demons. This is a travelogue. It is important to know what made Arun Kolatkar to write about Jejuri. Basically he was a graphic artist of critical mindset. So, he visited the temple and observed the life there. This collection is an output of his critical observation. He visited differently places there and saw different things and created this collection. He did not write these poems in the honour of the Lord Khandoba. He does not seem to be a religious person. He visited the temple

around 1963. He wanted to see the clash between Modernity and traditions in India. M. K. Naik in his History of Indian English Literature has rightly pointed out:

Jejuri is an Indian Waste Land (as some of its admirers seem to claim), since it lacks both the impressive social and religious dimensions and the complexity of that modern classic, but it certainly an experiment in a fruitful direction already indicated by A. K. Ramanujan-viz., a serious attempt 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 218)

It is evident from above critical perspective that in Modern India the place of religion is going down. India has become a waste Land. The collection begins with a poem entitled The Bus. The poem deals with the bus which is broken and has holes in it. The condition of the road is very bad. It has got many ditches therefore; the bus does not run smoothly. Hence, this is not only about religious showoff but at the same time the poet criticizes the political and economic corrupt system. The second poem The Priest highlights the hypocrite priest who waits for the devotees to get puranpoli: is the bus a little late? The priest wonders. Will there be a puranpoli in his plate (Kolatkar, 10). This is an example of cheating people in the name of religion. The poet hints at the foolishness of Indians, their blind faith and how they are exploited by the priest. Actually, a priest is considered to be a holy man but he himself misuses religion for his personal benefits. Here the

priest symbolizes the corrupt religious practices that go on in Maharashtra. The third poem in the Jejuri is Heart of Ruin describes the pathetic condition of Maruti Temple. The poem begins with lines: The roof comes down on Maruti's head. Nobody seems to mind (Kolatkars, 12). The temple is broken but nobody cares about it. This is what T S Eliot in Waste Land criticizes the modern society which has gone far away from religion. S. K. Desai's observation is significant when he finds some or other similarities between T S Eliot and Arun Kolatkar:

"Eliot mind is full of history, myth, legend and strong emotional attitudes, whereas kolatkars mind is free from knowledge which is always of the past, but fully engaged in the present with an implied convocation that simple, direct engagement with present is a way to truth (Pradeep 4)."

The temple is now a house of a bitch. It has delivered puppies. They run here and there in the temple. The poet ends the poem with a critical line: No more a place of worship, this place is nothing less than the house of god (Kolatkars, 12). The Next poem is The Door that stands for religious personality. It is medieval door but it is damaged. It is hanging without any solid support. The poet compares the door to a crucified martyr. Despite aged long suffering and decay the door stands yet it is weakened. The poet compares the door with the prophet: A prophet half brought down from the cross. A dangling martyr (Kolatkars, 15). The poet in his another poem A Low Temple describes a temple in which gods are in the darkness. They are not visible. In this poem the poet points out that religious faiths are based on emotion and feeling followed by tradition. Religious faiths aren't based on rational thinking.

Review of Literature

It is true that Arun Kolatkar is a versatile poet dealing with multiple issues in his writing. His collection of poems invite many scholars to focus various themes and issues concerning to modern Indian society. The researchers have paid attention to theses like modernity, Ironical approach, faith and religion, postcolonial discourse, and historical dimensions. The current research article aims at pointing religious and social aspects of modern Indian society. Going through his poems one may come across the fact he isn't against any religion. He criticizes the lethargic approach of people to religion. He reminds of people to be honest with religion. Many research scholars have pointed out that Arun Kolatkar's poems deal with conflict between religious belief and rational thinking. Their findings indicate that his poems hint at religious hypocrisy, dogmatic and ritualistic behavior of people. It is true that poet wants to pass on a message that people need to be rationally critical about religious practices. Scholars further can investigate issues such as science and religion, psychological dimensions, pragmatics, linguistic discourse.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research methodology has been applied. A close textual reading has been carried out in order to find out images and imagery used in the poem. There have been comparisons with other writers and their interpretations of the poem. Hence it also follows comparative methodology in this research article. Secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and critical essays on Arun Kolatkar's Jejuri, modernism, mythology, and the Indian Knowledge System, are used to support the interpretation. These sources provide

historical background, critical perspectives, and theoretical insights that strengthen the comparative analysis.

Discussion

The current research article undertakes some important poems into consideration. An Old Woman is such a popular poem by Kolatkar. This is a critical poem. There is an old woman standing near the temple and begging money. She promises the poet that she show him the temple. The poet avoids her. She says that she is helpless. She has nothing to do anything. The poet writes: An old woman grabs holds of your sleeve and tags along (Kolatkars, 21). The poet gives a meaningful message that it is necessary to help such helpless people. But at the same time the poet criticizes the political system that compels such people to beg. The Priest's Son is a critical poem. This poem indicates the conflict between religion and reality, fiction and facts, tradition and rationality. This poem deals with one of the fundamental themes of Jejuri. The son of the priest is now a guide. He is a school going boy. It is a vacation time. Hence, he provides information to the visitor. He informs the visitor:

These Five Hills

are the five demons
that khandoba killed
Do you really believe that story you ask him
He does not reply but merely looks uncomfortable
Shrugs and looks away (Kolatkars, 26)

The poet points out that the son of the priest is casual about the information he gives to the visitor. When the visitor questions about the authenticity of the information the boy avoids answering the visitor. The poet criticizes the blind faith of people. He wants that people need to be critical about religion and tradition. They must not believe what the priest and religious people tell them. A Scratch is another serious poem highlighting religious hypocrisy in India. The poems open with a question:

What is God?

and what is stone
the dividing line
if exists is very thin at Jejuri
and every other stone is god or his cousin (Kolatkars, 28)

The poet taunts that stones are worshipped at Jejuri. It has an ironical tone. He shows that in India religion blinds people from looking at reality. Nothing becomes as important as god and religious practices. The main concern of the poem is that people have got to be critical about religious practices. He also discovers that religious activities are practiced for money. The economy of the society largely depends upon such activities. Entire area of Jejuri has become godly. The poem ends with a line: scratch a rock and a legend springs (Kolatkars, 28) Yashwant Rao is a religious satire on religion. It exposes the conflict between perfection and imperfection. It questions one's belief in god and spirituality. Kolatkar begins the poem with a question:

Are You Looking For a God?

I know a god one.
His name is Yashwant Rao

and he is one of the best
look him up (Kolatkarak, 45)

Arun Kolatkarak categorizes gods. According to him some gods are special and other gods are common. Even in the structure of a temple important gods are given innermost place in the temple while gods like Yashwant Rao are kept out of the temple. Kolatkarak suggests Yeshwant Rao to be considered as god and names him as one of the best. The poet observes that there are gods of the poor and gods of the rich. He points out that there is a lot of corruption in religious practices. He showcases the difference between Yeshwant Rao and other venerated gods. He explains Yashwant Rao does not charge any money from his devotee while other gods demand gold, silver, diamond and give false promises of doubling your money or tripling your house holdings:

I've known gods
Prettier faced
Or straighter laced.
Gods who soak you for your soul.
Gods who make you walk
On a bed of burning coal (Kolatkarak, 45)

Kolatkarak glorifies Yashwant Rao for being simple and accessible to everybody Kolatkarak simplifies the process of meeting Yeshwant Rao who belongs among tradesmen and lepers and anybody can visit him at any time. No specification, no cast, creed, or class is required to have an access to Yeshwant Rao. This elevates an insignificant god like Yeshwant Rao. This is a critical observation of the poet. He attacks the over-religious minded people who ignore the real heroes and gods in the form of human beings. Indirectly, he suggests that there are many great people who do much more to people's lives better by sacrificing their valuable life. In the following lines he highlights the yeoman service of great people like Yashwant Rao:

Yashwant Rao.
He's the god you've got to mee
If you are short of limb,
Yashwant Rao will lend you a hand
And get you back on your feet. (Kolatkarak, 46)

The Railway Station is one of the significant poems from *Jejuri* which talks about the wretched condition of the Railway Station. It represents the condition of India. It has got an ironical tone. It indicates silence, decay, uncertainty and the futility of seeking certainty in life. The poem is highly relevant in the present scenario in India. People are rejecting the authority of religion and religious people and their wisdom. This also criticizes the waywardness of people towards religion. The poet compares the railway station with a saint who has lost its significance. The poet attacks on the mentality of the modern society. The world has become a meaningless place: A wooden saint in need of paint (Kolatkarak, 52). The poet in his another ironical poem titled The Station Dog speaks about the sad condition of the world. The dog has lost its connection with the world. The poet says that the dog is the essence of the place. Only the dog is the permanent entity and rest of all things are temporary. In his article, "Arun Kolatkarak's *Jejuri*: A Conflict between Myth and Reality, Faith and Skepticism," Amar Dutta argues:

Jejuri presents a continuous tension between traditional religious faith and modern sceptical inquiry. According to Dutta, Kolatkarak does not simply reject religion; rather, he examines the gap between the sacred myths associated with *Jejuri* and the ordinary reality experienced by visitors to the pilgrimage site (Dutta, 118-129)

Conclusion

It must be kept in mind that Arun Kolatkarak's *Jejuri* is not a simple travelogue. Although the language seems to be simple yet it is highly philosophical in tone. It has got an ironical tone. One has got to be intelligent enough to give justice semantically. The poet provides a stringent, satirical and ontological analysis of the religious and cultural practices in Maharashtra. He talks about commercialization of faith. He observes that Indian people believe in religion blindly. While reading *Jejuri* one feels that it is about god Khandoba but when the reader dives deep in the poems one by one he realizes that the poet has a mission to educate people. *Jejuri* presents a continuous tension between traditional religious faith and modern skeptical inquiry. He attempts to develop critical thinking in people and urges to discard illogicality of people about their religious beliefs. *Jejuri* is an ontological exploration of what is considered to be sacred. The poet being an artist, he looks at things as thinker who believes in facts and logical arguments. *Jejuri* contains poems written in simple language yet poems are ironical, the tone is skeptic and they have a lot of images. At times, ordinary readers struggle to comprehend the meaning of the poems. One can for sure find that the poet exposes religious hypocrisy in Indian society. He criticizes people for being over religious yet the same people behave differently in actuality. To him religion must liberate people from ego, envy, jealousy, hatred and enmity on the other hand religion is creating tensions in people. The poet isn't against god and religion but he is critical about the commercialization and commoditization of religion. His aim is to create awareness in people. He provides a logical approach towards religion.

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