

ARUN KOLATKAR'S 'WOMAN': AN IRONIC PORTRAYAL

Uttam Patil,

Associate Professor &
Head, Department of English,
Rajarshi Shahu Arts & Commerce
College, Rukadi, Kolhapur.

Abstract

Since the inception of patriarchy woman has always been the subject of subordination, subjugation, injustice, oppression and enslavement. She is viewed as the epitome of sacrifice, suffering, forbearance, and obedience. Literature depicts woman from various angles. Sometimes she is portrayed as the archetype of virtues and sometimes woman is presented as the standard of vices. The virtuosity and viciousness are determined by multitude of ideologies that can be personal, familial, social, traditional, and religious. Sometimes there is celebration of woman who obeys, sacrifices, forbears or suffers for welfare of the family or society and sometimes she is blamed and reprimanded for something that results from her breaking the established ideologies. The status of woman changes as per the influence of ideologies under which she sustains herself. Woman is depicted in literature in variety of ways as per the perceptions of the writers. Most of the male writers have projected woman, it can be observed, from the point of view of patriarchy. There are female writers who, under the influence of patriarchal ideologies stick to the so called ideal portrayal of woman and reproach the women who deviate from the ideological norms set by the male dominated society. The present paper attempts to study ArunKolatkars portrayal of woman with special reference to his short but remarkable poem, 'Woman'.

Key words: woman, ideologies, oppression, enslavement, suffering, patriarchy

ARUN KOLATKAR'S 'WOMAN': AN IRONIC PORTRAYAL

- Uttam Patil

Literature involves expressions of experiences, both psychological and physical, encountered by the writers and experiences encountered by others but observed and read or heard by the writers. It is a perception of life that differs from person to person. Literature is a powerful means of acquiring a total perception of life in variety of environs. It considers an experience from multidimensional perspectives. It gives voice to the mute; inward light to the blind; strength to the weak and knowledge to the ignorant. Literature fills the hearts with the courage to stand against injustice, oppression, and subservience caused by the system. Literature depicts life around with all its oddities and evenness. A writer sees the life around him/her and presents it as he/she perceives. This perception may be influenced by various factors to which the writer is being exposed. It may reinforce the social system of the writer of which he/she is a part. The perception may encourage the writer to protest against the existing system that operates to exploit systematically its own part or parts.

Since the beginning of patriarchy woman has always been the matter of subordination, subjugation, injustice, oppression and enslavement. She is being viewed as the epitome of sacrifice, suffering, forbearance, and obedience. Literature depicts woman from various angles. Sometimes she is portrayed as the archetype of virtues and sometimes woman is presented as the standard of vices. The virtuosity and viciousness are determined by multitude of ideologies that can be personal, familial, social, traditional, and religious. Sometimes there is celebration of woman who obeys, sacrifices, forbears or suffers for welfare of the family or society and sometimes she is blamed and reprimanded for something that results from her breaking the established ideologies. The status of woman changes as per the influence of ideologies under which she sustains herself. Woman is depicted in literature in variety of ways as per the perceptions of the writers. Most of the male writers have projected woman, it can be observed, from the point of view of patriarchy. There are female writers who, under the influence of patriarchal ideologies stick to the so called ideal portrayal of woman and reproach the women who deviate from the ideological norms set by the male dominated society. Woman is an indispensable part of society.

She is a companion, a peer, a mate. She is equal to man, and neither opposite inferior to him. Man and woman are complementary to each other. She is eulogized with the well known suppositions like – there is a woman behind every successful man or the hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world. Sometimes she is denounced with the remarks like – ‘Frailty, thy name is woman’¹ or ‘Yet she will be false, ere I come, to two, or three.’² This clearly shows how woman is presented in literature. Literature is a social phenomenon. It is usually used as a tool to propagate the ruling social, cultural, religious and other ideologies. These ideologies nurture and shape the members of the society physically as well as psychologically. In the male-dominated society almost all the ideologies are cultivated to exploit and oppress woman. That is why Simone de Beauvoir aptly observes, ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.’³ There are exceptionally selected male writers who raise the voice against the injustice and oppression done to woman in general in the society. Arun Kolatkar, a poet painter, is one of them. The present paper modestly attempts to study Arun Kolatkar’s portrayal of woman with special reference to his short but remarkable poem, ‘Woman.’⁴

Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar is a modern Indian bilingual poet who wrote in English as well as Marathi. He is one of the most significant and influential poets in post-independence India. He was born in 1932 in Kolhapur, Maharashtra (India). Student of J. J. School of Arts, Bombay, he was a graphic artist and worked in advertising in Bombay. His poems appeared in magazines and anthologies. He is mostly known by his Commonwealth Poetry Prize winning poem, *Jejuri*. Kolatkar presents a totally different outlook on man’s life. R. Parthasarathysays, ‘Kolatkar expresses what he sees with the eye of a competent reporter in a language that is colloquial and spare. The result is a poem of unexpected beauty and power.’⁵ With his modernity, novel style, realistic ideas, frank and bold expressions, he has got a substantial place in the modern Indian English Poetry. According to M.G. Krishnamurthy, ‘Koltkar’s poetry has the air of contemplativeness. This air of contemplativeness makes one feel that Kolatkar is probably trying to explore the significance of external fact.’⁶ He is not a prolific writer but whatever he has penned is radical and it challenges the established ideologies. He tries to repair them for the cause of the oppressed.

‘Woman’ is one of the radical poems by ArunKolatkar. The poem focuses the status of woman in the patriarchal society. The poet points out how the male-dominated society cultivates and frames woman suitably so that it supposes her plight as her natural way of life and serve the men ceaselessly. She is kept under the

false impression that she is born to be a slave and a blind follower of man. The poem begins with reference to the kind of freedom given to woman in the male-dominated society. She is free to 'collect cats.' She is allowed to 'read thrillers.' Collecting cats and reading thrillers are not very significant activities in human life. After all a cat is not an animal of good omen. Multitude of superstitions are associated with it. Collecting cats requires neither courage nor bravery. Similarly reading thrillers does not add to the knowledge of readers substantially. It is a kind of superficial literature. And a woman is allowed to read such literature. She is nurtured in such a way that she takes to reading of thrillers. Her life is made very mundane and she is allowed to experience thrills in life only through this kind of literature. It can be seen that all possible care is taken so as not to expose woman to real thrills in life. In fact, education was not allowed to her earlier and when she became educated she was permitted to read the light literature and not the serious and thoughtful one.

Further, it is pointed out that a woman is allowed to 'name her cats.' She is also permitted to be the member of the group of women who circulate books among themselves so that they can have access to new thrillers. Naming cats makes a woman emotional and sensitive. Actually she is allowed to keep and name cats and read thrillers so that she should not feel lonely and estranged. This means woman is estranged from public life. She is confined into the house and mundane activities therein. Kolatkar observes that woman is also allowed to 'add a new recipe to her scrapbook.' This suggests the selfishness of the male. She is allowed to work with culinary activities and in this way the responsibility of feeding the male is put on the shoulders of woman and she carries this yoke of serving to him in all the situations. He becomes the master and she serves him ceaselessly. Woman is also allowed to pursue painting pictures. This again makes her emotional. In the name of imbuing artistic and emotional values in a woman man exploits her emotionally and confines her to the insignificant chores.

In fact, the poet suggests that the woman is given full freedom to pursue meaningless and insignificant activities like collecting and naming cats, reading thrillers, adding a new recipe to her list and drawing pictures. These activities serve to her as a kind of recreation. They might have some creativity which is insignificant in comparison to the activities assigned to the man. And above all, these are all very ordinary activities for which no permission as such is required. Woman lives in the cocoon of ideologies designed by man to trap and enslave her for a lifelong period.

The cocoon weakens her physically as well as mentally. Hence, woman such a freedom is slavery.

The restlessness of woman is portrayed in 'her insomnia' which might be the result of her being oversensitive or emotional. She is so weak, timid and sensitive that 'a lizard, Kolatkar points out, may paralyze her.' Again the lizard is not a harmful creature but the superstitions associated with it affect the woman. She falls prey to the false traditions set by the male-dominated society. These traditions ridicule the woman. Traditions oppress the woman to such an extent that she becomes workaholic. She sacrifices her health and it is possible that she loses her physical intactness for the sake of other members of her family. That is why the poet says, 'a sewing machine may bend her'.

In addition, Kolatkar points out how woman is enslaved biologically and culturally by observing, 'moonlight may intercept the bangles circling her wrist.' 'Moonlight' might suggest the menstrual cycle of woman. It can be observed that menstruation affects considerable the married life of woman. This means culture exploits woman biologically. This might be referring to the restrictions on woman during her menstruation. In fact, it is man who can not have sex with woman during her menstruation. She is supposed to be unconsecrated. She is humiliated in the family as far as the Indian context is concerned. Furthermore, Kolatkar states that woman is so fragile or insubstantial that 'a spiked man' i.e. a drunkard 'may impale her', i.e. exploit her sexually. This shows helplessness and submissiveness of woman.

In every field of life woman is treated insignificantly. She suffers restlessly. She weeps during her nights as a reaction to the oppression and sufferings imposed on her but she is not given justice. Even the judiciary, according to Kolatkar, takes no heed of her plight. The judges consider her weeping meaningless. The surgeons may operate her body without her permission at their own will. She becomes a commodity without any worth. However, woman is allowed to rebuke or 'damn man.' She may scold man not for being merciless, it can be seen, but might be for not paying enough attention to family. Kolatkar ironically points out the meaninglessness of the freedom given to the woman.

The poet further points out that 'a woman may shave her legs regularly'. She is allowed to do so for the sake of the man. She is free to decorate or beautify herself so that the man is entertained; the thirst of his lust is quenched. And above all woman is given the freedom to 'poison twenty three cockroaches.' This is also meaningless. Cockroaches are insignificant. Culture has made woman so timid and sensitive that

she is not bold enough even to kill cockroaches. She has to poison them. The insignificance of the activity is suggested through the number 'twenty three.' This means the woman has to pass her life in doing insignificant things.

Actually, this is an ironic and satiric portrayal of woman. Women have no freedom in a true sense. They are just slaves in the male-dominated society. She is made to believe that she is free but she is confined within family, socially, culturally, religiously and in every other possible way. Man shows that everything is being done for the sake of her security, luxury, happiness but actually he enslaves her. Kolatkar ironically presents a plain reality that even in the modern age woman lives a meaningless life. She is like a servant, slave and doll to the man. She serves him and keeps him happy by beautifying herself.

Arun Kolatkar is a skillful deconstructionist. To deconstruct the age-old religious, familial and social ideologies, he employs the tool of irony effectively. The atmosphere is made to believe that woman is free, but it suggests that she has got no freedom in a true sense. Here is a social radical challenging the established ideologies through irony and sarcasm. Kolatkar presents the surrealistic portrayal of woman.

The vicious ideologies are deconstructed not only thematically but also structurally. The norms of writing are denied. Punctuation marks are not employed while portraying the subject. The poem has twenty four lines of uneven length. The shortest one is the twentieth line that consists of a single word 'man.' It underlines the importance of man and his superiority or domination over woman.

Moreover, the poem displays the masterly application of syntactic parallelism. Twenty four lines carry sixteen sentences. All the verb phrases of these sentences have the modal operator, 'may' that expresses either 'permission' or 'possibility'. 'May' is used to denote the kind of freedom, woman is allowed. The last sentence i.e.

'a woman may poison
twenty three cockroaches'

signifies the height of the irony. It ridicules the fact related to the kind of freedom allowed to woman. In nine sentences (i.e. 1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, and 16) 'may' means permission. On the other hand, in the remaining seven sentences 'may' may mean possibility. Using the technique of syntactic parallelism, Kolatkar successfully portrays the piteous condition of the modern woman by suggesting insubstantial freedom given to her.

To conclude Kolatkar's portrayal of woman is very real. It is as per the exiting reality in the society. Selflessness is cultivated in the woman to serve the selfishness

in the man. This is a radical poem through which Kolatkar protests against the injustice, oppression, and exploitation done to woman in the cruel and crafty male-dominated culture.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. "Hamlet", *The complete Works of William Shakespeare*, eds. John Heminge & Henry Candell, Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1996.673.

Donne, John . "Song – Go and Catch the Falling Star", *English Lyrical Types*, ed. R. A. Kulkarni, Kolhapur: Phadake Prakashan.,2002.114.

Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex* . New York: Vintage, 1949.

ArunKolatkar, "Woman", *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, ed. A. K. Mehrotra, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004. 60-61. All subsequent references to the text are from this edition.

R. Parthasarathy. *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. 40.

M.G.Krishnaswamy, "Introduction to ArunKolatkar", *Contemporary Indian Poetry In English: An Assessment and Selection*, ed. SaleemPeeradina, Madras: Macmillan India Ltd., 1972. 42.

Higher Education &
Research Society