

## INTERROGATING THE BELIEF SYSTEM THROUGH PAGANISM IN ARUN KOLATKAR'S *JEJURI*

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### Abstract

*Religion and spirituality have often been the subject of debate for many years. Because of the complexity of extracting religion from its enveloped religious practices, many people bend towards alternate practices of worship to seek refuge in the divine power. Arun Kolatkar's Jejuri poems reflect similar conflict with religion for a modern educated man, who is a product of science and technology. He seeks the answers to his quest in paganism, and its interpretation in nature. He employs what Foucault calls as 'bio-power' to reconstruct his ideology with regards to religion. He resists the interpellation of society, by fostering a questioning attitude towards the religious superstitions. This paper will evaluate his association with paganism in the ambit of resistance against the ritualistic form that religion has assumed. It will employ José Muñoz's disidentification as a resistance strategy to interpret the conduct of Manohar in countering the dominant world view of religion. The Jejuri poems are excellent specimens of overturning the traditional belief system by embracing a pagan way of life. The disintegration of the commercial religious practices, devoid of the true essence of religion, is renewed in the simplicity and abundance of the natural way of life.*

**Keywords:** *paganism, resistance, religion, beliefs, Jejuri, natural*

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### Introduction

Joining the ranks of A.K. Ramanujan and Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar is a well-known name in the tradition of bilingual Indian poets, who are quite comfortable in their native languages as well as in English. Writing in Marathi and English, he is known for his poems, which have the magical ability to transform the mundane into profound. His eye for details capture the commonplace in his surroundings, busting the ordinary reality and fusing it with a sense of remarkable astuteness. According to Homi Bhabha, Kolatkar is free from the anxieties of writing in a borrowed tongue because of his firm rootedness in his native culture, which has been demonstrated strongly in his poems. As observed, 'Kolatkar's roots in his own native Marathi tradition – his creative organic relations with it – are amply demonstrated in his translations of the *abhangas* of the seventeenth-century Marathi saint-poet Tukaram and the fourteenth-century saints Namdev, Janabai and Muktabai' (Engblom and Zelliott 109). It is this firm rootedness in his religion and culture, which makes him skeptical of the pseudo religious conventions at Jejuri. It is believed that he wrote *Jejuri* first in Marathi, which was lost, and then wrote it again in English. In a series of poems that form a part of his *Jejuri* collection, he takes us through the pilgrimage of Jejuri, a temple town which is situated in Pune. Through the variety of metaphors used in the poem, he rewrites the religious account to give us a different perspective of the pilgrim site.

### Focus :

This paper will study Arun Kolatkar's poems in the *Jejuri* collection as excellent illustration of resistance against the dominant world view of religion, which has become synonymous with commercial religious practices. Manohar, the protagonist of the poems, is a modern man, with a critical bent of mind towards the hollow religious practices, which are distant from the actual essence of religion. He defies the traditional belief system and seeks answers in nature and the natural elements. His inclination towards paganism will be viewed

as resistance. Resistance, here is interpreted not in the Marxist frame of definition, but as a product of post-structuralism. The premise of resistance is not to overthrow power, but to cause interruption in the smooth functioning of power. As observed by Rebecca Raby, 'resistance is about local struggles that disrupt institutions and normalization rather than the frontal attack on the state led by the One revolutionary subject' (161-162). Manohar's interrogation, and subsequent rejection, of the customs and practices at Jejuri is an illustration of the post-structuralist resistance against the age old beliefs and traditions. He refuses to take things at the face value, and critiques the baseless practices and superstitions which have engulfed the religion. The *Jejuri* poems have been studied from varied standpoints like Indian imagery, Indian aesthetics, conflict between tradition and modernity and use of myth. Using the lens of post-structuralist resistance to study these poems is a relatively new area of research.

### Theoretical perspectives

This paper will use resistance as an entry point to study the poems. It will employ resistance theories that have evolved in the wake of postmodernism and post-structuralism. At the outset, the paper will understand Michel Foucault's concept of 'bio-power' in resistance. The ability to have power over our own bodies and identities is instrumental in resisting the outside influences of the society. Manohar's questioning attitude towards religion and his interpretation of the practices as empty and meaningless is an extension of his bio-power. He refuses to bow down to the disciplinary control of the formal institutions, including religion, and forms his own notions of the divine power. For him, divinity is not in idol worship, but in worshipping and respecting the nature. The paper will also throw light on Paul Ricœur's concept of 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Finally, Manohar's rejection of the traditional as well as the modern forms of religion to embrace paganism will be evaluated from the vantage perspective of 'disidentification'. José Muñoz's 'disidentification' is a resistance strategy which works against the ideological interpellation of society. Hence, the paper will bring to fore the various resistance strategies used by Manohar to highlight the obscure truth of the religious place of Jejuri.

## Jejuri

Jejuri is famous for the Khandoba temple, which is a site of reverence. The place is thronged by the scores of devotees who undertake this pilgrimage to worship Lord Shiva. However, Kolatkar paints a true picture of the place of God, which is in ruins now. He points out how religion is camouflaged by the superstitious practices, and how the sacred is now turned into commercial. Without being vocal in his writing, his poems offer a subtle glimpse of the dilapidated condition of this religious town. It becomes a microcosm of religion itself, which is disintegrated into monetary and commercial gains. The marker between religion and rituals seems to be blurred with people confusing the rituals for religion itself. In his quest for answers, Manohar segregates divinity from the traditional practices and seeks refuge in nature. For him, pagan worship is the true form of worship, which is a natural way of life and which is devoid of ritualistic practices. He seeks divine intervention in nature and in the abundance of the natural elements. As pointed out, 'while *Jejuri* does subvert the conventional notion of the pilgrimage, it does not leave you without a glimpse of the sacred—even if we find it in the least expected places' (Subramaniam 21). His subversion of the conventional religious traditions is juxtaposed in his heightened sense of observation of the natural. His poems serve a two-fold purpose of unsettling the belief systems of the temple town, and simultaneously demonstrating the divine power of nature.

### **Bio-power as a means of resistance**

The Commonwealth winning poetry collection comprises thirty-one poems in total each showing a glimpse of the journey pursued by Manohar to the temple town of Jejuri. These poems have a satirical undertone right from the beginning. The first poem in the collection, "The Bus" reflects the actual bus journey by Manohar to reach Jejuri. Manohar is at crossroads with science on one hand, and tradition on the other hand. In order to solve the conflict between modernity and tradition, he decides to turn to religion to seek guidance. He is contrasted with the old man in the bus with a 'caste mark between his eyebrows' (Kolatkar 25). Manohar goes beyond the rigidity of the traditional practices and examines tradition with his skepticism. He tries to look beyond the tarpaulin flaps of the state transport bus, signifying his refusal to contain in the darkness and ignorance of the traditional values. Unlike other passengers of the bus, he does not accept the values as they are, but tries to

interrogate the same. He looks out of the bus searching for daybreak, just as he looks at religion to search for light. The concluding lines of the poem, 'At the end of a bumpy ride, with your own face on either side, when you get off the bus, you don't step inside the old man's head', further highlights his defiance to be constructed by the fixed values of the past (Kolatkhar 25). He does not accept the rigidity of the system he does not believe in, rather he strives to analyze the system before choosing his allegiance.

Manohar becomes a product of resistance with his objective scrutiny of religious values even in a pilgrimage. He refutes the disciplinary technology of the society through its institutional form of religion. Like his fellow pilgrim devotees, he is not governed by the disciplinary control of religion. He uses what Foucault defines as 'bio-power', wherein 'a new set of operations, of procedures – those joinings of knowledge and power that Foucault calls "technologies" – come together around the objectification of the body' (Rabinow 17). This power over one's bodies can be used as an agency of subversion against the dominant norms of the society. Kolatkhar makes his protagonist Manohar, a subject of resistance by positioning him with power over his body, and refusing to let his body be governed by the ideological interpellation of the society. In his search for the true essence of religion, he does not construct his identity through the religious superstitions. For him, to take his 'shirt off and go in there to do puja' is not religion (Kolatkhar 15). He refuses to follow the religious herd mentality, which has no significance for him. Parallels are drawn between Manohar and the holy saint, Chaitanya. Chaitanya is extremely confident of his religion and needs no meaningless conditioning to evoke religion in him. He is absolutely against the man-made rituals like painting the stone in red to symbolize religion. For him, all the stones have the same special value, because these symbolize natural divinity. His announcement, 'sweet as grapes are the stone of jejuri' further cements his thought process of worshiping all that is natural and abandoning all that is man-made ritualistic form of worship (Kolatkhar 12). Manohar, too, like Chaitanya discards the ornamental approach to religion, and chooses the natural in the end.

By making Manohar the mouthpiece, Kolatkhar critiques the dilapidated conditions of the revered pilgrim site. Manohar is able to see through the farce of the religious place, by excavating the underlined truth. The temple, which is a place of God, is in ruins as 'the roof



comes down on Maruti's head.' (Kolatkhar 13). So normative is this phenomenon that nobody seems to care about the shambles that the temple has turned into. The darkness of the temple is a metaphor for the darkness of the faith of the people. Religion has become a matter of fulfilling expectations, rather than having inner faith. Even the priests are ignorant of the true nature of religion. Religion has become a money making agenda for them, without professing the true dictates of religion. They are more concerned with the money than the knowledge and faith. Even when one argues that the Goddess has eighteen arms as against the eight arms as mentioned by the priest, 'all the same she is still an eight-arm goddess to the priest' (Kolatkhar 8). It is also a comment on the learned people who allow themselves to be led by these priests. Manohar is endowed with Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' wherein he is able to see things not only as how they are, but how they have come to be that way. According to Scott-Baumann, 'a "hermeneutics of suspicion" is an integral part of all appropriation of meaning. And with it follows the "deconstruction" of prejudgments which "impede our letting the world of the text be"' (65). It is the ultimate meta-critique, which helps Manohar deconstruct the situation at Jejuri. He reconstructs his identity by disidentifying from the majoritarian belief system of religion. He sees through the facade of the priests, the temple town, the rituals and the commercial gains and forms his own idea of religion, by using disidentification as a resistance strategy.

### **Disidentification as resistance**

José Muñoz has theorized disidentification as a resistance strategy for the minoritarian subject position group. Manohar falls in the minority subject position owing to his counter normative position on religion and belief system. As elaborated, disidentification is one of the survival strategies of the minority subject 'in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship' (Muñoz 4). It helps create new areas, which become sites of self-creation. In Manohar's case, his interrogation of the traditional belief system makes him a minority in the majoritarian world view of religion. He resorts to disidentification, when he chooses to counter-identify with the normative belief system, and follow the path of paganism. When the religious practices fail to address his concern and satisfy his faith, he turns towards nature and the natural elements. Like Chaitanya, he too

finds his answers in his faith in the natural. When Manohar opens the door to one of the temples, he expects to find another God inside. However, a 'wide-eyed calf looked back at him' (Kolatkhar 31). He realizes that this is not another temple, rather this is a cowshed. This simple observation highlights the basic form of worship in the form of paganism. The poem, "Manohar" blurs the lines between idol worship and worshipping the forces of nature. The calf in place of a stone deity brings back the lost tradition of paganism in religion.

Manohar completely disidentifies with the religious systems and the superstitions seen at Jejuri, when he is leaving the temple town. Ironically, he finds answers to his quest, not in Jejuri but on his way from Jejuri to the railway station. It is exactly at the middle of the juncture, with Jejuri, sixty three priests, three hundred pillars, five hundred steps and eighteen arches on one side and the railway station on the other side, that he finds his path of nature. He finds the natural amidst the traditional and the modern, and these natural elements, found at the least expected point, serves as an answer to his confused belief system. The 'sight of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar in a kind of harvest dance' symbolizes the pagan culture and the worship of the nature (Kolatkhar 41). Manohar is bewildered at the sight of this harvest dance, which also symbolizes fertility. It is at this crossroad between the traditional temple town and the modern railway station, that Manohar realizes the ultimate truth of nature and natural processes. He embraces and celebrates the pagan way of life and thus negotiates his way into the pagan belief system, rejecting both traditionalism and modernity. Delmonico calls this moment an 'epiphany' and further observes that it is 'imbued with a sense of wonder, and an appreciation for the world as it is' (534). Manohar becomes a figure of contestation as he chooses his allegiance to the pagan culture, thereby opening up new realms of religious identity.

### Conclusion

The *Jejuri* poems are perfect manifestations of the power of the natural. The poems offer a realistic picture of the temple towns and pilgrim sites. Throughout the poems, Kolatkhar is objectively stating facts as registered first-hand in his experience at Jejuri. Nowhere is he disrespectful towards religion. What he does is to subtly point out the difference between religion and the superfluous religious practices, which are unfortunately considered a part of religion. He discards these unwarranted customs and brings to light the pure religion of

paganism. By defying the priests, not following the commercial conventions and refusing the rigid customs, Manohar becomes a great demonstration of resistance. He underscores the importance of the ultimate reality of nature and the natural elements. The poems contrast the man-made religious practices with the natural beings, giving more prominence to the natural forces. The nature is God's creation, and by worshipping the forces of nature, one is worshipping God in the purest form. Thus, these poems use resistance against the normative practices and resort to paganism as a way of life.

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