

REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION IN KOLATKAR'S JEJURI

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Abstract

In the arena of South Asian Literature consisting of literature mainly from the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora, Indian English literature holds a predominant position mainly due to its varied and immense output. In my paper I wish to focus on Arun Kolatkar, an important name in both, modern Marathi as well as Indian English poetry. He was a prominent figure on the scene of Indian poetry in English during the 1970s and 80s. He won the Commonwealth Poetry award for his collection of poems entitled Jejuri in 1976. This paper attempts to draw attention to the representation of one of the significant aspects of Indian culture i. e. religion in Kolatkar's poetry. It highlights the different features of the depiction of Hinduism by Kolatkar in his poems through his characteristic way of reflecting the real experience of the Indian masses through his modern, urbanised sensitivity. The paper focuses on one particular thematic concern running through these poems- that of duality- which it can be safely assumed reflects a modern man's approach to religion.

Keywords: *Indian experience, duality, dilemma, tradition and modernity*

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The Indian poetry in English can be said to have come to its own in the post-independence period with the creative genius of the likes of Ezekiel, Parthasarathy, Ramanujan, Mahapatra, Kolatkar etc. With these people the Indian poetry in English moved beyond the romanticism of its predecessors and became strongly rooted in the Indian environment, reflecting its ethos and mores. Being strongly influenced by the modernist poets of the West, Kolatkar's poetry shows his constant experimentation with style and structure and reveals his complex modern, urban sensibility that absorbs the surroundings as it is and tries to comment and make sense of it through a modern outlook. He engages in free word play and sometimes even introduces graphic designs achieved through the arrangement of words. The familiar objects are rendered a new dimension by the curt, creative and novel ways of description. His verbal play, stylistic devices and his distortions come together to throw up new, startling and mostly amusing possibilities. But even behind this apparent word play and experimentation, one notices a serious mind conscious of the position and condition of the contemporary urban, educated man.

All the descriptions of Jejuri come forth to us through thirty one lively and vivid poems with a unique touch of a sceptic who ironically comments on the different aspects that he observes. As M.K. Naik rightly points out; 'there is a triple value system clearly discernible in *Jejuri*.' (21); one is the value system of the ancient religious tradition, the other is the value of system of modern, urban civilization and the third value system comprises of the life-principle that is found in nature. Adding on to this, I would say that there is an underlying duality in this entire poetry collection- a duality of writer's perception of religion, of belief and scepticism, of the sacred and the profane, of legend and truth, of the natural and the artificial- and all these oscillating between the

dialectic of tradition and modernity.

The very first poem in the collection, 'The Bus', introduces us to the narrator who henceforth undertakes to guide the readers through various aspects of Jejuri. He mentions-

Your own divided face in a pair of glasses

On an old man's nose

Is all the countryside you get to see. (2)

Here you see the split mind of the narrator. Besides the narrator's split mind, there is another duality visible here, that between tradition and modernity. The old man, a fellow passenger in the bus represents the faithful multitudes who very devoutly visit Jejuri. On the other hand, the narrator is a representative of the modern world who is unable to find any sense or meaning in the simplistic, near foolishness faith of the masses. He comes from an educated, urban background and looks at everything with a sceptical eye and is alienated from his surroundings. However, Kolatkar is not merely happy in representing his narrator as an urban sceptic. The phrase 'divided self' brings the twist in the tale. It seems as if the narrator carries with himself, though unconsciously, the cultural baggage of his upbringing which also includes faith and religiousness which is difficult to shrug off. Therefore, it seems as though the narrator is split between his modern scepticism and the inborn religiousness that he carries with himself.

Interestingly, the narrator seems to be aware of this fact. He wants to completely break away from his tradition, from the cultural baggage that he carries and wants to view everything with an aloof, alienated and sceptic outlook. He seems to be making conscious efforts towards it.

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 (13)

Through this oscillation between religious belief and scepticism Kolatkar reflects the dilemma of a modern man in his approach to religion. For all the modern thoughts the narrator might have, for all the conscious efforts of remaining aloof from the surroundings he may make, he is only able to move just beyond tradition. While eyeing modernity, tradition somewhere is lurking just behind in the narrator's mind.

The poem '*Makarand*' begins like this-

Take my shirt off
And go in there to do Pooja
No thanks.
Not me
But you go right ahead
If that's what you want to do. (43)

Although the narrator is a sceptic and views the dilapidation and corruption in Jejuri with ironic and mocking tone he nevertheless shows some consideration towards his friend who has accompanied him. One does not find total rejection of traditional beliefs by the narrator. However, he seems moderate, all accepting. There is an element of acceptance in the alienation that the narrator displays.

In the poem '*Between Jejuri and the Railway Station*', you find the narrator commencing his return journey.

You've just left the town behind...
And a few questions knocking in your head
You stop halfway...
You stop dead
And stand still like needle in a trance (54)

Somewhere in the narrator's mind there is confusion, a chaos which arises from

the discrepancy between his modern thoughts and the traditional beliefs. The narrator stops still at a point between Jejuri and the railway station. Here Jejuri stands tall symbolising everything that is tradition while the railway station on the other hand symbolises the modern world. At this point the narrator feels that he has achieved a state of perfect balance with nothing to add or shed.

It is here that a third dimension gets added to the dialectic of modernity and tradition. This dimension is that of nature. What has compelled the narrator to stand still in his tracks between Jejuri and the railway station is the sight of cocks and hens in a field of jowar who seem to be performing a harvest dance of some sort.

And there you stand forgetting how silly you must look
With a priest on your left shoulder
And a station master on your right (55)

So here a sort of balance is struck by nature between tradition and modernity. This collection of poems shows, citing various examples, the state of dilapidation and decay that has crept in the tradition. But it also forms an integral part of modernity. The poet wants to show that somehow pretence, artifice, commercialization, materialism etc. are responsible for this. The only solution to get away from the spiritual aridity caused by these factors seems to be recourse to natural ways of living.

M. K. Naik in his essay 'Arun Kolatkar and the Three Value system' explains the above phenomenon as follows. 'The cocks and the hens evidently represent a value system older than both ancient religious tradition and modern industrial civilization. It is the Life-principle.' (31)

Naik's explanation is that this life-principle has all the vigour, energy and vitality that have now gone missing from both, tradition as well as modernity. I think it is fairly a good one. But I would rather associate the narrator's mid-way stance with his dualistic perception. The narrator represents any modern man and his mid-way stance merely reflects a modern man's approach to religion. It is at this point that the modern man visualises both the ends of the dialectic of tradition and modernity and somehow instead

of confronting the conflicting ends of this dialectic, turns his attention away from it to nature which had hitherto been forgotten.

However, the poet makes it clear that this mid- way stance is momentary and it eventually leads towards modern civilization of which the modern man is a part and parcel. And so is the duality of thought and perception which has become an inherent part of the modern man's life.

We can thus see that *Jejuri* can be studied in the terms of duality which exists at various levels in the poems and which in itself is a representative of the modern man's dilemmatic approach to religion.

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