

A SPECULUM OF THE SOCIETY IN ARUN KOLATKAR'S POETRY

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Abstract

Postmodern Indian English poetry is the poetry of experimentation, be it in theme, language, technique, style, or form the overall treatment has undergone drastic changes. The texture of Indian poetry is enriched by the work of the poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K.Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Shiv.K.Kumar, Gieve Patel and ArunKolatkhar. Arun Kolatkar is a poet known for his realistic presentation of the society. His poetry is a reflection of the various ills of the contemporary society. The paper presents the view of Kolatkar in the light of the changes occurring in our social structure. The paper delineates Kolatkar as a spokesperson of the social ill rampant in our society.

Keywords: Society, ills, eye, unusual, downtrodden, concern, Bombay, city

Art properly so called is no recreation; it can't be learnt at spare moments, nor pursued when we have nothing better to do. It is no handiwork for drawing room tables, no relief of ennui of boudoirs; it must be understood and taken seriously, or not at all.

-Ruskin

Wordsworth said that a poet is a person of more than unusual sensibilities, he sees and feels what other cannot see and feel. He takes us on the wings of poesy sometimes to the uncharted land, fairyland forlorn, sometimes giving willing suspension of disbelief, sometimes kindle our imagination for the new world. A true poet is not one who sits in ivory tower and sings for his patron and benefactors by keeping himself aloof from the day's events. He is a visionary, a seer nay a scientist who depicts truth and predicts forthcoming events in the light of the present events. A poet is for the people and of the people. A poet shed the veil of the society delineates its stark sordid reality.

Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), a bilingual poet, wrote seamlessly in Marathi as well in English with equal proficiency. He was a graphic artist who won Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977 for his long poems *Jejurithat* was published in 1976. Before his untimely death, he further wrote two books in English *Kala Ghodapoems* and *SarpaSatra*. Kolatkar was not a prolific writer; he has written scanty poems but with these small productions he has carved a niche for himself. Arun Kolatkar has clearly been influenced by the style of Western writers

such as T. S. Eliot, Ted Hughes, D. H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams etc. His poems testify the influence of these poets on him. Everything about his poetry is unusual, but it is a refreshing unusualness which disturbs our understanding and makes us sit up and take note of the wonderful possibilities of poetry.

Kolatkar believes in the individual's duty, in the individual's obligation to take a vigorous part in life. His collected poems bear witness, on almost every page, to this belief. He believes that man must progress, not by shambling along following the habit of the world, forever adapting himself to existing conditions, but by resolute, fearless scrutiny of the world, followed by determined positive action in an effort to change the conditions for the better.

Reading Kolatkar, even at his most vague or his silly poems, enlarges our perception of what the life of our day is really like. His favourite mode seems to be the diagnostic, where the scrutiny is on several different levels; his eye is the graphic designer's eye, which moves not only in space but in time, peeling the layer upon layer of history, and displaying the stimulus no less than the movement.

One finds that Kolatkar brings a plethora of images of unnoticeable, common and underprivileged entities in an unusual style. In this way, his poems become the mouthpiece of these lowly social entities just as an old man and woman, station dog and pi-dog, idli woman and the hash seller etc. The desolate, dilapidated and dried state of Jejuriis superbly presented in the following lines of "An Old Woman" as:

And as you look on
the cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.

And the hills crack.
And the temple crack.
And the sky falls

with a plateglass clatter
around the shatter proof crone
who stands alone (Collected Poems in English50)*.

*All references to this paper will be cited parenthetically within the text as (CPE...)

The "crack" of the old woman's face reveals the pressing problem of modern society. Sudesh Mishra observes: ". . . his realization that the infirm and impoverished woman is essentially alone in an uncaring world is conveyed through imagery of a disintegrating universe." it provides ". . . an insight into precariousness of human existence and the essential tragedy of individual human lives" (255). It seems that the poet describes the ruin in order to remind us that without natural harmony and holistic development whatever progress we may do, would result into ruin.

In *Kala Ghoda* poems, Kolatkar emerges as a socialist with a responsibility to unleash the picture of the contemporary society. “*Kala Ghoda Poems* underline the fact that even today the space continues to be called by the name of the absent monument, indicating the continuity between the elitist policies of the colonial society and the postcolonial era” (Nerlekar “The Cartography” 3). These poems depict that now we are free from the clutches of colonial rule and have an indigenous rule. But despite this sea change we have a neo-colonial rule that has only replaced the colonial rule. These poems are targeted towards the people at the helm of affairs. They pooh-pooh the tall claims of progress, development and growth by the political regimes of all times. The question is if the progress has been made why it is not visible in the life of the people at Kala Ghoda. In this way, the *Kala Ghoda* poems become a metaphor representing muteness of the subaltern across the globe. The condition of the pi-dog in the poem “Pi-Dog” reflects the condition of the subaltern that remains unchanged even after decolonization as:

I look a bit like
a seventeenth-century map of Bombay
with its seven islands
not joined yet, (CPE 75)

The line “seven islands, not joined yet” (CPE 75) describes the fissure between the rich and the poor. Further, their grim situation is depicted as: “. . . surrender the city / to its so-called masters” (CPE 81).

The poem “Pi-Dog” validates Kolatkar’s view that externally chaotic new art reflects the new urban reality. He speaks of the present-day city in general and of post-colonial India in particular as the only source and inspiration of truly contemporary art. It appears that he attempts a new synthesis of nature and urban civilization in his poetry; he refused to reject one at the expense of the other. His fundamental attraction is towards Nature, but he brings with him not only the everyday physical environment of a city dweller but his social and historical associations as well. He succeeds in retaining the freshness of vision without any impairment to culture or civilization.

In the poem “Meera” where “The honey cart,” (CPE 85) came “with the noble mission / of cleaning this city.” (CPE 86) is not able to accomplish its mission as:

. . . more and more of Bombay
keeps mushrooming
on land wrested from the sea,

the malarial swamps
salt marshes
and creeks that surround it,
and reclaimed by sweepings
such as this trolley collects

day after day;

with the result, that
the more you clean Bombay
the more Bombay there is to clean (CPE 86 -87).

The poet satirizes the ruthless expansion of the city in the name of development. The lines “. . . beautifully elucidate and derides the unabated and ruthless execution of the negative, lop-sided and imperial project of expansion, advancement and increase by claiming and reclaiming the marginal space in post-colonial India” (Hemang Desai n. p). In the poem “Song of Rubbish”, the fate of the poet says that the rubbish lives a long “period of silence and seclusion” (CPE 89) before meeting with its destiny. The rubbish is piled near “Jehangir Art Gallery” where a fresh painting entitled “Homage to Bombay” is installed. The juxtaposition brings the point that “a good bit of the city stands on sweeping” (CPE 85). It is a glaring reality that a civilized city owes its existence to the filth.

Through his *Kala Ghoda* poems, Kolatkar highlights the encroachment and illegal construction that has become a common phenomenon of metropolis. In his mock ironical tone he writes: “. . . more and more of Bombay / keeps mushrooming / on land wrested from the sea” (CPE 86). These lines depict the universal problem of space in the contemporary society; the poet calls Bombay as “Shit City” highlighting the plight of all the metros of India.

In the poem “Chirimiri”, the poet gives a realistic scenario of corruption that is rampant in the public offices in India.

How automatically your hand
slips into your pocket
when you see a policeman.

Is there someone still out there
who does not take a bribe?
They talk about Yama,
but even he belongs to the same tribe.

So why try to run or hide under your bed?
You don't have to.
Next time you see him coming
try a little cash instead.

Why try yoga, visit holy places
or go to the spiritual gym,
when it's so much simpler just to toss

god's shining name like a coin at him? (CPE 273)

The lines above depict the gruesome reality of our system and suggest that how corruption has become a part and parcel of our life; we observe it as a ritual for our inner satisfaction. Though death is considered as inevitable, sometimes it appears that even it can be warded off by simply tossing a coin.

The poem *SarpaSatrashows* that woman is a harbinger of peace as revealed in the following lines:

Go, Aastika;
and my prayers go with you.
Go, my son,

and all our hopes
go with you.
My heart tells me

you'll find a way
to put a stop
to that festival of hatred (CPE 211).

These lines suggest that since time immemorial women have been playing the role of a pacemaker to preserve the mother earth but man has always sidelined and marginalized the role of woman in order to sustain his power over them. In another poem entitled "crabs" of the same collection, he gives a vivid picture of "two" "big fat crabs" (CPE 249). The crabs symbolize man's psychological fear as:

The crabs belong to you,
and to you alone....
They came out of your head.
Where else do you think they came from? (CPE 249)

The crabs may be a symbol of man's own fear. It is the Prufrockian fear of one's own failure. They represent the problem of id, ego or superego in one's own mind. They suggest the dilemma a man is in when encountered with an unaccustomed situation in life. Through these poems, he brings forth the problems of the modern individual and his alienated existence. In a way, he tries to sensitize the reader about the problems of depression which are created by human beings themselves.

The poem "The Hag" is rich in its visual portrayal of the image an ugly old woman; "...the details about her follow with consummate skill and great artistry" (Dwivedi 191). She is stone deaf and "Entrenched" and the images of pawing, clawing, mobbing and mauling is a pointer towards her pathetic plight (CPE 221). She is "featureless" and "toothless" (CPE 221). She is 'entrenched' like an animal. As a result of which "An orange isn't peeled. It's torn" (CPE 221). The poem with its kinaesthetic image creates horrid and nauseous feelings.

But this is the way he has brought the real picture of our society in which there is no place for old people where no old man or woman hope that the “best is yet to be” (Browning 246). These lines present with clarity and force the depressing situation of Indian cities. The simplicity of the lines rightly matches with the simplicity of the lives of these poor people. The poem reminds us of Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium” as: “An aged man is but a paltry thing, /A tattered coat upon a sack...” (“Sailing” 1). The poem “The Hag” not only creates humour by its irrationality but also precisely points towards the heart-rending picture of aged people. The description is interlaced with social comment and humour. Although he evinces little sympathy for the overtly ideological or social concern, he displays a deep concern for the socially oppressed and the underdogs of the society. While the light of faith never diminishes in his mind it does seem strong enough not to be overshadowed and overpowered by a deep sense of desperation “to celebrate anew, every morning,/ the seduction and death/ of demon of hunger”(CPE 135), as if “shimmering with the joy of living,”(CPE 144). In the desperation of the human predicament, he very often reflects the wastelandish despair.

One has to take care of the society when the society takes care of oneself. It is a set pattern of natural law and Kolatkar’s poetry upholds a common consciousness on this. Kolatkar’s extraordinary visual presentation of the ordinary, everyday life of the underprivileged not only presents his artistry in giving a graphic vision to his readers. By doing so, he shows that by empathizing with them he wants his readers also to develop empathy with the downtrodden. By this, he has emerged a humanitarian poet with a holistic approach.

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