

## From Erasure to Assertion: *Kala Ghoda* and *Sarpa Satra*

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### Abstract

*The basic endeavour of this paper is to highlight the concern of downtrodden more in the form of sharpening their consciousness against the rottenness of the society. This paper examines the complex use of poetry, identity, myth, and history as a subaltern method of resistance. The paper throws light on the subaltern elements in the poems of Kala Ghoda and Sarpa Satra. Subaltern consciousness is more or less similar to that of portrayal of Dalitism in literature. Subalternity as a condition becomes an umbrella concept which gained an extended attractive fashion. The paper is an attempt to unleash the other side of India and its picture after colonialism. The poems of Kolatkar are a poignant satire on the hypocrisy of the system and society.*

**Key words:** *Kala Ghoda*, *Sarpa Satra*, subaltern, downtrodden, colonial, oppression, rubbish, garbage

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Man's history is waiting in patience for the  
triumph of the insulted man.

-Tagore(*Collected Poems and Plays* 328)

Literature cannot remain detached from life. It is the expression of life. Life with all its shades becomes the raw material of literature. Literature always anticipates life, says Oscar Wilde, 'It does not copy it but mould it to its purpose'. Human feelings, ideas, passion, experience, joys, sorrows, aspirations, frustration and the struggle in life form the core of all art and more particularly of literary art. An artist succeeds not by resisting or avoiding life but by giving in to it. The artist expresses reality by identifying himself with the genius of the nature he contemplated, at the same time that by ordering and recomposing these essential elements he makes them in their turn expressive of his own mind. India is a land of varieties and vitalities and unity in diversity seems to be the driving force of our country. But there is disparities and dichotomy. The article provides glimpses of the hind sight of Bombay. The

concern of this paper is to bring how with change of ruler there is no change in the condition of subaltern. Subaltern studies help to understand the history of the working class emancipation. The subaltern studies are relevant in the case of India, because India was a subaltern as a British colony and after the independence; we were subordinated to the neo-colonialism of the western world. Gramsci was credited with expounding a new dimension by introducing the term 'subaltern'. The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci's words to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation. He inculcated the method of persuasion to attain social justice. In post-colonial theory the word 'subaltern' is used to refer to member of any group who face oppression due to caste or gender or race. Spivak clearly points out that a subaltern cannot speak and even if a subaltern speaks it cannot be or will not be heard by others. People in the present time would willingly like to occupy the position of a subaltern whose silence is possibly voiced through the advocating representation of an intellectual. Spivak warns in advance from such a position of accepting the condition of a permanent subordination. She affirmed that the task of an intellectual is to pave way for the subaltern groups and let them freely speak for themselves.

Coming to Indian scene Iyengar says "Indian writing in English is but one of the voices in which India speaks (Quoted in Riemenscheider 172). Modern Indian poets have been contributing for the cause of society. Of the modern Indian poets Kolatkar is most obsessed by the problem of predicament of man. Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), a bilingual poet wrote seamlessly both in Marathi and English with equal proficiency. He is a graphic artist who won Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977 for his long poems *Jejuri* published in 1976. Before his untimely death he wrote two further books in English *Kala Ghoda* poems and *Sarpa Satra*. Kolatkar was not a prolific writer; he has written scanty poems but with these small productions he has carved a niche for himself. For a poet of Kolatkar's susceptibility, the problem of man and his society become the problems of his own heart. Kolatkar deals with the larger life outside the individual – a life which is never without a close link as well as a direct and deep impact upon the individual's life. In his assertions of poetry's dependence on real life, Kolatkar goes beyond the repetition of the self – evident and undeniable truth that all art ultimately has its roots in life. He not only insists on the everyday quality of occurrences that inspires the poet, but actually declares that life with its minute details is poetry.

*Sarpa Satra* is a long narrative poem based on the *Mahabharata* in which *Janmajaya*, great grandson of *Arjuna*, son of *Parikshita* avenges his father's death by *Takshakha*. In the *Sarpa Satra* Kolatkar is reinventing the myth of 'sarpa satra' in the modern context. His poems sweepingly cover aeons of time as they deal not only with the myth of *Sarpa Satra* which has remained a source of abiding inspiration for postcolonial poets, but also with

elements of modern history such as the atrocities of *Khandav Van*, in the *Mahabharata*. What emerges in the process is an alternate history of India, marked by entrenched caste, class and gender hierarchies which have shaped thousands of years of casteist subjugation against which *Sarpa Satra* vehemently reacts. The aftermath of *Khandava* forest destruction by *Arjuna* and *Krishna* which *Jaratkaru* describes as:

And it was these together  
that did this thing  
-burnt down the khandava forest.

And when they were done,  
no one green leaf ,  
not a single blade of grass

was left behind.  
Just miles of ash that kept smouldering  
for months afterwards. (CPE 195)

These lines describe massive destruction that result from vengeance. The poet, with animate poetic heart, recreates the scene and the use of appropriate imagery gives intensity, vigor and immediacy of appeal and freshness. Kolatkar employs myth to resist oppression met out by the voiceless creatures, and does it from the perspective of the subaltern as he writes from a sense of community in envisioning the past. The employment of myth by Kolatkar subverts the convention of national identities, providing an alternative to the myth that was thought to be rigid and definitive. The past that is being appropriated by the oppressor and used to perpetuate their oppressive identity and division, which Kolatkar attempts to deconstruct. The subaltern perspective provided by Kolatkar is not only rooted in resistance, but can also be understood as an alternative form of history. Said writes that resistance literature, “far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history.”(216)

In *Kala Ghoda* poems Kolatkar emerges as a socialist with a responsibility to unleash the picture of the contemporary society. 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 is just subverting the colonial rule. “The colonial masters are and should be replaced by the commoner, represented by the dog, and yet the commoner is a stray dog, the animal that is slighted, kicked around and mocked by Indian society”(Nerlekar “The Cartography” 4). 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 gap and 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 title of the poem “Pi-Dog” is a sly irony that subalterns are pie eating dogs. The “so called masters” is a grim satire on the people in power as they really don’t know the role of the masters but are called so. According to Sachin Ketkar it is “a discovery of truth” (115). The human sensations and emotions that the poem is about could only have been evoked by observation of the pi dog itself and indeed to some extent by a sympathetic feeling of it. Yet the poems open before us as it does a shareable experience of a man living intensely through a certain situation, and it manages to establish a set of human possibilities for the feeling and the will and of the dangers and failures.

There is no sympathy or understanding in the modern urban society. The feeling of grief and melancholy and life’s loneliness and helplessness are revealed with a note of profound pathos as in the poem “The Boomtown Lepers’ Band”. The sensitive social being in the poet reflects upon the realities of life in varying moods from the melancholy of ‘Lepers’. In fact the poem unleashes the black (Kala) colour of our society and in the poem “The Boomtown lepers” band:

Trrrap a boom chaka.  
shh chaka boom trap

Whack.  
Let the city see its lion face  
in the flaky mirror of out flesh.  
Slap a tambourine (thwack),  
let cymbals clash  
Come on let the coin shake rattle and roll  
in our battered aluminium bowl-  
as our noiseless singer  
lets out a half- hearted howl  
to belt out a tuneless song  
for a city without soul.

Here we come (bang)  
and there we go (boom)  
pushing the singer in a wheelbarrow (CPE 154).

His rhythmic urge explores matching creative impulse to fuse with the cause of the oppressed. These are tokens of a mighty and appalling imagination that sweep us along with it, like an angel and force us to endure the vision of another world, thronged with enchantments and horrors. This is a great natural force, we cannot be unmoved by it, but there is more than natural genius, there is art. The word 'wheelbarrow' reminds of the sinister wheelbarrow in the poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" of William Carols Williams and Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. It seems that Kolatkar has taken the poem to a macro level presenting the pathetic situation of "a city without soul", "the flaky mirror of our flesh" (CPE 154) pointing towards the ruthless, merciless and relentless conscience of the modern man who has no sympathy for such people. "This is an intensely horrifying aspect of Bombay life in reality but it is treated in a manner that shows us the verve type and creativity in these beggars" (Nerlekar "Essay" 96). The poet's voice is the voice of the unprivileged, the downtrodden, the purpose of his poetry seems to be to give words to all experiences and thus to share it. The inexplicable, ruthless violence and injustice of the contemporary society has begun to worry the poet. Gone are the dream exploration of a poetic consciousness, there is urgency and fear that seize the poet as a result of which his poetry has become rough and rugged.

The change from the exotic into indigenous has brought change from the margin to the centre and the underprivileged to the privileged. Despite tall claims of socioeconomic development and progress, there is no perceptible sign of change in the life of the subaltern. They "...can see through the new day / and know it/for the clever forgery that it is" (CPE 82). Their life and hopes are "like ill –starred lovers / fated never to meet" (CPE 82). In the poem "Song of Rubbish" rubbish does not become a metaphor for the people who never "aspire to greater glory" nor "find a new purpose" "but prepare for a long period of exile / in the wilderness of a landfill / site (CPE 89) colonized by developers who are:

. . . the valiant prince, from what I hear,  
with true Brit grit,  
managed to get back in the saddle,

and there bid  
in total command of his steed  
once again, (CPE 175)

Robbed of its glory and surrendered to commercialization the city now appears as: "A cement-eating-blood-guzzling city / pissing silver, shitting gold, / and choking on its vomit" (CPE 173). Kolatkar throws light on the fact that despite decolonization and independence;

we still suffer from the problem of poverty, exploitation and extortion. There is no change in the behaviour of the rulers though the name has changed. By presenting the situation of Bombay Square at the microcosmic level, Kolatkar takes it to a macrocosmic vision.

In a sweep of free fantasies, the poet delves into the roots of the life of Bombay and illustrates his comments on Bombay heroes from a source often too little known. He shows how “the neocolonial society of capitalist Bombay has taken over the mantle of the colonial power: the West tried to silence the powerless “natives”, and the independent Indian nation tries to peripheralize the poor and criminalize poverty” (Nerlekar “Essay” 95). Kolatkar tries to bring into his Bombay itself the great city, its bitterness, its brackish quality, its vast glory, its cruelty. He encounters life at its ugliest and reacts to it with a kind of gusto and faith. He has shown through his poems that the more truly localized the art, the more it is universal. His *Kala Ghoda Poems* are the portrayal of underdogs, downtrodden “people who do not fit the agenda of the modern, consumerist, progressive nation” (Nerlekar “Essay” 94). In the poem “Meera” the following lines depict Kolatkar’s masterly display:

As they sink deeper  
into themselves,  
eggshells and dead flowers,

dry leaves and melon rinds,  
breadcrumbs and condoms,  
chicken bones and potato peels (CPE 88)

The details of garbage, waste materials collected by “Meera” describe the poet’s keen sense of observation. These lines suggest that beauty lies in its simpler and humbler aspects, for this one does not require wearing of 3D glasses to get the required image. What he is trying to suggest through these lines is that “Pollution is not on the side of outcasts or subalterns, of those who live on the fringes of society, but on the side of all those who try to purify, monopolize or anesthetize it”(Laetitia “Moving”214).

His *Kala Ghoda* poems at once reveal him to be a poet suffused with humanism to the core of his heart bewails the extension of human values like compassion, mercy, love and kindness in a climate of chaos and disenchantment. “the poet appears up in arm against the socio-political India holding it responsible for maintaining, maneuvering and magnifying the illusory and scandalous discourse of development that had shrewdly brought about and perpetuated the faceless, indistinctive and uncultured subaltern identity in the colonial period”(Desai “Singing Out” n.p.). Brooding over lost identity is aptly presented in the poem “Pi-Dog” where the dog recalls his lineage in the backdrop of globalization as:

I like to trace my descent  
-no proof of course,  
just a strong family tradition-

matrilineally,  
to the only bitch that proved  
tough enough to have survived,  
  
first, the long voyage,  
and then the wretched weather here  
-a combination  
  
that killed the rest of the pack  
of thirty foxhounds,  
imported all the way from England.... .  
  
And my ancestor become the only dog  
to have made it to heaven  
in recorded history. (CPE 76-7)

Kolatkar seems to mourn over lose of individuality, identity, community in the face of modernity. The mushrooming of industries has ushered in an era of commercialism, neocolonialism and imperialism eating into the vital smile of human values like love, justice, humility, tolerance, equilibrium, equanimity, sanity, truth and beauty. He is interested in the here-and-now particularly in *Kala Ghoda* poems in which Bombay is evoked by him as a modern multicultural, postcolonial, urban and lively city. However, the poems in *Kala Ghoda* do not remain tied down to any specific locale. What begins with “Pi-dog” culminates in a sensitive portrait of the way, the pariah, the old and the disabled anywhere in an urban culture. These surreal images are revealed in such a way that they become a metaphor for heedless proliferation which characterizes cities all over the world. The moment and the scene exude a meaning not quite different from that which may have inspired those who penned the epic. Kolatkar’s treatment of this quotidian is humorous, sarcastic, colloquial and full of empathy. The greatness of Kolatkar’s poetry lies expressly in its sincerity and the techniques by which its unique apprehension is distilled into the poems are the technique of sincerity. Though he denied being a socialist but we still find him revealing the harsh realities of Indian society as:

In Bandagere  
in Andhra Pradesh,  
or may be somewhere else in India,  
  
thirteen high-caste Hindus  
are forcing four dalits to eat

human excreta,(CPE 128)

“We too/have our tryst with destiny,” and we too “feel/ the birth-pangs of a new/ city,” (CPE 89). “Kolatkar reveals the insane violence dissimulated behind an ideal of purification and correctness, both linguistic. . . but also social and cultural . . . which is expressed through the violence of a language which refuses to be polished or neutralised by euphemisms(shit)”(Zecchini “Moving Lines” 65).

In fact Kolatkar’s *Kala Ghoda* poems are tribute to Bombay and its dwellers. He has given voice to the voiceless, space to spaceless in these poems. He “aggrandizes everyday people, elevates insignificant things and makes merry of the incongruence that follows” (Nerlekar “Essay” 97). He has conferred various title in honour of these people such as “Urvashi”(CPE 101) “pregnant queen of tarts”(CPE 135) “maids of honour” “the barefoot queen of the crossroads”(CPE 120) “Our Lady of Idlis”(CPE 130) “our lady of Dead Flowers”(CPE 83) “like a Meera before her Lord”(CPE 87) etc. In these poems he has explored myth, history, ethos, geography, politics and art in his experimental style among lepers, prostitute, old cycle tires, rat poison man, pi-dog, shit, rubbish and beggars etc of Kala Ghoda. The inner city, the slums, the tribal settlements, the vast mass of people so long kept out of power and privilege: they have a literary voice and it will be and should be heard. Kolatkar’s extraordinary visual presentation of ordinary, everyday life of underprivileged people not only presents his artistry in giving artistic, 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 down trodden. By this Kolatkar has emerged a humanitarian poet with a holistic approach.

To sum up, the poet has not only portrayed subaltern in their miserable, pitiable lot but he has praised their human virtues in their wretched situation. He has boldly exposed the grim reality of contemporary India. The situation presented by Kolatkar is fresh and live. He presents all the aspect of their life with small detail. By this he has emerged a humanitarian poet with a holistic approach.

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