

## Transcendentalism and Skepticism in Arun Kolatkar's Select Poems

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### ABSTRACT

Arun Kolatkar belongs to the canon of modern Indian poetry writing in English. He is the only well acclaimed Indian poet other than Kabir to be represented on the World Classics title of New York Review of Books. Kolatkar is well versed in both the Language Marathi and English. His poem *Jejuri* is a collection of thirty-one poem which traces humour in everyday matters. For *Jejuri*, Kolatkar earned the Common Wealth Poetry prize in 1976. The poem *Jejuri* presents Kolatkar's view on spirituality, religious experience and imagination. The poems of Kolatkar ironically present the natural imagery which in a way satirizes the society and its superstitious belief. Kolatkar highlights the pitiful situation of modern man who has been entangled between the materialistic world and unable to find a peace of heart, mind and soul within himself. This paper critically analyses the three select poems of Arun Kolatkar- the *Bus*, the *Priest*, an *Old Woman*. All these poems highlights the surrealistic image and also focus on the individualistic approach. Kolatkar transforms his experiences into his works which presents the idea of individualism. Kolatkar presents the individualistic aspect in the poem through the protagonist Manohar who is not a hollow man of Eliot's *The Waste Land* but a modern educated and rational man, can be seen connected to the transcendentalist philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thus, the paper tends to mark the transcendentalist perspective in the Kolatkar's poetry and also traces skepticism in his poetry.

**Keywords:** *Transcendentalism, self-reliance, faith, individualism, spirituality.*

### Introduction

Arun Kolatkar is modernist poet who has written a poetry collection *Jejuri* in 1974. Through this poem Koltakar tries to present the image of the modern society, his relationship with the past and the traditional rituals and the practices. Kolatkar ironically satirizes the blind faith, religious superstition and social hypocrisy that he witnessed at the pilgrimage spot of the *Jejuri*. This paper deals with the idea of the transcendentalism in the poem *Jejuri*. This paper analyses the importance of the individualism in the select poems from *Jejuri*- the *Bus*, the *Priest* and an *Old Woman*. Kolatkar here in these poems ironically portray the parallel scenario with powerful imagery. Thus, Kolatkar through his poem “*Jejuri*” communicates his sadness over a

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few customs and traditions without knowledge of them and unbridled religiosity rehearsed by individuals. Kolatkar uses the satirical tone to express biased experience of during his travel.

Arun Kolatkar was an Indian bilingual poet who wrote both in English and Marathi. He was born on November 1, 1932, in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. His father Tatya Kolatkar was an officer in an education department. Arun kolatkar was a multifaceted artist equally in love with painting, music and poetry. He once asserted that ‘I am primarily a poet,’ but his love for painting and music can not be distant from his poetry. Kolatkar experienced his childhood in a conventional patriarchal Hindu family. He described his crowded home as ‘a house of cards’- the rooms had mudfloors which must be put with cowdung consistently to keep them in decent shape. He got his early education from Rajaram High School in Kolhapur where medium of instruction was Marathi and then went to J.J. School of Art in Bombay, graduating in 1957. He started writing and publishing in magazines and anthologies from 1955 but only after the publication of *Jejuri* he got the fame and joined the literary canon of eminent Indian poets, for which he got commonwealth poetry prize in 1976. His third Marathi publication, *Bhijki Vahi*, won a Sahitya Akademi Award in 2004 (Nerlekar 135-139; Zecchini 25-26). Arun Kolatkar belongs to the group of modern poets but “in Marathi literary history, Arun Kolatkar is defined as the avant-grade.” (Zecchini 21) This is because of his new and experimental ideas and methods in art, music and literature.

Traditionally, in the Marathi literature, the term *sathottari* poets is given to a small group of experimental poets in the period between 1955-1980. Anjali Nerlekar, in *Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture*, however, extends and expands its significance. She states that the term *sathottari* is capable enough to include such local, national and international cosmopolitanisms through its worldwide comparativism and its regional verbalization. Thus, with concern to Kolatkar, she denies the differentiation between modernism and avant-grade. Nerlekar uses the idea of the *sathottari* in a modified manner in *Bombay Modern*, different from its conventional use in Marathi criticism. Often, the term *sathotari* in Marathi literary criticism is used to define a radically experimental spirit in Marathi writing however, the term is also caught synchronous attributions of both nativism and the avant-garde (Nerlekar 8).

In the book called *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in Indian*, Laetitia Zecchini gives a brief account of modernism in the poetry of Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Adil Jussawalla and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra along with the modernism in contemporary American poetry. He

discusses about the 'Beat poets' which is the new spirit of writing between 1950-1960 against the conventions of American life. Therefore, the Indian modernist poets are very much relatable to the American beat writers in their unconventional writing style, such as the use of free verses on a large scale and the surrealism in their poetry. Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is a collection of thirty one poems, first published in *Opinion Literary Quarterly* in 1974 and the issued in a book form in 1976 which is written in a free verse and includes the surrealistic ideas. *Jejuri* is a major poetry collection of Kolatkar that shows the Kolatkar's modernist and unconventional writing style.

*Jejuri* is all about the traditional and contemporary Hindu religious and spiritual sensibility. It presents the view of the town Jeuri and the hill temple khandoba, also known as Lord Shiva. The poem *Jejuri* details the Kolatkar's metaphysical, spiritual, religious experience and imagination. (Chindhade 9). Kolatkar here in this poem ironically portrays the parallel scenario with powerful imagery. He uses a satirical tone to describe the unpleasant image of society and also how the religion has become a business. Pakhmode in his paper "A Social Aspect in the Poems Of Arun Kolatkar" explores the faults in religion, blind faith, superstitions and the religious practices prevailing in the society (642-47).

Manohar is the protagonist of the Poem *Jejuri* whose mind is confused with the mixed feelings of faith and science. The protagonist is confused due to the impact of modern life and culture on his mind. There is always a conflict between modernity and tradition in the society through which the protagonist Manohar is dealing with. Thus, Kolatkar through his poem "Jejuri" communicates his sadness over a few customs and traditions without knowledge on them and unbridled religiosity rehearsed by individuals. The poem begins with the question that whether he is a traveler or a pilgrim. Looking at the forehead of an old man, the protagonist expects that he is a religious person due to the teeka-mark on his forehead (Patel 687-92). Kolatkar, through mentioning the teeka-mark here, states the differentiation between the traveller and pilgrims. However teeka-mark is not the ultimate hints at the personality of the old man.

Kolatkar all through attempts to uncover the human culture got in the midst of religious corruption, social blind faith and profound depravity. The tone of these poems are humorous and is set apart by the use of irony, attempts to uncover the common however inconvenient state of modern man who caught between his social past and future possibilities, endeavors to chalk out the equilibrium by willfully submitting to the accepted practices and customs. (Kumar 33) Thus Kolatkar highlights the pitiful situation of modern man who has been

entangled between the materialistic world and unable to find a peace of heart, mind and soul within himself rather than the outside world. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is among world's well known allegory, which begins the description of a man named Christian, who lives in a city called Destruction. On the one hand, he carries Bible, and on the other hand, he is laden with the burden of his sins. This symbol is interpreted by the Christians as a vision of their own life who want to live the city of destruction behind. Thus, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is about modern man's transformation to the world, which is less with materialism that individual man wants to attain. Manohar, the protagonist of the poem *Jejuri*, is not a pilgrim but a traveller with a conscious mind.

Travel writings are prominent among modernist writers. Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is also a travelogue poetry in which Kolatkar vividly presents the picture of pilgrims along with the travel spots of *Jejuri*. Pulkita Anand in the paper "Exploring Elements of Travel Literature in Arun Kolatkar's Poetry" states what Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), highlights about travel writings of the nineteenth century. Anand says travel writings looked at the ways in which other cultures are represented and how travel writings has influenced the minds of the travellers (64). Therefore Kolatkar's *Jejuri* as a travelogue poetry tends to convey the transcendentalist philosophy. Poem *Jejuri* presents the idea of transcendentalism. Individuals, men and women both, know about themselves and their surroundings that 'transcends' or goes beyond what they can see, hear, taste, or feel. This knowledge does not come through rationality or sensibility but rather through instinct and a creative mind. Individuals can trust themselves to be their own clout on common decency. A transcendentalist is an individual who acknowledges these thoughts not as strict convictions but rather as an approach to grasping life connections. Likewise transcendentalist, Kolatkar also believes that every individual, there exists a private relationship between the self and the universe.

Emerson in the essay "Self-reliance" states that "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." (15) Here, in the last line of the poem 'the Bus' Kolatkar says 'you don't step inside the old man's head' because the temples or religious places never do favoritism. It shows that the history is meta-narrative, written through the ideological perspective. Hence, what the transcendentalist idea of relying on the past is not supported by the poet of 'the Bus Stop' as well. As transcendentalism itself emphasizes on individualistic approach. "The Bus" shows the cross sections of the society, Kolatkar in the line "Outside, the sun has risen quietly/ it aims through an eyelet in the tarpaulin." presents the idea of receptivity of the narrow-minded people

in the bus because every individual like Manohar does not want to look outside the window at the rising sun that will replace the darkness with light which I nothing but a light of spirituality. Kolatkar here mentions tarpaulin here as the faults in the religion that is not letting the sun's rays enter inside the every individual in the Bus.

The second part of the poem “The Priest” presents the picture of the temple Priest, looking for the arrival of the pilgrims at Jejuri. The prevailing subject of the poem is hypocrisy. The Priest is keen on offerings and contributions by the pilgrims than any religious ceremonies. He is concerned because of the delay of the bus. (Banupriya 61) Kolatkar, in the line “The bit of betel nut/ turning over and over on his tongue/ is a mantra” presents the unhealthy and bad habit of chewing a betel leaf in which the Priest has been indulged. As a Priest, he is supposed to be a holy person, but he turns it over and over in his mouth while chanting a mantra. Tagore, in his most widely read collection of poem, *Geetanjali* suggests that “Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! (8-9).” Therefore according to Tagore, the worship is not the matter of chanting the mantras from the outer mind, but it should become from the inside the soul to feel spiritually connected to the universe.

The another poem “An Old Woman” from the same collection Jejuri appeals to the same idea of self-reliance. Kolatkar shows the real image of the society where individuals overlook to give an older woman fifty paise but give numerous rupees in the cause to satisfy their aims. Whereas the protagonist Manohar follow his own instincts and idea. He gives fifty paisa to an old woman rather than the priest having a materialistic approach to collect money from the pilgrim, and thinking of Puran Poli on his plate. Thus, Manohar is the self-relianced person with individualistic approach who does not follow the blind faith. The poet compares the old woman and a burr with whom he wants to get rid of at any cost. He says:

And the hills crack.  
And the temples crack  
And the sky falls  
With a plateglass clatter  
Around the shatterproof crone  
Who stands alone. (Kolatkar, An Old Woman)

Kolatkhar compares the face of an old woman with the cracks of the temple. The old woman in spite of being in a despicable predicament, generally attempts her potential means to get that paisa. Here the poet shows the psyche of the society (Tomar 184). The protagonist Manohar finds her eyes reflect the sky of inner consciousness. She is working there as a guide to earn her livelihood rather than making a fool of the pilgrims, likewise, priest used to do. Thus the Old Woman finds the transcendentalist and individualistic approach, she finds the spirituality coming from the self rather than organized religion. The Old Woman not only impresses the visitor but also teaches him a lesson of self-reliance. The visitor realizes that despite being catastrophe, she earns her livelihood on her own rather than creating the hypocrisy likewise the priest. The visitor now realizes that an old woman is very determined and would rather make her own way in life. Like the penny in her hand, his spirituality to the real world makes him feel insignificant. The poem concludes by arguing that no one should be judged or taken for granted. Wallace Stevens in his poem Sunday Morning states that “Divinity must live within herself:/ Passions of rain, or moods is falling snow;/ Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued” the poem focuses on a woman sitting in the garden at her home, does she need to go the church to find a spiritual connection to the God? And the poem generates the idea that a woman, while sitting in the garden, can discover the spiritual connection to self and divinity. Thus, the woman in the ‘Sunday Morning’ rather than speaking loud relying on her inner thoughts.

Transcendentalism is all about how to overcome the burden of the society and culture, which is restricting an individual. Thus, from Transcendentalism viewpoint, an individual works best when they don’t rely upon various components of the society and its culture, however when they depend upon themselves. (Cirjak) Kolatkhar as an modernist poet combines ‘old light’ of religious experience with the ‘New Light’ of his personal experience which tends to bring out the idea of transcendentalism in his Poem Jejuri. Emma Bird in the article “Re-Reading Postcolonial Poetry: Arun Kolatkhar’s Jejuri states that “Jejuri accordingly provides a succession that prompts expert postcolonial readers to scrutinize the arrangement of strategic practices they work inside (229-43).” Thus, the bird also emphasizes the modification of practices based on religion.

There are incidents in Jejuri that reveal a typical modern urban septic mind of the poet. The key feature of this poem is that it is objective scrutiny of ancient religious tradition, which has become materialistic practice nowadays. Whatever is observed by the narrator, it has not the

sensitivity where the past does not dominate the present, where the present is all that matter. In this regard S. K. Desai compare Kolatkar with T. S. Eliot:

“Eliot mind is full of history, myth, legend and strong emotional attitudes, whereas kolatkars mind is free from knowledge which is always of the past, but fully engaged in the present with an implied convocation that simple, direct engagement with present is a way to truth ( Pradeep 4).”

At some point, Kolatkar’s poem *Jejuri* tends to hint towards the existential crisis, to which an absurd French dramatist says “cut off from his religion, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Abrams 1)

M.G. Hari and H. S. Komalesha in their article ‘Sacred withod God: Bhakti in Arun Kolatkar’s Poetry’, discuss the subaltern subject position assigned to an individual by the hegemonic power structures is not only refuses the material comfort of life but also ignores their existence and dignity. Hari and Komalesha then suggest that Bhakti poets are deeply rooted in one’s own world and reject the belief that nothing outside is commendable to point of being given more importance and respect than the wealth of the internal being. (151) Mahadevi Verma in her poem *Why An Introduction Dear, You are Within Me* “You are limitless, I am but an illusion of limits,/ In the secrecy of real image- reflection, why enact to be lovers.” Here Mahadevi Verma also finds the connection herself to the Universe from the inside rather than depending on the outside world. Thus, the spirituality comes from self-reliance and individualism, which Kolatkar hints through the protagonist Manohar in *Jejuri*.

*Jejuri* is hardly an Indian wasteland (as some of its admirers seems to claim), since it lacks both the impressive social and religious dimensions and the complexity of that modern classic, but it is certainly an experiment in a fruitful direction already indicated by AK Ramanujan- viz, a serious by a modern Indian English poet to review his ancient heritage. *Jejuri* could have been a far more substantial achievement had the poet’s vision been less fragmentary and had he not remained content with scratching the surface of the problem (Naik 208).

M. K. Naik states that *Jejuri* can not be considered an Indian wasteland due to excessive fragmentation and lacks to offer a solution, likewise, Eliot offers at the end of *The Waste Land*. Eliot mentions the Three virtuous principles- giving, compassion, and self-control which is taken from the *Brihadaranayaka Upanishad*. According to Eliot, these three virtues are the directive principles for the salvation of the modern man. This principle for the salavation of the modern man is presented in *The Pilgrim's Progress* where a man, Christian, seeks to transform

his life by living the city of destruction behind. It hints that human beings can achieve salvation through introspection as the driving force of our life exists within ourselves it cannot be achieved by looking into the outside world.

### Conclusion

Kolatkars *Jejuri*, although not fits into the modern classic according to Naik, it provides the social and religious reality prevailing in the society. It provides the transcendentalist idea of individualistic approach that reflects through the protagonist, Manohar. The Poem breaks down the false consciousness of faith and religion and directs the individuals to open their minds and modify the faults in the religion. Moreover, Kolatkars *Jejuri* deals with the approach of self-reliance, which directs every individual to rely on their intuition and thoughts rather than rationality in order to transcend or go beyond this materialistic world. Thus, Kolatkars *Jejuri* encompasses the main ideas and beliefs of the transcendentalist movement, that is individualism, idealism, and the divinity of nature. Kolatkar, through the character of Manohar, shows the importance of an individual, and it is Manohar who finds an old woman worth of his fifty paisa rather than the priest to whom people use to give numerous sums of money as an offering for their salvation. The theme of search is most prevalent in all these three poems. The old man is in search of faith, whereas 'the Priest' is in the search of the pilgrims so that he may get 'Puranpoli' (a sweet dish) in his plate. While in the last poem, an old woman provides a glimpse of self-reliance. She genuinely seeks for the pilgrims to show the tourist the way to the horseshoe shrine in exchange of fifty Paisa coin. Thus Kolatkars *Jejuri* presents a vivid picture of the modern society and, at the same time, hints towards the individualism.

Arun Kolatkar converted his travel experience into his writings which is very much visible in the above select poems from *Jejuri*. There is a sense of Skepticism about the truth, reality and believe throughout the visit in the mind of the protagonist, Manohar. He is a modern educated and rational man who finds the pilgrimage devoid of any religious sanctity. The Protagonist's conscious mind and his rational attitude and response not only to the externality of his environment but also to a played-out faith and the materialistic aspect provide deep insights into individualism and self-reliance. The protagonist Manohar is neither a seeker like an old man nor a pilgrim but only a traveller who observes the things with a conscious mind. He believes that transcending an individual is possible only through the conscious mind and self-reliance and believes in the aspects of individualism rather than trusting in others.



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