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Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*: A Conflict between Myth and Reality, Faith and Scepticism

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Abstract

Myth and mythical association with different gods and goddesses play a significant role in Indian English literature. Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is a Commonwealth Writers' Prize winning collection of poems about a pilgrim place of the same name in Maharashtra and mythical stories associated with the local god Khandoba. Kolatkar tries to exploit the age old theme of a religious pilgrimage through his poetic persona, Monahar, who is a modern urban sceptic. To him *Jejuri* does not appear to be a spiritual place or a sacred place of worshipping God. Rather it is a barren, desolated and ruined place. This paper aims to analyze the conflict between the mythical association of the place and the god Khandoba and the socio-cultural and economic reality of the place; between the blind faith of the local people and the pilgrims who visit there and the sceptic attitude of an urban tourist with an objective eye and rational mind.

Keywords

pilgrimage, faith, scepticism, myth, conflict

Being a basic element of human culture, myth exists in every society and has been influencing authors of great literary works in every language and in every age. Myths and their mythical symbols lead to creativity in literary works. Authors often take their stories or subject matters from myth so that the reader can understand the work more deeply and in a much comprehensive way. Arun Kolatkar's (1932 – 2004) widely known collection of poems, *Jejuri* (1976) is about Jejuri, an ancient place of pilgrimage in Maharashtra and its mythical association of the god Khandoba. But what makes *Jejuri* to draw much critical attention is that it presents a conflict, an essential element for any literary work, between the legendary associations of the place and the god and the socio-cultural reality of the place; between the blind faith of the people of Maharashtra in the miraculous power of the god Khandoba and the sceptic attitude of an urban tourist.

Arun Kolatkar is an important and influential figure in Indian English poetry. He is a bilingual poet who wrote poems simultaneously in Marathi, his native language and in English. His *Bhijki Vahi* (2004), a collection of Marathi poems, won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2005. *Jejuri* is his first collection of English poems that not only brought him immense fame but won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1977. About its place in the canon of Indian poetry in English, Mehrotra in *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) comments that it is "among the finest single poems written in India in the last forty years" (54). *Jejuri* is a collection of thirty-one poems, the last one having six sections, which has provoked a considerable amount of debate among critics and readers because of its attitude to the religious experience. Jejuri is a place of pilgrimage about thirty miles away from Pune in the central Indian state of Maharashtra and has one of the most famous temples of the state. Khandoba (often said to be a form of Lord Shiva) is the local god of the temple and is worshipped by all castes and communities in Maharashtra and some other places in India. In his "Introduction" to *Jejuri*, Amit Choudhuri writes that Kolatkar, in a conversation with another poet Eunice de Souza, disclosed that he had discovered Jejuri in "a book on temples and legends of Maharashtra... there was a chapter on Jejuri in it. It seemed an interesting place" (xv). In 1963, he, along with his brother and a friend, visited Jejuri and composed some poems thereafter. A part of *Jejuri* was first published in *Dionysus*, a little magazine of the mid 60s, but the editor of this magazine lost the whole manuscript. Kolatkar then rewrote *Jejuri*, which was first appeared in the *Opinion Literary Quarterly* (1975) and later as a book by Clearing House Publication in 1976. M. K. Naik in his article "*Jejuri*: A Thematic Study" observes, "The religious theme is evident even to a casual reader, for the title 'Jejuri', is an unmistakable pointer to it" (169). It is obvious

that for *Jejuri* Kolatkar takes a place of pilgrimage as the setting and mythical stories and blind religious belief as the theme, but a close reading of the poems reveals the fact that while a picture of ancient religious tradition is certainly a theme of the poems, it is not the sole theme, but only a part of the larger thematic complexity of the collection. Here Kolatkar's intention is not to worship or celebrate the god Khandoba but to depict the real socio-cultural and economic condition of the local people by highlighting, or rather by satirizing their blind faith, superstitions and mythopoeic imagination. Kolatkar tries to exploit the age old theme of a religious pilgrimage through his protagonist, Manohar. Manohar is not an ancient pilgrim, but a man with modern sensibility and scientific wisdom and through him Kolatkar gives us a sceptical perception of the entire pilgrimage. S. K. Desai justly comments that the narrator goes to Jejuri not "as a pilgrim... He is a kind of traveller... a tourist" (48-49).

Kolatkar beautifully blends the theme of religious faith, mythical stories and superstitious beliefs of the people of Jejuri with the natural description, harsh reality and rational and sceptical attitude. According to M. K. Naik, "Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* has almost uniformly been regarded as a 'quest poem' as a presentation of modern urban scepticism impinging upon ancient religious tradition" (179). Kolatkar wants to seek what Jejuri is really about and therefore he, like a modern sceptic, investigates every stone, tradition, culture, people and legend associated with gods and goddesses, people and places of Jejuri. Almost all the poems are written in a sarcastic and ironical tone by satirizing the blind faith and superstitious belief of the people. By presenting the myths Kolatkar beautifully exposes the legends about the god Khandoba and the place of pilgrimage for what they really are.

Arun Kolatkar's visit to Jejuri, as the poems depict, is completed within a single day – starting from the early morning and ending by the late afternoon. "The Bus", the opening poem of *Jejuri*, establishes the theme through the juxtaposition of his protagonist, Manohar with an old man who a fellow traveller, more specifically a pilgrim going to Jejuri in the same bus. It is a state transport bus full of pilgrims proceeding towards the temple of Khandoba in Jejuri. The windows of the bus are covered with tarpaulin to keep off the possible rainfall and the cold wind. The cold wind is slapping the tarpaulin, which in turn, whips at the elbow of the pilgrim. Symbolically the tarpaulin is attacking the blind faith of pilgrims even before their reaching at the pilgrimage: "a cold wind keeps whipping/ and slapping a corner of tarpaulin at your elbow" (3-4). Manohar, on the other hand, is searching for the signs of daybreak but the sun rays, a symbol of the light of true knowledge, is posing hindrances in entering into the bus. The only light of the sun that Manohar sees is the sight of his own face that is reflected in the pair of glasses on the old man's nose. This split image

shows the conflict between the faith and belief of the pilgrim and the scientific and sceptic mind of the protagonist:

your own divided face in the pair of glasses
on an old man's nose
is all the countryside you get to see. (10-12)

While describing the old man, who is sitting by the opposite seat of the speaker in that bus, he notices a 'caste mark' on the forehead of the old man which reveals that he belongs to a high caste, probably a Hindu Brahmin, who has a deep faith for his own religion. The last line of the poem is highly significant: "you don't step inside the old man's head" (25). It is obvious from the statement that the speaker is out and out non-involved and sceptic towards devotion or worshipping, which the pilgrims of Jejuri have for their mythical gods and goddesses.

The stark reality behind the blind faith comes to the fore in the next poem – "The Priest". In a sarcastic tone the poem brings out the ugliness of an established belief, the commercialization of a religious aspect. The priest is here not a true worshipper of God, but a custodian of God. He is less concerned about the religious aspects, but more about the offerings of the pilgrims. Though he is seen as chanting a mantra over and over, his mind is anxiously waiting for the arrival of more pilgrims by bus. Ironically, he is not praying for the pilgrims but for himself simply because he is aware of the reality that his livelihood solely depends on pilgrims' offerings to the god Khandoba, better to say, on the blind faith and belief of the worshippers. The poem unmasks the reality about priest and priesthood – they are ready to eat pilgrims commercially by the name of religion or God:

a cat grin on its face
and a live ready to eat pilgrim
held between its teeth. (31-33)

Poems like "Heart of Ruin", "The Door", "The Door Step", "An Old Woman", "Hills", "A Scratch", "Water Supply", "The Reservoir" etc. expose dilapidated, desolated and dying pictures of the places and people of Jejuri. Instead of eulogizing the mythical stories and false believes associated with the place and with the gods and goddesses, the speaker sharply portrays the true pictures of what his objective eyes and scientific mind examine. "Heart of Ruin" presents before us the ruined condition of a temple and unfolds a touching reality. The roof of the *Maruti* (Son of the Wind god) temple comes down on the head of the god and a mongrel bitch has made this ruined temple a dwelling place for herself and for her puppies:

A mongrel bitch has found a place
for herself and her puppies

in the heart of the ruin.

May be she likes a temple better this way. (5-8)

The ruinous condition of the temple leads Kolatkar to conclude that it is no more a place of worship. Yet, he is highly ambiguous at the very end as he seems to accept the fact that it is indeed a house of God: "No more a place of worship this place is nothing less than the house of god" (11-12). More vivid description of ruined condition of temples in *Jejuri* is projected through "The Door" and "The Door Step". The present condition of the temple is pathetic and at the same time ironic:

Since one hinge broke
the heavy medieval door
hangs on one hinge alone. (4-6)

The door is out of order for a long time:

The door would have walked out
long long ago
if it weren't for
that pairs of shorts
left to dry upon its shoulders. (20-24)

The real picture of the wretched condition of the temple reaches its acme in "The Door Step". The poem comprises of only four lines but these four lines are enough for bringing out the reality behind the myth. The poetic persona is highly sceptical and sarcastic and puts question about the very entrance of temple, the house of God:

That's no doorstep.
It's a pillar on the side.
Yes.
That's what it is. (1-4)

Not only the temples in the pilgrim place are ruined, the people living there are even in worse condition. Kolatkar explicitly portrays the condition of beggars in *Jejuri* in his poem "An Old Woman". If a pilgrimage provides livelihood to priests, as we have already seen in the poem "The Priest", beggars too get their bread from this place. "An Old Woman" is one such poem in *Jejuri* that captures this reality. The old woman in this poem begs money from pilgrims who come to visit this place. She is so poor that she catches the sleeve of the pilgrim and asks for only 'fifty paise coin'. When she finds that the pilgrim is not willing to provide that coin, she makes another pathetic attempt by presenting herself as a tour guide who is willing to take him to the 'horseshoe shrine'. Though the pilgrim replies that he has already visited that

place, she still holds his sleeve, even tightens her grip. After all her vain attempts, she herself discloses the reality:

... you hear her say,
 “What else can an old woman do
 on hills as wretched as these?” (16-18)

Really people like her have no alternative but the charity of pilgrims to sustain their livelihood even in such a place of gods and goddesses. The protagonist finally realizes:

And you are reduced
 to so much small change
 in her hand. (22-24)

Kolatkar's presentation of the temple town brings out the aridity and barrenness of Jejuri, instead of the religious mysticism associated with the place. Poems like “Hills”, “Water Supply” and “The Reservoir” easily uncover this ground reality, which adds the nonconformist attitude of the speaker. The hills of Jejuri, which are believed to be the dwelling place of gods and goddesses, are, in the protagonist's eye, actually nothing but a desolated and barren land:

Hills
 demons
 sand blasted shoulders
 bladed with shale
 demons
 hills
 cactus thrust
 up through ribs of rock. (1-8)

Both the poems “Water Supply” and “The Reservoir” vividly portray the dry and dead state of the place. “Water Supply” ironically presents a ‘dry water tap’ with ‘a broken neck’ which ceases to supply water:

a conduit pipe
 runs with the plinth
 turns a corner of the house
 stops dead in its tracks. (1-4)

By reiterating the aridity of the place Kolatkar, in “The Reservoir”, offers a conflict between the faith of the ancient and the scepticism of the modern:

There isn't a drop of water
 in the great reservoir the Peshwas built.
 There is nothing in it.
 Except the hundred years of silt. (1-4)

The lack of water and the presence of hundred years of silt symbolically suggest the lack of faith and presence of stagnant false beliefs of the people of Jejuri. M. R. Satyanarayana states that the poem “prepares the reader for a possible symbol of a permanent drought. There is no water in the reservoir built by the Peshwas. Whatever spiritual sources Jejuri might have boasted of in the past have dried up” (76).

Through the narrator Kolatkar makes a pure objective scrutiny of an ancient religious tradition which reveals the sceptic mind of the poet. All the religious aspects in Jejuri make him to think whether they are spiritual or not. Kolatkar sharply satirizes the blind faith and religious belief of the people of Jejuri and of the pilgrims' who visit the place to worship the god Khandoba. “A Scratch” is one such poem where Kolatkar ridicules this blind faith and mythical stories which can make any stone of Jejuri a god or a goddess or a god's cousin and blur the dividing line between a god and a stone:

what is god
 and what is stone
 the dividing line
 if it exists
 is very thin
 at jejuri
 and every other stone
 is god or his cousin. (1-8)

Myth has the power to create god out of mere stone. There is a large rock, of the size of ‘a bedroom’, which is believed to be the wife of Khandoba and she had been turned to stone by Khandoba, who in a fit of rage struck her down. The ‘crack’ that runs across the rock is the ‘scar’ that she received from her husband's ‘broad sword’. This is how the rock bears the story of Khandoba and his wife generation after generation to the local people and the pilgrims. But to the protagonist this is nothing but harvesting gods and goddesses out of ‘hard rock’:

there is no crop
 other than god
 and god is harvested here

around the year
 and round the clock
 out of the bad earth
 and the hard rock. (9-15)

The speaker cannot restrain himself but to conclude:

scratch a rock
 and a legend springs. (23-24)

Kolatkar's same blasphemous tone can also be seen in another poem called "Chaitanya". Chaitanya is actually a late-fifteenth century Hindu saint whom Kolatkar presents here as having the god-making ability. To Chaitanya the stones of Jejuri were as sweet as 'grapes' and he had the ability to turn stones into gods:

He popped a stone
 in his mouth
 and spat out gods. (4-6)

A strange theological classification among gods and goddesses in Jejuri again establishes the blind faith of the pilgrims and the sceptic mind of the protagonist through poems like "The Cupboard" and "Yeshwant Rao". "The Cupboard" reveals the absurdity of people's faith in God and shows how even the gods are preserved according to their status. In the case of stone gods, they are kept in ruined temples with broken roofs and doors, but the gold gods get special care, they are kept in protected cupboard:

the cupboard is full
 of shelf upon shelf
 of gold gods in tidy rows. (10-12)

In "Yeshwant Rao" we come to know about Yeshwant Rao, who is conceived as a 'second class god' and as he does not belong to the highest category of gods his place is outside the main temple, outside even the outer wall. He is being classified so perhaps because he belongs to the 'tradesmen and the lepers'. He is being worshipped by those who have any problem in their limbs and the irony is that the god himself is "without an arm, a leg / or even a single head" (37-38). Being a second class god he does not have the power to do anything 'spectacular', he is merely a 'bone setter' who can mend any broken limbs:

He is merely a kind of a bone-setter.
 The only thing is,
 as he himself has no heads, hands and feet,
 he happens to understand you a little better. (52-55)

The conflict between a modern intellectual sceptic and the traditional believers of God and religion is presented through some conversational poems like “A Low Temple”, “The Blue Horse”, “The Priest’s Son”, “Makarand” etc. The quest intention and the questioning mind of the protagonist bring out the ignorance of the priest. “A Low Temple” and “The Blue Horse” make it clear that the priest, who is the prime worshipper of God, does not have the true knowledge about the gods and goddesses whom he is worshipping every day. To the priest the goddess has eight hands but when the protagonist counts them, it is eighteen:

Who was that, you ask.

The eight-arm goddess, the priest replies.

A sceptic match coughs.

You can count.

But she has eighteen, you protest.

All the same she is still an eight-arm goddess to the priest. (9-14)

The low temple literally keeps its gods and goddesses in dark. They revive and die with the ‘length of a match stick’. Kolatkar’s scepticism is heightened by the protagonist’s coming out ‘in the sun’ and lighting ‘a *charminar*’ (cigarette). Similarly, “The Blue Horse” exposes the ignorance of the priest. While a group of singers singing of ‘a blue horse’ upon which god Khandoba is sitting, the picture that the protagonist finds on the wall of the priest’s house has a ‘white’ horse:

“The singers sang of a blue horse.

How is it then, that the picture on your wall
shows a white one?”

“Looks blue to me”.

says the priest. (21-25)

The priest then very cunningly gives a ‘shade of blue’ so that the white horse looks blue. This shows how the priest is in darkness about the true history of the god.

On the opposite side of the priest’s ignorance is the scientific judgement of the protagonist. In “Makarand” he openly refuses to take off his shirt to worship the god Khandoba. Instead, he prefers to smoke outside in the courtyard:

Not me.

But you go right ahead

if that's what you want to do. (4-6)

The hollowness in traditional religious belief comes to the fore in “The Priest’s Son”. The priest’s son is a young boy studying in a school and during vacations he acts as a tour guide.

He guides the protagonist too and tells him legendary stories of Khandoba. He tells the protagonist the story of the five hills which, according to the local myth, were the five demons whom Khandoba killed. But when the protagonist asks the boy whether he believes the story, he does not reply this question and looks 'uncomfortable'. He sceptically tries to divert the protagonist's focus by drawing his attention to a butterfly:

look
there's a butterfly
there. (18-20)

What we realize is that being an educated youth, he too, like the protagonist, does not have any faith in the superstitious stories of gods and goddess but he is bound to tell these superstitious stories only for the sake of livelihood. This is how *Jejuri*, instead of a place of true devotion, has become a place of commerce in the name of God or religion.

After realizing the spiritual hollowness, the protagonist is leaving the temple town and proceeding towards the railway station in order to return home. "Between *Jejuri* and the Railway Station" records the speaker's personal feeling of what he actually has gained from this place:

You've left the town behind
with a coconut in your hand.
a priest's visiting card in your pocket
and a few questions knocking in your head. (16-19)

The concluding poem of *Jejuri* is entitled as "The Railway Station" and it has six sections with individual titles – "the indicator", "the station dog", "the tea stall", "the station master", "vows" and "the setting sun". Taken together these six sections provide a graphic picture of a railway station of the temple town and are an embodiment of absurdity and futility. All the objects and beings in the railway station appear to be very mystic, just like the gods and goddesses in *Jejuri*. In "the indicator", the indicator of the railway station seems to be "a wooden saint / in need of a paint" (1-2); "the station dog" depicts a sleeping dog who is the 'spirit' of the place and it is "doing penance for the last / three hundred years under / the tree of arrivals and departures" (4-6); the man in "the tea stall" is a 'young novice' who has taken a vow of silence and if you ask any question to him he "exorcises you / by sprinkling dishwater in your face / and continues with ablutions in the sink / and certain ceremonies connected / with the washing of cups and saucers" (4-8); "the station master" too, is mystic who is 'two headed' and "keeps looking anxiously at the setting sun / as if the sunset were a part of a secret ritual" (17-18); "vows" tells us the fact that if you want to know the arrival

time of the next train you have to perform ritualistic ceremonies like to “slaughter a goat before the clock / smash a coconut on the railway track / smear the indicator with the blood of a cock / bath the station master in milk” (1-4); and in the final section “the setting sun” the sun appears to be as large as a wheel and is “like the parallels / of a prophecy / appear to meet”(5-8). In this regard S. K. Desai comments, “The myth associated with *Jejuri* stimulate the mythopoeic power of the mind to such an extent that at the railway station, the tea stall boy, the booking clerk too is a philosopher who believes in the doctrine of the next train and the station-master is a two headed ‘God’ engaged in a secret ritual to whom vows have to be made in order to find out when the next train is due” (54). Kolatkar presents all these objects and beings in an ironic and sarcastic vein that lead us to a desolated and absurd world. The indicator indicates nothing, the station master does not know the time of arrival and departure of trains, the sleeping dog symbolically reflects the sleeping state of the place and of religious belief, and finally the setting sun suggests the decaying condition of faith in God and religion. We are of the same opinion with R. Parthasarathy that *Jejuri* “evokes a surreal world in which imagination and reality are fused, in which contradictions in logic are acceptable to the imagination, ordinary concepts of time and space do not operate, and everything is seen with an innocent eye” (40).

To conclude, in *Jejuri* we experience the coexistence of conflicting binaries of myth and reality, faith and scepticism through the images of gods and demons, past and present, and men of tradition and a modern individual. Kolatkar’s protagonist is a typical urban sceptic, who with a scientific mind encounters religious places, mythical legends and superstitious people and is able to bring out the socio-cultural and economic reality, the barrenness of the place and the spiritual hollowness of the people. Kolatkar does not find any spiritual faith either in the gods and goddesses of *Jejuri* or in the people who worship them; rather he finds that faith in his poems, in his objective eye and rational mind. In *Jejuri* Kolatkar, like a true artist, beautifully foregrounds an objective and modernistic point of view under the background of a tradition ridden cultural locale.

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