

Arun Kolatkar : An Introduction

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Abstract:

The present paper attempts to study Kolatkar. Arun Kolatkar has contributed in the development of modern Indian English poetry. This article is about modernism in the poetry of Arun Kolatkar. The paper highlights about Kolatkar's life, his work, influences, translation, achievement and contribution of the poet.

Keywords:

Modern; English poems; Marathi poems; translation; influence and achievements

Modern poetry is the rejection of sweet melodious rhythm. Modern poetry is personal in detail as Kamala Das's bold treatment of sexual themes. There is smoothness and suppleness in modern poetry. Modern Indian poetry's texture is enriched by poets such as J.P. Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla, K.D. Katrak, Arun Kolatkar, Subhas Saha, O.P. Bhatnagar, Syed Ameeruddin, P.S. Sastri, Kamala Das, Meena Alexander, Vimala Rao etc. Indian English poetry is the most flourishing and significant form of Anglo Indian Literature. Modern writers reflect Indian ethos through local theme, idioms and scene as Jayant Mahapatra's Orissa and Kolatkar's Maharashtra. Irony of modern life is reflected in the following lines of "The Priest":

Is the bus a little late?

The priest wonders

Will there be a puran poli in his plate? (CPE, 43). We find priest devoted to Mammon. Post-independence poetry is independent from shackle of imitation. Modern Indian poetry is antipoetic, unconventional, urban, sardonic and experimental in nature. Kolatkar is the rarest king of poet in post independent India; interested not in him but in the plural aspects and manifestation of the world which he turns into his art. Kolatkar is interested in people and animals, as in ruins and rubbish, sceptic and subaltern, absurd and downtrodden in society. He has bought a renaissance in Indian English poetry.

Bio: Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar (1 Nov 1932- 25 Sept 2004) is one of the most influential poets from Maharashtra India. He is a bilingual poet who wrote seamlessly both in Marathi and English with equal proficiency. His poems reflect absurdity in several everyday affairs. His first extraordinary book of English poetry, *Jejuri* made in road for Commonwealth Writers' prize in 1971 which came when he was forty-four and ran into three editions; it has also been translated into German. *Jejuri* is about a religious place with the same name *Jejuri* in Maharashtra. Kolatkar's Marathi publication *Bhijki Vahi* won Sahitya Akademi Award in 2004. His collected poem in English, published in Britain by Bloodaxe Books in 2010 was edited by Arived Krishna Mehrotra. Kolatkar was also a renowned graphic designer, with numerous awards for his work.

Kolatkar was born in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, where his father Tatya

Kolatkhar was an officer in the Education department. He lived in a conventional patriarchal Hindu extended family, along with his uncle's family. Kolatkhar attended Rajaram High School in Kolhapur, where Marathi was the medium of teaching. After graduation in 1949, much against his father's wish, he joined the J J School of art. He graduated in 1957. In 1953 Kolatkhar married Darshan Chhabda. The marriage was opposed by both families. Kolatkhar developed drinking problem. After the breakup of his first marriage in 1966, he married his second wife Soonoo. His formative Years in Mumbai were poor but exciting, particularly his life as a growing artist, in the Rampart Row neighbourhood where the Artist' Aid Fund Centre was situated. During this time, he also translated Tukaram into English. This period of trial and tribulation has been captured in his Marathi poem "The Turnaround":

Bombay made me a beggar.
/Kalyan gave me a lump of
jaggery to suck.

In a small village that had a
waterfall / but no name/ my
blanket found a buyer / and I
feasted on plain ordinary
water/ I arrived in Nasik with
/ peepul leaves between my
teeth./ There I sold my
Tukaram/to buy myself some
bread and mince. (CPE, 237)

After many years of struggle, Kolatkhar started work as an art director and graphic designer in several advertising agencies like Lintas. By mid-60s he was established as a graphic artist, and joined Mass Communication and Marketing, an eclectic group of creative headed by the legendary advertiser Kersy Katrak who pressed Kolatkhar into bringing out *Jejuri*. Kolatkhar was, in advertising jargon, a 'visualizer'; and soon became one of Mumbai's most successful art directors. He won the

prestigious CAG award for advertising six times, and was admitted to the CAG Hall of Fame. In 1957, Kolatkhar joined Ajanta advertising as a visualizer and established himself in the profession which in 1989, inducted him into the hall of fame for lifetime achievement. Kolatkhar led another life and took care to keep the two lives separate. His poet friends hardly knew of his prize-winning ad campaigns. In the early 1950s his poem came out in English and Marathi magazines and he continued to write in both languages for the next fifty years, creating two independent and equally significant bodies of work. By 1966, his marriage with Darshan was in trouble, as Kolatkhar developed a drinking problem. This went down after the marriage was dissolved by mutual agreement and he married his second wife, Soonoo.

Marathi Poetry: The boundaries are not only blurred between fact and fiction, native and alien, but also between what is religion and scepticism and in some cases for Kolatkhar, between Marathi and English. As a Marathi writer Kolatkhar has secure identity and he can embody in his poetry the agnostic secular outlook that emerges in a large body of modern Marathi writing (Prashant K. Sinha and Shires V. Chindade, 45) In Marathi his poetry is the essence of the modernist as reflected in the 'Little magazine movement' in the 1950s and 60s. Kolatkhar's early Marathi poetry was radically experimental and demonstrates the influences of European Avant-garde trends like surrealism, expressionism and beat generation poetry. These poems are vague, peculiar and at the same time gloomy, ominous and exceedingly hilarious. Kolatkhar's early Marathi poetry is far more impudent and takes greater liberties with language. However in his later Marathi poetry, the poetic language is close and less radical compared to earlier work. Kolatkhar's later work Chirmiri, Bhijki Vahi and Droan are less ambiguous and less fearsome. They

show a greater social responsiveness and his satire becomes more direct. Two characteristics of Kolatkar's poems since the mid 60s are tendency to play with vision a scene for its abstract qualities, as a painter or a designer might and a tendency towards a cool non-committal attitude in what is said (Two Bilingual Experimentalists, 165)

Bilingual poet and anthologist Vilas Sarang eulogizes Kolatkar for his contribution to Marathi poetry observation on Chirmiri in particular is worth noting as "a work that must give inspiration and direction to all future Marathi poets"(31). He further adds "The Marathi poems are more ambitious ,more daring ,in contrast to the cautious approach and muted tone that Kolatkar adopts in English"(Sarang,31) He won the Kusumagnaj Puraskar given by the Marathwada Sahitya Parishad in 1991 and Bahinabai Puraskar given by Bahinabai Prathistan in 1995. Kolatkar was among a group of post-independence bilingual poets who combined the diction of their mother tongues along with international styles to blaze a trail in their poetic traditions; others in this group included Gopalakrishna Adiga (Kannada), Raghuvir Sahay (Hindi), Dilip Chitre (also Marathi), Sunil Gangopadhyay, Malay Roy Choudhury (Bengali), etc.

Influence: Marathi devotional poetry and popular theatric (tamasha) had early influences on Kolatkar. American beat poetry, especially of William Carlos. William had later influences on him. Along with friends like Dilip Chitre, he was caught up in the modern shift in Marathi poetry which was pioneered by B.S. Mardhekar. Kolatkar an avid reader was well- versed in English and American poetry. He enjoyed everything from Whitman to Kierkegaard. A reader who has knowledge of both English and Marathi finds beauty and appreciate poetic creation. He was influenced by American popular music.

When asked by an interviewer who his favourite poets and writers were, he set out a large multilingual list. His reply is part rejection, the list suggests of the vast, split sources he may have in his mind, and is worth to refer them in full. Whitman, Eliot, Pound, Auden, Kafka, Baudelaire, Hart Crane, Gunter Grass, Cumming, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Kierkegaard, Kabir, Hardy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Issac Bashevis, TuFu, Han Shan, Ram Joshi, Honaji, Mardhekar, Manmohan, Wang Wee, Barth, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, Baber, Rax Stout Rabelais, Apuleius, Bahinabai Chaudhari, Lenny Bruce, John Lee Hooker, Leiber and Stoller, Larry Williams, Lightning Hopkins.....(Sunil Karnik,94). The Beatles, Elvis Presley and various blues, Musicians were as much influences on him as W.C. Williams (King, 575)

On examining a few poems from *Jejuri* it is visualized that Kolatkar has clearly been influenced by the style of T.S.Eliot in the use of ironies, form, imagery, juxtaposition of past and present as well as the Spiritual deterioration, till some extent in few of his poems. Kolatkar believe in Eliot's theory of objective co-relative. His image and symbols are co related to emotions and feelings which he objectifies through them. Kolatkar's images are generally conceptual instead of being purely ornamental or sensious, as by their visual property in addition to their figurative suggestions they suggest an understanding or else insight of some abstract truth of intellectual value. In his poetry there is usually a noteworthy synthesis of the abstract and the concrete. Thus, most of his assertions which appear as bare assertions are frequently contrasted or connected to a certain image that vivifies the assertion. We shall see in our study that Kolatkar images are a unique contribution to modern poetry.

English poetry: Kolatkar was reserved about bringing out his English verse, but his

very first book, *Jejuri*, had a wide impact among fellow poets and litterateurs like Nissim Ezekiel and Salman Rushdie. Brought out from a small press, it was reprinted twice in quick sequence, and Pritish Nandy was prompt to anthologize him in the cult collection, *Strangertime*. For some years, some of his poems were also included in school texts.

The poem sequence deals with a visit to Jejuri, a pilgrimage site for the local Maharashtrian deity Khandoba. In a discussion with poet Eunice de Souza, Kolatkar says “he discovered Jejuri in ‘a book on temples and legends of Maharashtra... there was a chapter on Jejuri in it. It seemed an interesting place’”(18). Along with his brother and a friend, he visited Jejuri in 1963, and appears to have composed some poems shortly thereafter. A version of the poem “A Low Temple” was published soon in a little magazine called *Dionysius*, but both the original manuscript and this magazine were lost. Subsequently, the poems were recreated in the 1970s, and were published in a literary quarterly in 1974, and the book came out in 1976. What is particularly striking about Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* as compared with his other work is his essentially slight dependence on emergency; his strength drives almost entirely from the quality of his psychological insight and his attempts to translate that insight into images. Kolatkar never confirms to any poetic form. Madhusudan Prasad observes that Kolatkar like Arvind Krishna Malhotra and Kaki .N. Daruwalla, is now dramatic, now conversational, now ironical, now satirical, now humorous, now meditative (11 8) The poems evoke a series of images to highlight the vagueness in modern-day life. the question alone. I don’t think I have to take a position about God one way or the other”(18).

Before Jejuri, Kolatkar had also published other poem sequences, including the boatribe, which appeared in the little

magazine, damn you: a magazine of the arts in 1968, and was anthologized twice. A few of his early poems in English also appeared in Dilip Chitre’s *Anthology of Marathi poetry 1945-1965* (1967). “The Renunciation of the Dog” is one of the fourteen English poems collectively called ‘Journey poems’ written during 1953-54 Kolatkar showed the journey poem to his friends who passed them on to Nissim Ezekiel, Ezekiel editor of *Quest* decided to carry. The Poem “The Renunciation of the Dog” appeared in August 1955 in the magazines, inaugural issue. It was Kolatkar’s first published poem in English. A line below “The Hag” and “Irani Restaurant Bombay” in Chitre’s *Anthology of Marathi poetry* says English version by the poet; suggesting that the two poems are translations.

Later Work: A solitary figure all his life, he lived without a telephone, and was reluctant to bring out his work. It was only after he was diagnosed with cancer that two volumes were brought out by friends – the English poetry volumes *Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Sarpasatra* (2004). Sarpasatra is an 'English version' of a poem with a similar name in Marathi *Bhijki Vahi*. It is a representative Kolatkar narrative poem like *Droan*, assimilating myth, allegory, and modern-day history. Although Kolatkar was never known as a social commentator, his narrative poems tend to offer an unusual skewed commentary on social background. Many poems in *Bhijki Vahi* refer to current history. Nevertheless, these are not politicians' observations but a poet's, and he evades the typical Dalit -Leftist-Feminist language.

Though *Jejuri* is about the tormented association of a modern responsive individual with the native culture, the *Kala Ghoda* poems are about the dark underside of Mumbai’s underbelly. The bewilderingly diverse megapolis is imagined in various slanting and quirk perceptions of an underdog. Like *Jejuri*, *Kala Ghoda* is also 'a

place poem' exploring the myth, history, geography, and ethos of the place in a typical Kolatkaresque style. Although Jejuri, a very popular place for pilgrimage to an idyllic god, could never become Kolatkar's home, Kala Ghoda is about exploring the mysterious intricacy of the great metropolis.

While *Jejuri* can be considered as an example of probing for belonging, which turns out to be the major obsession of the previous generation of Indian poets in English, Kala Ghoda poems do not deceive any anguish and agony of 'belonging'. With Kala Ghoda Poems, Indian poetry in English appears to have grown up, shedding adolescent identity crises and goose pimples. The astonishing mellowness of poetic vision embodied in the Kala Ghoda Poems creates it something of a milestone in Indian poetry in English.

After his death, a new edition of the hard to obtain *Jejuri* was published in the New York Review Books Classics series with an introduction by Amit Chaudhuri (2006). Near his death, he had also requested Arvind Krishna Mehrotra to edit some of his uncollected poems. These poems were published as *The Boatrider and Other Poems* by Pras Prakashan in 2008. His *Collected Poems in English*, edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, was published in Britain by Bloodaxe Books in 2010. Kolatkar was survived by his wife Soonu Kolatkar. With his death in 2004 Kolatkar has become a part of history itself but he remains to us a whole climate of opinion and not a mere name.

Translation: Creativity is not repetition and so the translation from one language to other is two separate entities independent of the stamp of the other. A translator should acknowledge the liability of visualizing the full significance of the original text in the target language. A minor portion of Kolatkar's literary achievement was in the realm of translating. Kolatkar's knowledge of the Marathi and English languages and

literature made him an ideal translator of his works. The pungent flavour of the translation is an objection sometimes made to Kolatkar's translations. Kolatkar has translated his *Jejuri*, "Irani Restaurant", "The Hay" "alphabet "Seventeen "Lion Congealed in a Carpet", "*Sarpa Satra*", Arun Kolatkar's *Kavita*, Chirmiri etc. Kolatkar's translation of English helps in propagating his message not only in India but also across the world. There is not only variation in size but also content of poems is both languages. Ramanujan says "A translation has to be true to the translator no less than to the originals. He cannot jump off his own shadow. Translation is choice, interpretation, an assertion of taste, a betrayal of what answers to one's needs, one envy's." (Quoted in S.C. Harrex, 164).

Kolatkar, himself translated his Marathi *Jejuri* into English. Despite brutal criticism of English *Jejuri* reader should read them as separate entity to be free from any sort of prejudices. His Marathi poems are pungent and biting whereas his English poetry are mild and questions are raised about their originalities and bitterness. Kolatkar's view on translation can be discerned from his own poem "Making Love to a Poem":

I must take possession of a
poem before

I can translate it ...

I have a pen in my possession
/Which writes in 2 languages

and draws in one

My pencil is sharpened at both
ends /I use one end to write
in Marathi

The other in English

What I write with one end/
Comes out as English /What I
write with the other /Comes
out as Marathi ...

I didn't have to ask myself
what qualification/I had for I
knew the answer to that one I
had none/I want merrily
along

writing one poem in Marathi
after another in English
/sometimes starting one in
Marathi and finishing it in
English

On vice versa.../I find it
equally difficult to write in
either language(CPE,345-
348)

Achievement: Kolatkar a bilingual poet writing in his native language Marathi and English rejects the binary opposition between minority and majority, loiter over boundaries and asserts the existence of an unsurmountable plural reality and identity. His poetry highlights alternative ways of perception refusing the majoritarian and exclusive classical perceptions of identities and rootedness. Kolatkar is a gifted artist with a remarkable sensibility nothing can escape from his microscopic eye. He is a poet of bizarre, ugly, downtrodden, obscure, weird and varied but with his impeccable power of imagination he enlivens events. The theme of his poetry is myth, legends, belief, scepticism, globalization, industrialization and commercialization which he presented with wry irony.

Kolatkar's achievement as a poet lies in producing a phenomenon at work which has consistently embossed the primacy of pre-rational levels of experience without

rejecting the everyday reality. The thrust of his poetry's progression has been from abstract to concrete and from general to particular and from local to global. It is enlivened with an unusual breath of sympathy which is clear overtone of Indian Bhakti poetry, Kolatkar is not a prodigious poet and his poetic oeuvre is scanty. Kolatkar's poetry presents the graphic picture of the urban Indian life. 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 the poetry. His poetry has been assessed by critics and reviewers from various facts as colonial, post – colonial and its conjunction with symbol modern, post modern scepticisms, the Indianness, the exploration of myth, his sensitivity, his observation, his cartographic presentation, his craftsmanship, his blurring of line and a universal significance in his poems, etc. which are clearly recognizable aspects of his achievement as an Indian poet writing in English. His English poetry through influenced by Anglo- American modernism achieved its distinction as the Indian experience, perceive in a new way. If we examine the entire corpse of Kolatkar's creative work i.e. his Marathi poetry and English poetry, we cannot help drawing the influence that Kolatkar is essentially a modernist non committed to historical, political and transcendental consciousness. Like Jayant Mahapatra, Kolatkar's creative genius is reflected in from Marathi to English. However translated by Kolatkar himself each work seems to have its own entity and each appears to be original. His irony contends with sensitivity and humour just as he write with an attitude to reform the world by exposing itself even if occasionally tilting towards abstraction or vagueness.

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