



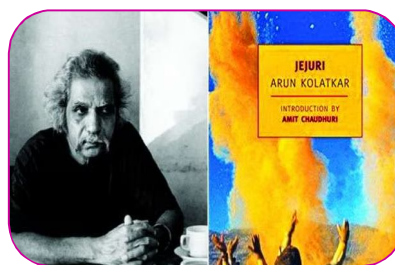
TRADITION, MODERNITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DECAY: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF ARUN KOLATKAR'S *JEJURI*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to explore the environmental awareness as reflected in Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* (1976). Most of his poems in *Jejuri* have a surrealistic vision and deal with the encounter between tradition and modernity. The striking sense of emotional non-involvement remains persistent throughout the poem. M. K. Naik identifies a three-valued system in *Jejuri*: (i) the ancient religious tradition (ii) the modern industrial civilization and (iii) the life principle in nature and its ways (1982:25). The present paper is an attempt to reveal that Arun Kolatkar has used the images of hill, butterfly, tigers and horse to provide an 'ironical expose' of the legends and traditions of the native place. The poet has made a very subtle use of irony to express his concerns over the loss of identity, the rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization, environmental decay, pollution and the loss of communion during the age of globalization.



KEY WORDS: 'ironical expose', traditions, industrialization and urbanization, environmental decay, pollution, globalization.

INTRODUCTION

Arun Kolatkar, a bilingual poet, has contributed both to English and Marathi. For his first collection of poems *Jejuri* (1976), he received a prestigious Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977. His other profound works include *Kala Ghoda Poems* (2004), *Sarpa Satra* (2006) and *The Boatride and Other Poems* (2009) along with his Marathi output.

Most of his poems in *Jejuri* have a surrealistic vision and deal with the encounter between tradition and modernity. The striking sense of emotional non-involvement remains persistent throughout the poem. As R. Parthasarathy remarks, "Kolatkar expresses what he sees with the eyes of a competent reporter in a language" (1981:40). M. K. Naik detects a three-valued system in *Jejuri*: (i) the ancient religious tradition (ii) the modern industrial civilization and (iii) the life principle in nature and its ways (1982: 25). Arun Kolatkar has used the images of hill, butterfly, tigers and horse, but all these images are exploited to provide an 'ironical expose' of the legends and traditions of the native place.

In his 'Heart of Ruin', Kolatkar notices the broken condition of the temple at Jejuri. It is no longer a sacred place for the devotees but rather a safe shelter for the animals.

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. (*Jejuri*, 16)

Instead of the people, the bitch and her puppies has taken over the possession of the temple. The ruined temple may not be a suitable place for worship but it is a convenient shelter for animals.

The bitch looks at you guardedly
past a doorway cluttered with broken tiles.
The puppies tumble over her.
May be they like a temple better this way.
The black eared puppy has gone a little too far.
A tile clicks under its foot. (*Jejuri*, 16)

Though Anjali Nerlekar cites her view that Maruti the god, the bitch and her puppies appear equated at subliminal level ...as a type of the abandoned outcast even bitterly ironic fate for one sanctified inhabitants of formerly hollowed place (2012:5), Kolatkar rightly comments that the survival of the animals depends on the destruction of the monuments of human culture.

The poem 'The Priest's Son' deals with the mythology of the five hills at Jejuri as "these five hills/are the five demons/that Khandoba killed" (*Jejuri*, 30). It refers to the religious roots of these hills. But the poem 'Hills' reveals the present demonic barrenness, desertification and infertility of these hills.

hills
demons blasted shoulders
bladed with shale
hills
cactus thrust
up through ribs of rock
hills
demons
kneequartz
limestone loins
demons
hills
cactus fang
in the sky meat
hills
demons
vertebrated
with rock cut steps
demons
hills
sun stroked
thighs of sand stone
hills
demons
pelvic granite
fallen archways

demons (*Jejuri*, 28-29)

In 'A Scratch', the land is not under cultivation due to the hard rock. The images of the gods at Jujuri have been made up of stones, so there is no difference between god and stone at Jejuri.

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 (*Jejuri*, 32)

The poet seems to suggest that the bad earth and the hard rock have been responsible for the beliefs and superstitions at Jejuri. If the earth has been fertile, it might have produced better harvests. The bad land does not require cultivation and farming. Hence the production of more legends and gods because you "scratch a rock/and a legend springs" (*Jejuri*, 32).

there is no crop
other than god
and god is harvested here
around the clock
out of the bad earth
and the hard rock (*Jejuri*, 32)

The poet happens to notice the sudden movement of a butterfly in an unhealthy condition on these hills: "a quick wink of a movement/in a scanty patch of scruffy dry grass/burnt brown in the sun" (*Jejuri*, 30). In the poem 'The Butterfly', the poet mentions a pinch of holy turmeric powder called bhandara of the god Khandoba "Just a pinch of yellow" (*Jejuri*, 31). The butterfly has neither past nor future. It is no doubt a present peculiar reality. "It has no future/It is pinned down to no past/It's a pun on the present" and "it opens before it closes/and closes before it o" (*Jejuri*, 31). "There is no story behind it/It is split like a second/It hinges around itself" (*Jejuri*, 31). It reveals its present struggle for existence on these wretched hills and its wonderful existence over the environmental oddity.

It's a little yellow butterfly.
It has taken these wretched hills
under its wings. (*Jejuri*, 31)

The poem, 'An Old Woman' reveals how the adversity of nature causes the great affliction and misery to the human beings. "An old woman grabs/hold of your sleeve/and tags along/She wants a fifty paise coin/she says she will take you/to the horseshoe shrine/She hobbles along anyway/and tightens her grip on your shirt/She won't let you go/You know how old women are/They stick to you like a burr" (*Jejuri*, 25). The old woman has no other alternative than begging there for her livelihood. She says,

What else can an old woman do
on hills as wretched as these? (*Jejuri*, 25)

In a sudden experience of revelation, the poet identifies the wrinkled condition of the old woman with the wretched condition of the hills at Jejuri.

And as you look on
The cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.
And the hills crack.
And the temples crack.
And the sky falls (*Jejuri*, 26)

The poet finds his life as worthless as the coins in the old woman's hand because of his failure to establish communion with her and her wretched environment.

And you are reduced
to so much small change
in her hand. (Ibid)

In 'The Reservoir', the older historical water storage facility at Jejuri indicates the better average of rainfall in the past. At present the water reservoir is dry and empty due to the less rainfall.

There isn't a drop of water
in the great reservoir the Peshwas built.
There is nothing in it.
Except a hundred years of silt. (*Jejuri*, 40)

The poem 'Yeshwant Rao' expresses the possessive and selfish expectations of man. He always demands something from god for the sake of only his happiness at the cost of nature. As a result, nature always gets exploited in one way or the other by him.

Gods who soak you for gold.
.....
Gods who tell you how to live your life,
double your money
or triple your land holdings. (*Jejuri*, 49)

In 'Between Jejuri and the Railway Station', the poet-persona has 'left the town behind with a coconut' in his hand, 'a priest's visiting card' in his pocket and 'a few questions knocking' in his head. In his way he stops between Jejuri representing tradition on the one hand and the railway station representing the modern industrial world on the other hand.

You stop halfway between
Jejuri on the one and the railway station on the other hand.
You stop dead
and stand still like a needle in a trance.
Like a needle that has struck a perfect balance between equal scales
with nothing left to add or shed. (*Jejuri*, 54)

The poet-persona is attracted by the sight of a collective dance of cocks and hens in the field. Their very action represents the time of harvesting and the reproduction of the entire world of nature.

What has stopped you in your tracks
and taken your breath away
is the sight
of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar
in a kind of harvest dance. The craziest you've ever seen.
Where seven jump straight up to at least four times their height
as five come down with grain in their beaks. (*Jejuri*, 55)

He realizes that the harvest dance of the cocks and hens is more meaningful and significant than the empty worship of god and the industrial development.

And there you stand forgetting how silly you must look
with a priest on your left shoulder as it were
and a station master on your right. (*Jejuri*, 55)

In 'The Railway Station', the poet-persona, who admires the perfect natural world of the cocks and hens, ridicules the imperfect modern industrial world that creates unpredictable and confused situation for man.

the indicator
has turned inward
ten times over
swallowed the names
of all the railway
stations it knows
removed its hands
from its face
and put them away
in its pockets
if it knows when
the next train's due
it gives no clue
the clockface adds
its numerals
the total is zero. (*Jejuri*, 56)

Even the dog is badly affected in such condition at the railway station. "The spirit of the place/lives inside the mangy body/of the station dog/doing penance for the last/three hundred years under/the tree of arrivals and departures" (*Jejuri*, 57). The dog is in a dilemma and is unable to decide who's who.

the dog opens his right eye
just long enough to look at you and see
whether you're a man a demon a demigod (*Jejuri*, 57)

The setting sun figures in the poem to provide an ironical comment on the confusion of the station master.

he keeps looking anxiously at the setting sun
as if the sunset were a part of a secret ritual
and he didn't want anything to go wrong with it
at the last minute
finally he nods like a stroke
between a yes and a no
and says
all timetables yet to be published
are simultaneously valid (*Jejuri*, 57)

The poem also alludes to the local superstitions which have caused a lot of damage to the living beings such as goats and cocks as they are killed for greed insensitively.

slaughter a goat before the clock
smash a coconut on the railway track
smear the indicator with the blood of a cock
bathe the station master in milk
and promise you will give
a solid gold toy train to the booking clerk
if only someone would tell you
when the next train due (*Jejuri*, 61)

The image of 'the setting sun' appears once again to conclude the entire collection of the poetry. The poet seems to suggest that in comparison with the ruined temple and the faulty railway timetable, nature in the form of the setting sun is more elementary and more permanent.

the setting sun
touches upon the horizon
at the point where the rails
like the parallels
of a prophecy
appear to meet
the setting sun
large as a wheel (*Jejuri*, 62)

Thus, Arun Kolatkar has made a very subtle use of irony to express his concerns over the loss of identity, the rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization, environmental decay, pollution and the loss of communion during the age of globalization.

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