

ARUN KOLATKAR'S POETRY: A FASCINATION WITH RAPT ANIMAL FORCE

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ABSTRACT

Post-independence bilingual Indian poet Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004) uses animal energy and independence to show the affinity between animal life and human life. This article shows that Kolatkar's poetry is a fine reflection of animal power. It is not about dehumanization but rather illumination to discover new truth. This paper attempts to re-orient and re-position interpretation of text in context with animal power.

Keywords: Animal, Affinity, Discovery

Nature has been a constant source of inspiration for poets since time immemorial. More often they are drawn towards calm, cool and composed atmosphere of Nature but not with the rugged, wild and rampant aspects of Nature such as animals or ruins of ancient heritages. The present paper attempts to deal with an unusual aspect seen through a more unusual point of view of animal force in the poetry of Arun Kolatkar. In this sense the poems of Kolatkar could be considered unique.

Arun kolatkar (1932-2004), a bilingual poet, wrote seamlessly in Marathi as well in English with equal proficiency. He was a graphic artist who had won Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977 for his long poems *Jejuri* that was 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. Arun Kolatkar has clearly been influenced by the style of Western writers such as T.S.Eliot, Ted Hughes, D.H Lawrence, William Carlos Williams etc. His poems testify the influence of these poets on him. 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 poetry.

Animals have been man's companion since ages. Kolatkar seems to be especially fond of animals. Many animals have been celebrated in his poetry and have gone into the making of his poetic imagery. The title of Arun Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra* and *Kala Ghoda* provide immediate and highly suggestive indication that the poems will directly represent animals. Though the title of *Jejuri* is not of an animal but it has similes, images, metaphor and poems on animals and insects. By personification of animal as "Station-Dog" in *Jejuri* Arun Koaltkar satirizes religious practices. A beautiful alliterative use of the sound 'L' creates the

lizard world in a figurative manner in ‘under his lazy lizard stare’ and metaphoric representation as ‘stands/purring softly’. In *Jejuri* following stanza of striking imagery:

a catgrin on its face
and a live, ready to eat pilgrim
held between its teeth (CPE.44)

The imagery of cat brings to our mind the keen observant attitude of a priest who will not let loose his prey for anyone. The phrase “held between its teeth” highlights the helplessness of the pilgrim in the clutches of the priest. He ultimately succumbs to the priest’s demands. According to A.N Dwivedi “the strong shiny bus is likened to a catgrin and its wheels that can crush anyone falling under them to ‘its teeth’” (194). The following image is not only the springboard of poetic composition, but the kernel as well:

God is the word
and I know it backwards’
I know it as fangs
inside my flanks.
But I also know it
as a lamb
between my teeth’ /as a taste of blood
upon my tongue (CPE,57)

The backward of the word God is dog. Though the poet is overtly sarcastic in his tone yet he tries to depict the contrast between the lifeless god of *Jejuri* and its contrast with the dog, which is full of vitality and vivacity. The word ‘backward’ also implies the poet’s longing for primitive form of worship where every creature of God is considered as an embodiment of God. This “lamb” is completely in contrast with “The Lamb” of William Blake:

Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee:
He is called by thy name
For He calls Himself a Lamb
He is meek, and He is mild
He became a little child
I a child and thou a lamb
We are called by His name. (p.7)

The bareness of the place is depicted through the description of a dry tap which looks like “a brass mouse with a broken neck”. In “Heart of Ruin” Kolatkar gives a fine application of imagery as:

A mongrel bitch has found a place
For herself and her puppies....
The pariah puppies tumble over her.
May be they like a temple better this way. (CPE,44)

By using marginal images Kolatkar has centralized them. Kolatkar finds divinity in the ‘heart of ruin’ because it is ‘no more a place of worship this place /is nothing less than the house of god’. His negation is conformation of faith but this faith is not related to worship. It is more humorous and full of comparison towards God’s creatures. Kolatkar’s admiration of beauty is depicted in his poem “The Butterfly” as:

It’s a little yellow butterfly
It has taken these wretched hills
Under its wings (CPE,53)

In “Butterfly”, according to M.K.Naik, the butterfly has certain attributes like life, vitality and vivacity; which temple and all its legendary association seem to be devoid of. In “Ajamil and the Tiger” Naik observes an awareness of the need for harmony in a life full of conflict and discord (32, 33). In the poem “The Rat Temple”, Kolatkar presents powerlessness of Khandoba, the presiding deity of the temple; the warrior god is not able to remove a rat that sits on him. The big black rat with ferocious eyes seems to him to be more powerful than his mind is distracted towards; the rat instead of god. Another mocking satirical title of the poem is “The Horse Shoe Shrine”. The poet is fascinated by animals and primitives because they exist in a naked world beyond the domain of analytical intellect. All consciousness is self-consciousness and the poet is able to see the chasm between the naked world of pure feeling and the clothed world of concealed emotions. The “Pi-Dog” poem *Kala Ghoda*, lying on a traffic island at midnight proclaims:

I look a bit like
a seventeenth century map of Mumbai
with its seven islands (CPE,75)

Pi- Dog belongs to the lineage whose ancestor had link with Mahabharata and the British period. This poem highlights the change that colonial period has brought into India. The poem depicts the picture of modern cities all over the world where animals have no place. Dog which is considered to be man’s best companion since ages is forced to live desolated life in Bombay city. Sachin Ketkar perceives that the appearance of a mongrel and an old map of the city with a history of cultural hybridization is not simply a technical device but a revelation, a discovery of truth. (New Quest 162, Oct-Dec 2005)

Sarpa Satra is full of snake images as:

According to Mahabharata,

a sacrifice performed by Janmejaya
with the object/ of annihilating the Nagas,
or the snake people (CPE,185)

Kolatkhar writes further as:

My father died of snake bite
When? Oh, I was too young then
I don't even remember /but I'm going to avenge his death
By killing /every single snake that lives:
Yes, / by wiping out the whole species
From the face of the earth. (CPE,188)

These lines are full of satiric overtones. They express the bizarre, crazy and frenzy attitude of man towards god's creature. Despite being considered as the most intelligent species, man destroys other species to quench his own thirst. But he has forgotten that in their destruction lie the seed of his own destruction. The many poems about animals indicate Kolatkhar's obsession with the primitive and violent aspect of human existence. The heart and the mind of the poet longs to return to the primitive animistic freedom and the pleasure which have been cruelly crushed under feet of the so called civilization in the march of humanity through myriad centuries. In fact, Kolatkhar may be treading upon the ground already covered by such illustrious predecessors as D.H Lawrence and Ted Hughes. However, Kolatkhar's animals are portrayed with a kind of empathy which also allows space for a detached presentation. Thus, it can be concluded that Kolatkhar's poems express a rapt fascination with animal energy and independence and an awareness of the affinities between animal and human life, between human aspiration towards freedom and power and the instinctive animal passion.

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