

Divided in between Quest and Dilemma in Arun Kolatkar's Poetry

Goutam Karmakar

Assistant Teacher, Department of English, Bhagilata High School (H.S), Raiganj, Uttar dinajpur, West Bengal, India

Email: goutamkrmkr@gmail.com.

Abstract

Postmodern Indian English poetry is the result of many experiments, new themes, techniques, personal experience, irony, maximalism, pastiche and above all rejection of romantic and melodious style and rhythm. So many poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K.Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Shiv.K.Kumar, Gieve Patel and Arun Kolatkar try to keep up the tradition of postmodernism in their poetry. But among them Arun Kolatkar is somehow different. His poetry is free from any kind of imitation and antipoetic elements are seen in his poetry. He is ironic, experimental, sardonic, unconventional and realistic in nature. The so called Indian society, religion, rituals do not influence him as he is more interested in realism, modernism, society and local people. He is a very simple downtrodden poet and often we find in his poetry dualism and conflict between tradition and modernism, between realism and superstition and he always wants to search the truth behind all these. This paper attempts to highlight his quest for truth and the dilemma and conflict that we find in his poetry.

Keywords: Quest, Truth, Authenticity, Dilemma, Modernity.

Introduction:

Arun Kolatkar, a social, simple, truthful and skeptic poet of Indian English poetry contributes a lot for the development of Indian English Poetry. He helps to bring renaissance in this genre of poetry. A close reading to his famous poetic collection 'Jejuri' shows that he has done the same thing what T.S.Eliot shows in his Waste Land. Spiritual deterioration is shown in his poetry and he investigates the religion and religious people to achieve the actual truth of intellectual value. He shows the past and present religious tradition of India in his poetry and often conflicts and dilemma are found in him as he wants to juxtapose all these in his poetry. Actually he is known for his thought provoking, hard hitting and truth exploring nature.

In his 'Jejuri', we find thirty one sections which describe his visit to Jejuri. It is a famous temple situated near Pune in Maharashtra. Here he visits the temples and witnesses the blind faith of the people, the attitudes of worshipper and different gods. He shows all these and wants to access the truth of all these. Tradition and modernism go side by side in his mind. M.K.Naik aptly says, "the penultimate section, between Jejuri and the Railway station present an experience which provides a sharp contrast... The poet is generally skeptical and ironic; through moments of sympathy (as when he encounters an old beggar woman and a teenage wife) do break in. The poem opens with a journey (to Jejuri) and closes with return journey in the offing, thus suggesting the motif of a quest." (Naik, 217-218)

In Jejuri, one can find different value systems and quest and investigation behind all these. Primitive religious tradition, modern civilization in urban society and the life principle are found in his poetry. He is in a kind of dilemma between modernity and tradition, artificial and real, truth and legend, skepticism and belief and his own perception regarding religion and he does all these to find the actual truth. In his 'The Bus', the narrator begins his journey to Jejuri in a bus. It is also a journey of all his readers. Here one can find the oscillation between tradition and modernity. The old man in the poem and also in the bus is the representative of blind religious Indians. On the other hand the narrator is a modern man and finds nothing special behind the blind faith of the old man and the foolish attitude of the fellow passengers. Actually he belongs from an educated family and his brought up in urban area makes him realistic and that is why he remains skeptical always as he does not want to believe anything without real logic. Not only that but the narrator the other self of the poet also carries religiousness and faith which are not very easy to shrug off. And these all are the causes that create dilemma and conflict between religiousness and modern skepticism in his mind. He says:

"Your own divided face in a pair of glasses
On an old man's nose
Is all the countryside you get to see." (The Bus)

He is in such kind of dilemma and oscillation that he seems puzzled. He is totally conscious about this dilemma and wants to break all his cultural baggage and tradition. Actually he wants to get an experience of all these from a neutral aloof condition but his alienation from superstition and blind faith on religion give birth to skepticism and quest for ultimate truth. As we find his efforts to do these:

“At the end of a bumpy ride
with your own face on either side
when you get off the bus
you don’t step inside the old man’s head.” (The Bus)

Actually through this poetic collection, one can find the dilemma, conflict and tension between tradition and modernization between modern and orthodox ideas and ideals. These are well shown in his ‘Chaitanya’ poems. In his second Chaitanya poem one can clearly watch the contrast between the faith which is shown by devotional man and saints and ruined commercialized tourist complex. Here he shows at first people’s belief and myth regarding the stones at Jejuri:

“sweet as grapes
are the stones of Jejuri
said chaitanya
he popped a stone
in his mouth
and spat out gods.” (Chaitanya)

But again his search for truth regarding god and stone begins. He feels that man is more concern for stone rather than religion and god. His skeptic mind and realistic thought are the barriers as he is a modern man with modern and logical bent of mind. In his ‘A Scratch’ he shows again his dilemma and the quest for truth. He wants to investigate the stones and goes. And after this his realization comes to a point that:

“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.” (A Scratch)

Actually it is quite tough to identify between god and stone at Jejuri. The dividing line is also not prominent as stone can produce a legend. Here one comes across a part of a huge rock. What he hears about the rock is that this part of the rock is actually the wife of Khandoba as his wife is turned into a rock by the hit she receives from Khandoba’s sword in a fit of anger. The crack in that rock is that wound. He shows these in these lines and also it shows that he is in a dilemma whether to believe the story or not:

“the giant hunk of rock
the size of bedroom
is khandoba’s wife turned to stone
the crack that runs across
is the scar from his broadsword
he struck her down with
once in fit of rage
scratch a rock
and a legend springs.” (A Scratch)

A modern man with modern and realistic outlook will never take religion and different religious belief, legends story in a very simple way. He will question about its authenticity and this is shown in Kolatkar’s poem by the dilemma and conflict that we find between modernism and tradition, skepticism and religious belief in his poems. Even if he shut down all his modern thoughts and whatever efforts he takes to move aloof from religious surroundings, he can only be able to slide a little bit from previous tradition. Tradition, modernism, religious belief and investigating mind to search the truth will make him impatient. And these are shown in his ‘Makarand’ where the protagonist Manohar disobeys the customs and remains free in his own thought. The speaker here prefers smoking rather than worshipping a statue in the name of god. Tradition and modernity are shown and also his quest for actual god is shown. Here he throws question towards the authenticity and relevance of customs and rituals in a temple:

“Take my shirt off
and go in there to do pooja?
No thanks
But you go right ahead
If that’s what you want to do
Give me the matchbox
Before you will go?
I will be out in the courtyard.” (Makarand)

The poet is a person of skeptic and investigative mind as his quest for the actual religious aspect haunts him. In his ‘The Priest’s Son’, he asks a teenage boy of a priest about the authenticity of the story that he tells. In the poem the priest’s son takes the narrator to different places and tells the stories related to khandoba. He says the hills as demons and also tells those demons’s story. After hearing the story of hills, demons and rocks the narrator again feels a conflict and dilemma as whether to believe his story or not. And out of this skepticism his quest begins and he asks the priest’s son about his thought and authenticity regarding the story. Here also the priest’s son feels the same thing like the narrator and he wants to divert the narrator’s mind by seeing him a butterfly. Here are the lines that show all these:

“says the priest’s son
a young boy
who comes along as your guide
as the schools have vacations
do you really believe that story
you ask him
...look
there is a butterfly
there.” (The Priest’s Son)

His vignette poem ‘An Old Woman’ also shows his dilemma and quest for truth and reality go side by side. Here one can find different attitudes of the people towards the old woman who begs money from the visitors. Some pious pilgrims give her money as they also take it a pious good deed but it is not the same case for all like the protagonist. He comes here to visit the place and to search its authenticity and to know the past and present legends and myths. So he does not want to give the woman money. But the persistent woman offers the protagonist place to visit. But the protagonist has seen the place before and the rejection from his part to give money gives a queer feeling to the protagonist. Again he feels the same conflict and the reality he has to face:

“And you are reduced
to so much small change
in her hand.” (An Old Woman)

It is also true that he keeps all his confusion, dilemmas and investigations within himself and he does not interfere in others offerings and religious beliefs. He is a modern man and his modern outlook is shown here. Quest for authenticity is needed in this postmodern period as logic defines everything now. Even in his return, there arises confusion, dilemma and these all are the results of the difference and quest between traditional beliefs and modern outlook with thought. In his ‘Between Jejuri and the Railway Station’, one can find his returning motifs and there the narrator stops between jejuri and the railway station for some reason. Here a deconstructive reading shows the station as the representative of modern world and the temple place jejuri as the traditional world. Here it seems to us that perhaps he achieves a balance or rather helps to maintain the divided will and dilemma in a middle portion as he takes both the world in a similar way with nothing more to believe or disbelieve. Here the poem shows:

“You stop halfway between
Jejuri on the one and the railway station on the other hand
You stop dead
And stand like a needle in a trance.
Like a needle that has struck a perfect balance between equal terms
With nothing left to add or shed.”
(Between Jejuri and the Railway Station)

But it is also true that he is suffering the problem of dilemma and quest till the end of his journey. So many questions come to his mind and he is trying to solve those but these are tough for him because he makes a balance between those thoughts and confusing elements. In the same poem he tells:

“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 about in your head.”
(Between Jejuri and the Railway Station)

But at last it seems that he has achieved some sort of truth and balances his conflict and dilemmas. He is not stuck in the station out of dialectic dilemma between modernity and tradition but due to nature and natural elements and surroundings. He sees cocks and hens which are dancing in the field in some sort of happiness and the poet also achieves this natural bliss. M. K. Naik aptly says, “The cocks and the hens evidently represent a value system older than both ancient religious tradition and modern industrial civilization. It is the Life-principle.” (Naik,31). These are showed in these following lines:

“And thee you stand forgetting how silly you must look
with a priest on your left shoulder
and a station master on your right.” (Jejuri, 55)

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is clear that the poet’s motif to visit Jejuri is actually to know what is Jejuri about and what the truth is behind these rituals. Here he takes every stone, culture, tradition under his investigation to seek the actual story behind these. But it is also true that these poems show how decay, corruption and dilapidation have entered in the tradition and rituals. And these lend to a man to approach modern view to judge it and this give birth to postmodern attitudes. It can be noted that materialism, commercialism, artificiality, hypocrisy and blind faith are the causes for this deterioration of tradition and rise of skepticism and quest. And only by spending a life in a simple natural way, one can solve all these problems. So Jejuri is a collection of poems where one can find the poet’s dilemma and oscillation towards religion and rituals and at the same time his quest in this modern world to attain the actual truth and thought perception become the part and parcel of a modern man.

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