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The Economy of Subjection: Reading Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* as a Journey Poem

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Abstract: Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is a key text in Indian English Poetry and it has been subjected to various readings. One reading that is still possible is its politics of representation, that beneath its seemingly innocent surface of a journey poem involving a city-bred modern-day tourist visiting the temple town of Jejuri near Pune in Maharashtra, it takes up the serious issue of the dynamics of cultural misrepresentation in the way of marginalization and displacement. The poem can be read as one classic example of how the centre perceives the margin and at what cost. And in the process it reveals its economy of subjection. By 'economy of subjection' one can mean, in Saidian sense, the Orientalist process of subjecting the Other or the Oriental, the member of a subject race, into subjection; because one can find here the same process of othering by using the patterns of a travel narrative. However, a sense of alienation from one's own culture on the part of the observer-recorder also comes to the fore, rendering the master-slave narrative problematic. Other manifestation of the Orientalist representation is a sort of internalisation of the Western way of looking at the Oriental irrationality and chaos and viewing it from the perspective of rationality and imposition of a rational form over the irrational chaos. One thematic aspect of Indianness in the poem is the internal colonialism and the resistance of it, rather than the external one; the cultural markers of which are always found in the form of our attitude towards the womankind and the subaltern, and in the pervasive sense of hopelessness and guilt, as manifested in our overriding religious feelings.

Keywords: Orientalist, Representation, Reason, Form, Sublime, Alienation, Persona.

Within its simple framework of a journey poem or a place poem, Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* offers a deeply ambiguous and strangely devious narrative. The layout of the poem is in the

allegory-realistic tradition of a narrative poem which not only accounts for a good description of the place, but also carefully builds up the image of the persona as a modern, rational and secular observer whose role may be likened to that of the *flaneur*, presumably making a journey from the metropolis to the provinces. The poem is basically an account of what he sees there, and building up of a narrative of poverty, desolation, decay and mismanagement. Therefore, what comes to the fore is the optic and semiotic of the narrative, underlining the nature and role of the observer whose impersonal, detached way of recounting his experience hardly ensures neutrality of representation. The poem carefully develops the personality and role of the persona as a detached, impersonal and neutral observer through whose eyes the reality is portrayed and validated. But it appears that his carefully developed image of impersonality is just a stance, to minimize the partisan, idiosyncratic nature of his observation. The supposed transparency earned through a narrative style marked by the qualities of simplicity, directness, lucidity and brevity is also punctuated by a chiaroscuro of light and shade, of reason and unreason, of eloquence and silence, of seriousness and levity; and the grey areas raise questions about his real motive and objective. The result is a productive ambiguity working through the dialectic of clarity and opacity. "Since *Jejuri* takes all its images from a temple town of the same name near Pune in western Maharashtra, ..., simple academic critics have confused the poem with the place, and followed it as a work that indicates the poet's attitude towards religion", writes A. K. Mehrotra in his *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* and adds, "The presiding deity of *Jejuri* is not Khandoba, but the human eye" (Mehrotra 53-54). Expressing a similar view, Rajeev S. Patke writes, "Perhaps it is best read as a glass-poem: what you think you see through is the place, what you really see is your own reflection trying to look through" (Patke "Poetry Since Independence" 257-258). While

the optical emphasis of *Jejuri* can easily be explained, the semiotic undervaluing of the place and the associated landscape, both physical and psychological, cannot so easily be understood. Commenting on the 'camera eye' of the persona Shirish Chindhade observes that "it is the persona that acquires a greater representation in order to hold the central consciousness. This amply suggests that something more than a camera-eye is required to comprehend the *Jejuri* spirit" (Chindhade 107-108). Chindhade may be pointing towards grasping the 'Jejuri spirit' by moving beyond the form imposed by the persona's obsession with reason, and which he suspends only when he attempts to grasp the sublime in the form of insects and animals. Still the point is, the persona may lack this 'something more' but his camera eye has already something more in it, that is to say, a colonial eye, as Chindhade's detailed study of the poem's imagery makes it a case of politically fraught reading. Centrality of eye in *Jejuri* works in tandem with the problematic and politics of seeing—that looking at does not necessarily mean seeing and seeing does not mean believing, and that one can still see things according to one's own mental baggage.

Jejuri has attained the status of a key text in modern Indian English poetry and in the same fashion modern Indian English poetry has attained the identity of a definite genre, although a minor one, by virtue of its rigorous quest for an Indian idiom in poetry. One may even say that while as Indo-Anglian writing it is constrained to find its own idiom that will be distinctly Indian in context and condition, it has the advantage to explore the possibilities of the well-established European modernist art practices. Although European modernism professes an 'aesthetic autonomy' and is 'either ambivalent towards or critical of colonialism', it is implicated in colonialism (Patke *Postcolonial* 196). "[D]isseminated to

cultures outside Europe by colonialism”, writes Rajeev S. Patke in *Postcolonial Poetry in English*, modernism “creates several difficulties when transposed from Europe to postcolonial societies” (Patke, *Postcolonial* 196). One example of this is that while European modernism “drew upon the otherness of non-European in transforming its self-image, postcolonial modernists could hardly do the same. Instead, they ended up discovering or inventing oppositional alterities from within their own cultures” (Patke *Postcolonial* 197). Patke reads *Jejuri* in this light and comments that in *The Waste Land* “the Orientalism of Eliot turned from his time and place to the Brahminical pieties of Indic culture for ‘Shantih’ (spiritual peace). In reverse analogy, Kolatkar berates the internal colonization practised on Indian society by Brahminical belief systems (Patke *Postcolonial* 197). But Patke’s criticism should be taken with a pinch of salt because the question is whether Kolatkar is berating the Orientalist and the internal colonialism of Brahminism, and not following the footsteps of the Orientalist and Brahminical belief systems or the very opposite of it, needs to be investigated. There are several reasons for this surmise. First, by taking up *Jejuri*, a place of religious pilgrimage, as a microcosm of the macrocosm, Kolatkar buttresses the view that India is a land of spirituality and religiosity and at the same time a site of serious muddle and mismanagement. Second, although the hilltop temple town of *Jejuri* as the locale of his poem offers a landscape of transition—an intersection of competing and conflicting realities like old India versus new India, the traditional and the modern, faith and scepticism, spiritual and material etc, Kolatkar presents them in a dialectical manner without any resolution. The impasse is relieved only by evasion, a provisional and temporal diversion of the “Life Principle in Nature” (Naik 35) in the form of small creatures. Third, there is a considerable insistence on the body or embodiment, to visualize things in terms of body; or to be

more specific, buttressing the image of the Aryan as mind and the non-Aryan as body.

The whole narrative bristles with uneasiness, embarrassment, anxiety and the belittling experience on the part of the persona. The visitor/persona has not much aesthetic-ennobling experience at the place, but he keeps himself busy recording the signs of decay, desolation, muddle and mismanagement. The journey to the margin itself is far from being smooth. He calls the bus journey a 'bumpy ride' ("The Bus"), because of the dilapidated condition of the bus and the bad road condition. One may also consider the fact here that Indian English Poetry may be playing at the Western gallery, that it may be catering to the Western reader in portraying this picture of undevelopment of a Third World nation. Or it may be taken as a journey of a newly-independent nation, which is at the crossroads of the old traditional India as represented by the old man with a caste-mark on his forehead and glasses, and the new modern India as represented by the persona. The journey commences in darkness before dawn and when the bus reaches Jejuri it is sunrise; the persona seems too eager to see the daybreak and the ushering of a new day. The old man who he takes to be his opposite number is obviously a pilgrim and the persona decides not to "step inside the old man's head". This is the first of a series of displacement happening in the poem, not to see the place in terms of what it is or what it stands for, that is to say, not in terms of faith and religiosity but in terms of reason, truth and progress which simply violates the liberal principle of 'seeing things as they are'. The first part of the poem which is a description of Jejuri follows this bias consistently. In the second part of the poem which is a description of the railway station, the way of looking changes from reason to faith and the persona describes the railway station in terms of faith and religion. This is how he displaces things and thereby falls into misrepresentation of the place, people and the activity. The

poem is full of two-headedness. The “divided face” he mentions in the section “The Bus” gets concretized by two characters in the first half of the poem, Manohar the believer and Makarand the non-believer. In the second half, the station master is described as “two headed” (“the station master”). This duality of vision sums up the narrative strategy of the persona in the last section of the poem called “the setting sun” bringing out the impasse and ambivalent openness in a closed circuit between the centre and the margin where time passes only mechanically with no progress in sight: “the setting sun/ touches upon the horizon/ at a point where the rails/ like the parallels/ of a prophecy/ appear to meet / the setting sun/ large as a wheel” (“the setting sun”). Does the margin always remain static or regressive, where time has no effect like Thomas Hardy’s Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*? The margin returns, like the repressed, and its act of resistance to the centre is termed as equally regressive and counter-productive. In the three “Chaitanya” poems we see the narrative of reform, change and progress towards modernity. The centre is progressive, whereas the margin is shown to be anti-progress: “a herd of legends/ on a hill slope/ looked up from its grazing/ when Chaitanya came in sight / the hills remained still/ when Chaitanya/ was passing by/ a cowbell tinkled/ when he disappeared from view/ and the herd of legends/ returned to its grazing” (“Chaitanya”). Resisting change means decay and degeneration, and the overall picture points to a failure of management. If the centre is the symbol of management, then the margin is always marginalized or implicated or maligned with mismanagement. The fable of “Ajamil and the Tigers” is probably included to give a contrasted picture of management. In the eye of the persona, *Jejuri* presents a picture of degeneration, decay and ruin. The reservoir has dried up, temples are in ruins, the priests have degenerated, there is no crop except the stones of the wretched hills, and the belittling experience of meeting the

old woman beggar leaves the persona “reduced/ to so much small change/ in her hand” (“An Old Woman”). And he is further reduced in the cave-like a low temple where he wants to make the priest see reason and light, but fails to do so, “You can count./ But she has eighteen, you protest./All the same she is still an eight arm goddess to the priest” (“A Low Temple”). Light of reason fails; it has at best the longevity of a matchstick, a very short life span at this darkened and darkening place which is bereft of the light of reason. The synchronicity of the margin retards the diachronic progressivity of the centre.

M. K. Naik has pointed out the “three major value-systems” (Naik 35) of the poem, namely, faith, technology and the life-principle in nature. The persona is critical of both faith and technology because faith has a stony face of certainty whereas technology offers only uncertainty. But he seems to be mesmerized by the life-principle in nature. If nature is the margin of culture, then *Jejuri* is the margin that reflects the centre of Brahminical faith and the railway station is the margin that reflects the western science. In the process both margins become a degenerated version of the centre. The persona’s almost Coleridgean romantic sensibility in watching the small creatures of nature like the pariah dog, puppies, dung beetle, butterfly, calf, cocks and hen is the only redeeming and redemptive feature of the poem. We can hardly ignore the persona’s childlike wonder towards nature in the section “Between *Jejuri* and the Railway Station” which brilliantly describes the transition from a mock cultural cosmos of the *Jejuri* architecture to the natural chaosmos of the harvest dance of a dozen of cocks and hens, and which he elevates to the level of sublimity. By valorising the margin of nature the persona is able to provide a definitive picture of cultural decay on the one hand and on the other hints that even the nondescript small creatures of nature are better than the *Jejuri* life.

Marginalisation happens in the way of embodiment too. The persona shows keen interest in depicting body which we can assume to be the non-Aryan body. There is weird description of the body of the priest, the old woman and the mangy body of the station dog, but two more sections stand out as examples of embodiment exclusively, "Hills" and "Yeshwant Rao". "Hills" describes the hills in the shape of demons, describing the body shoulder down but there is no mention of the head, "Hills/ demons/ sand blasted shoulders/ bladed with shale" ("Hills"). "Yeshwant Rao" is a god of the margin, placed outside the outer wall of Jejuri pantheon, "Yeshwant Rao,/ mass of basalt,/ bright as any post box,/ the shape of protoplasm,/ or king size lava pie,/ thrown against the wall,/ without an arm, a leg/ or even a single head." The absence of head seems to exclude these bodies from the Aryan spirituality and vision.

We have already seen how "Ajamil and the Tigers" is a poem about good political/diplomatic management of avoiding political conflict by accommodating the powerful political rivals. Since the persona chooses to go to Jejuri where the presiding deity is Khandoba or Lord Shiva, the point of marginalization becomes clear. Even though Khandoba is worshipped by all castes and communities in Maharashtra, the deity is worshipped mainly by the low caste Dhangar communities. This brings to the mind the probable background of Lord Shiva as a powerful non-Aryan god who was accommodated by the diplomatic Aryan rulers in their pantheon in order to win over the non-Aryan races in their bid to a pan Indian expansion. The appearance and lifestyle of Shiva testify to his low origin and marginal status. Compared to the elite gods Brahma and Vishnu, Shiva is presumably a Dalit god who was assigned dangerous assignments like drinking poison churned out of the churning of the ocean and absorbing the impact of falling Ganga. His different manifestations are to protect the people and animals of the

low-lands or marshes. Shiva is exotic as a cave-dwelling meditative god and loved for his curative powers and feared for his destructive powers. In short, he lives in the margin and represents the margin. Therefore, *Jejuri* is viewed as margin and which requires a difficult assimilation in the wider Hindu culture. The travel narrative of the poem is expressive of this difficulty. As the centre makes a difficult journey to the margin it does so with a divided face, an overture it has to make to the margin and at the same time retaining its original Orientalist mentality. It is almost like Brahminism's difficult journey to the margin of non-Aryan realm, showing it as incompetent and degenerated version of Brahminism.

The mockingly indulgent and playful tone of the poem creates a sense of superiority on the part of the persona. Even though almost nothing is said about the cultural background of the persona but we can see that he assumes the role of a 'phallogocular' centre out to dominate over the margin. He is critical of the margin but he is never self-critical. Moreover, the architecture and the formation of margin is analysed with the western concept of reason. The gaze is essentially male because it defiles the object of its vision. The privileging of optic makes this slender poem a classic narrative of centre-margin problematic.

However, the Railway Station section shows the persona thoroughly affected by the place he has been representing and takes his vexation to another level at finding the margin non-responsive to his anxiety and which thus flattens his egotism and he is prompted to assume a philosophical outlook over his discomfiture. The poem is marked by a productive ambiguity that enhances the perception of Indian reality through its depiction of scarred landscape of a postcontaminated margin. The ambiguity comes from a playful irony that runs through the sequence of poems which is apparently an account of a journey to a temple town called *Jejuri*. Although physically located in Maharashtra, this temple town is symbolic in its

representation of the Indian landscape which is dotted with such temples and pilgrimage centres and holy places, and thus becomes a microcosm of the macrocosm. The narrative of Indian identity is inseparable from the mythic and the legendary narratives of multitude of gods and goddesses so much so that a place is no more imagined geographically but conceived as part of religious narrative. Life does not exist independently of it, it is drawn inevitably to the cultural vortex of an eternity and at the same time a banality from which one cannot escape. Like the races of people who arrived in India and silently merged into its embracing landscape even though the twin processes of embracing and merging have left the landscape scarred and muddled, one may arrive here out of curiosity and self-will as the persona of the poem does, but the experience of the scarred and muddled landscape leaves him equally scarred and muddled and he is no more the same person as he gets possessed by the spirit of the place. He seems to be thoroughly seeped with the spirit of the place and feels overtaken and overwhelmed by it. The poem emerges as a checkerboard of influences exerted upon each other by the landscape and the persona. The way the persona brings to bear upon this ancient place of worship his modern/urban personality and sensibility with mild petulance and scepticism and tries to see/grasp the outer and the inner reality of the place, he gives out a playful epistemological defeat at the aura of spirituality pervading the place and he becomes anxious to get back home, the sense of home transcendently shifts from the physical to the spiritual. Journey becomes the metaphorical journey of life, problematic and demanding completion, and also representing it with right thinking and right action. And after the usual share of playful acceptance and denial of the given materials of life, one remains doubtful about the entire purpose of this exercise. The bizarre and surrealistic things that he perceives in the temple town now start spilling over into the railway station and the

representation of the station becomes surrealistic as he starts describing things in religious terms. The indicator becomes “a wooden saint/ in need of paint” (“the indicator”); the station dog is “doing penance” (“the station dog”) and “the spirit of the place/ lives inside the mangy body/ of the station dog” (“the station dog”); the young novice at the tea stall “has taken a vow of silence/ when you ask him a question/ he exorcises you/ by sprinkling dishwater in your face/ and continues with his ablutions in the sink/ and certain ceremonies connected/ with the washing of cups and saucers” (“the tea stall”); and unable to get an answer regarding the arrival of next train the persona makes seriocomic religious vows like “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 is due” (“vows”). Although it is possible to see that he is making a travesty of the religious ceremonies he might have seen at *Jejuri* temples, it is clear that he has internalised them and is imbued with them, and may be ready to appropriate them.

By his movement and engagement with reality, however playful, the persona represents flow of time and change, or the temporality of history; and he is pitted against the lack of movement, stillness and changelessness of *Jejuri* and the railway station. The landscape of *Jejuri*, like the stopped clock and the railway timetable, appears to him apocryphal and resisting movement and change. The only movement he finds is in the dance of cocks and hens and he is spellbound to “stand still like a needle in a trance” (“Between *Jejuri* and the Railway Station”). Otherwise he seems to move through the tableaux of still pictures and he sums them up nonchalantly and curtly, “You leave the little temple town/ with its sixty three priests inside their sixty three houses/ huddled at the foot of the hill/ with its three hundred pillars, five hundred

steps and eighteen arches./.../You pass by the Gorakshanath Hair Cutting Saloon./ You pass by the Mhalasskant Cafe/ and the flour mill./And that's it./ The end.” (“Between Jejuri and the Railway Station”). The way he narrows down and downsizes his experience to these lines shows the marginalization of a static landscape that produces only rocks, has no crop, has no dynamic cultural expression, has no vibrant lifestyle, has no flourishing economy; and berates a place that sticks to production of faith in gods and goddesses, superstitions and legends. The dismal picture of underdevelopment and ruin comes to the fore and the spiritual and mythical elements go to the background. The summing up is a matter of lifeless statistics and summing up of this kind is a way of depriving and denying the place of any inner content or significance. This is how the margin is emptied of any significant content that contributes to life and culture. And nature offers him only a craziest up-and-down harvest dance of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar. This is how the margin is allowed to exist in the form of wilderness.

Perhaps this movement from the waste land to wilderness infuses the desiccated landscape with some vitality. This is the paradoxical and redemptive aspect of the poem that can be seen as a conclusive vision like the setting sun that “touches upon the horizon/ at a point where the rails/ like the parallels/ of a prophecy/ appear to meet” (“the setting sun”). Although the prophecy cannot be figured out, it seems to be a revitalisation of the relationship between culture and nature, and between the centre and the margin so that the wheel may turn, like “the setting sun/ large as a wheel” (“the setting sun”), towards a new dawn. This new dawn may be in favour of the margin. In referring to the sun in the beginning and at the ending, the poem may be seen emphasizing the relationship between the Sun and Earth, or the centre and the margin. With the turning of the wheel of fortune and the

consequent reversal of roles, writing from the centre at the margin now may take a turn towards a writing back at the centre by the other.

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