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A sociological study of Arun Kolatkar

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Abstract

After 1980s Indian English Poetry sees a rapid change both in form, content, style and theme. Poets during this period become more experimental and liberal in their expression and thought. They begin to write poetry with a modern view on their choice of subjects. Besides, they also want to show their motherland, its society, culture and tradition in their poetry. It means they always keep in their mind Indian ethos and sensibility. So many poets emerge in that period and Arun Kolatkar is one of them. He is a poet of common people. He is not like the other poets as his way of thinking depends on his scrutiny over everything as he judges from rational, logical and realistic point of view. And in doing so, he also shows society, culture and people living in that society from his own points of view after his observation on these. This paper attempts to highlight Arun Kolatkar's view and observation of the then Indian society and culture as seen that time.

Keywords: Society, Religion, Culture, Divide, People

1. Introduction

Through his poetry, Arun Kolatkar deals with many themes, obstacles, religious dogmas, blind faith, superstition, religious practices that prevalent in society and he also shows how common man is easily deceived and affected by these. So it is very much true that Arun Kolatkar is really the poet of common man and society. It is very much true that the impact of tradition, culture and blind faith turn the Indians religious minded. But the youth like Arun Kolatkar sees everything in light of reality, logic and scientific explanation. So society is now turned into mix culture, tradition and thoughts. Kolatkar with his trans-historical and cross-cultural images wants to show the society and culture in his poems. Some of the poems from his famous and eternal poetic collection 'Jejuri' show these.

In the very first poem from 'The Bus', the poet wants to show the social and geographical condition of the surrounding place and society. The pilgrims start their journey by a state transport bus. A cold wind blows and it moves the tarpaulin flaps which block the windows. The poet here wants to find sunshine as he is waiting for daybreak. Here the narrator sits at the opposite side of an old man who a pious religious man is going to offer puja at the temples of Jejuri. But the narrator is the representative of modern realistic logical world who always search truth behind blindness, hypocrisy. So society is divided between two cultures:

You look down the roaring write.
What little light spills out of the bus?
Your own divided face in a pair of glasses
Is all the countryside you get to see?
You seem to move continually forward
towards a destination." (The Bus)

So it is proved that society is divided and also way of thinking too. The old man carries a caste mark as if it is the mark that differentiates this group from others like the narrator. But the narrator is going to that place to reach beyond religion in order to expose hypocrisy and truth. For this reason none of them share their thoughts as their views are different. Here the narrator says:

"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." (TheBus)

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In his 'The Priest', he also shows the society and culture related to worshipper. It is the society full of money minded people and the priest is no more exception. The priest waits for the arrival of the bus as the pilgrims are the source of his income. He is more concerned about the bus time table, number of pilgrims and offering puja to deity is their secondary work. So Kolatkar here aptly shows how the society is corrupted by this so called hypocrite priests. He often comes out from the temple to see whether the bus arrives or not. He also says something like mantra with a 'puran Poli' in his plate as if he is praying for the bus and its passengers. It may be also true that his utterance of mantra will be a policy to attract the pilgrims as so many other hypocrite priests are available there. Such is the picture of the society that the poet paints in his poem:

"An offering of heel and hunch
On the cold altar of the culvert wall the priest waits
In the bus a little late
The priest wonders
Will there be a Puran Poli in his plate?" (The Priest)

So the poet here shows how the caretaker and worshipper of god is changed into a greedy person. The pilgrims are more religious and devout than that priest. He takes this as his service and the offerings from pilgrims as his salary. Everything is showed here in commercial way and commercialization is in everywhere in our society. The temples are surrounded by beggars, greedy and hungry people and the priest is the representative figure of those people. Here the poet compares him with an animal to show his hunger and the condition of society:

"As a catgrin on its face
And a live, ready to eat pilgrims
held between its teeth." (The Priest)

In his 'An Old Woman', he shows the society and surrounding place of Khandoba temple at Jejuri. Here an old woman tries to earn something from the pilgrims. She wants only fifty paise and if anyone shows disinterest in giving the paise, then the old woman shows her some places like horse shoe shrine. She also takes the help of religion and takes the opportunity to use the pilgrims' blind faith. The woman is very eager to earn and does not want to leave the pilgrims. Really this is the picture of the society and social surroundings and the poet portrays these very beautifully. It is such a society that if anyone fails to do something it haunts him or her. The pilgrim's inability or disinterest in giving fifty paise to the old man haunts at such extent that he feels like a very minor person like that minor fifty paise. So it is the society for the commercial, money minded people and inability to cope up with these can make one alienated. Few lines from the poem show these:

"she wants a fifty paise coin.
She says she will take you
To the horseshoe shrine
...what else can an old woman do
on hills as wretched as these?
...and you are reduced
to so much small change
in her hand." (An Old Woman)

His 'The Blue Horse' is another poem which depicts the society, culture and behavior of some people. Here he shows

people with less consciousness and faith in their belief as they are hollow. The priest again wants to take opportunity by telling the blue colour of the painted horse. Kolatkar is very surprised to see that the blind minded, religious pious people admit everything in a conventional way. They lack real knowledge and wisdom and realism. It is the real picture of the society and the poet says here:

"The singers sang of a blue horse,
How is it then, that the picture on your wall
Shows a white one?
'Looks blue to me',
says the priest," (The Blue Horse)

Society is consists of two types of people. One is full of religious bent of mind. They always worship deity, blindly believe to the words of priests and believe in what they say. Another group is the people who are full of logical bent of mind. They are modern, skeptic and want to find truth and realism behind everything. In the poem 'Makarand' the poet shows this. The poet does not want to follow customs blindly as he has some freedom and he does not want it to leave. But he does not want to stop his friend to follow these customs. Everyone has own choice, individuality and freedom and there is no need to interfere in it. So the society is shown here very beautifully and the poet is the representative of active logical society. He is a total disbeliever of foolish rituals and customs. As Satyanarayana says, "puzzles the reader who has all along followed the protagonist's complaint that there is no god worship at Jejuri. Here, where there is worship, the protagonist does not wish to be a party to it on the ground that he is being asked to observe a meaningless from his refusal is not merely because of the required form but because he sees no meaning in the form or worship itself." (Satyanarayana, 80) So the divided society along with its divided people in religion and realism are shown here. Some prefers to smoke while some gives all before god and priest. The poem shows:

"Take my shirt off
And go in there to do pooja?
No thanks
Not me.
But you go right ahead
If that's what you want to do
Give me the matchbox
Before you go will you?
I will be out in the courtyard
Where no one will mind it
if I smoke." (Makarand)

Men learn from society and from his surroundings. More clearly he learns from his parents as he follows them. If parents are leading immoral life then it is tough for the child to lead a moral life. This picture is portrayed in 'The Priest's Son'. Here the priest's son is a young boy and watches his father who tells the tourists and pilgrims about different temples, statues and different significances of various places. The boy also does the same thing without knowing the real story behind statues, rocks and places. He only follows his father's path. As a result when he is asked by the narrator about the reality of the stories he tells, he looks puzzled. This is the picture of future society or next generation. The boy then wants to divert the narrator's mind as if the boy is learning how to fool visitors:

“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)

As a social poet, Kolatkar also shows the women and their position in the society. In his ‘Woman’ he compares woman with sewing machine, cat and lizards. He shows their domestic life where they are marginalized and subdued. There woman has to struggle to achieve freedom and now in the society woman position is changing. They are now not the objects of exploitation, subjugation and sexual desire but now they are taking control of patriarchal society. The poet says:

“in a weather fraught with forceps
a woman may damn
man.” (Woman)

It is often seen that contemporary society pays more attention to idol worship. People engage in the thought of hero but this image is broken in ‘Suicide of Rama’. Here he shows the death of an extraordinary man rather hero in a very ordinary way. The theme of the poem is death and darkness. Here he shows the hero’s death and only natural elements mourn for him. Society and its people have no time for that unfortunate hero. So the poem is also a criticism over the contemporary society. Here a deep reading of the poem puts question on immortality, secularism and the concept of ram rajya:

“...his flesh of myth sapnified
his arse turned up towards the moon
rama drifts like a gourd
far from sap or shore.” (Suicide of Rama)

His ‘The Railway Station’ is a poem where he also shows society. M.R.Satyanarayana says, “The Railway station having six sections with separate title is by far the best poem in the sequence...The Railway Station is just another meaningless temple and station master is the two headed god who inhabits the place.” (Satyanarayana, 78) In this poem he show the railway time table as station is there but the indicator does not work, only dog is more active and it has the capacity to recognize original people, the novice boy’s careless activity at the tea stall, the insignificant activities of the railway booking clerk and two headed station master and lastly the time measurement by seeing the setting sun. Very true pictures of society and of its people are shown here through the six sections in this poem.

In his ‘Yeshwant Rao’, he shows typical attitude of common people of this society. It is such commercial society that always pays homage, tribute and attention and importance to those gods who can do upheaval task. Yeshwant Rao is the second class god and belongs to the society. He can’t do anything extraordinary. Only he can restore someone’s missing limb. He has no hands, feet and heads and that is why he realizes the pain without these and that is why he restores others limb. So this poem shows the social picture of a social god.

2. Conclusion:

Regarding the above discussion it can be said that Arun Kolatkar is really a social poet. His poems have sociological aspects and often his poems are telling commentary of society. What he sees in the society is shown in his poems. Some of the issues like woman, religion, worshipper and other primal issues of society are shown in his poems with a view multi dimensional in true terms. A deconstructive reading of his poems show that he is not actually portrays the society but he wants to de center the ongoing socio cultural, socio religious activities, It is all about cultural and social dislocations and his poems exactly show these. And in doing so he is really foreshadowing postmodernism.

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