

Kala Ghoda: Post-colonial Scene of Third World Metropolis

Dr. Jayashri Balasaheb Aher
Assistant Professor
Dept of English
New Arts Commerce and Science College
Ahmednagar, MS, India

Abstract

Arun Kolatkar's long awaited second collection of poems in English titled Kala Ghoda Poems appears on the literary scene in 2004. His first collection, Commonwealth Prize winner Jejuri, published in 1975 had increased the expectations of the readership. Unlike Jejuri, Kolatkar appears with a slant of life which is highly unexpected in realm of poetry. Here he depicts the lives of the people living on the fringes of the metropolis like Mumbai. These are the people, most neglected residing on the margins of the margins ie fourth class workers, hawkers, daily wages workers and footpath dwellers. The process of urbanization has caused rapid dehumanization of human beings and they have been reduced to things. This reduction is a constantly recurring theme in almost all his Marathi poems. Here it appears with some extra pungent flavor. We do experience characteristic objectivity but even the lence of camera moist the eyes of the sensitive reader. The article makes a comprehensive reading of the text in a post-colonial perspective detailing the mytho – historic psyche of the colonial subject.

Keywords: colonial, post-colonial, metropolis, urbanization, colonizer, workers.

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“A country may be both postcolonial (In a sense of being formally independent) and neo-colonial (in a sense of remaining canonically and culturally dependent at the same time.”¹
- Ania Lumba.

With post- colonial state of India, what Lumba says is very true. In 1947, formally India got Independence, but this independence did not bring freedom for Indian people. But they were people sans any love, kindness and concern towards the problems of people. They are the cannibals using colonizers’ weapons and unfortunately they are using them against their own people. The long cherished freedom has failed to provide decent rulers to the people of India in post-colonial era. Many post colonial authors, novelists, dramatists and poet have pictured this grim picture of post-independent India. Their point of views may differ, attitudes may clash, but their aims had always been vital and honest.

One of the important titles in post-colonial poetic scene of India, is Arun Kolatkar, a bilingual poet, who writes both in Marathi as well as in English. Decades after his much debated, Commonwealth Prize winning poem, “Jejuri” he appears with he new venture in English titled ‘Kala Ghoda Poems’, Which has been published, along with ‘Sarpasatra’ by Prass Publications, Mumbai, in 2004. It is a collection of some 28 poems, about the things, places and people, residing at the region of Mumbai, called Kala-Ghoda.

‘Kala Ghoda’ is the crescent that stretches from Rigal Circle, to the University of Mumbai. The name has come from the old black equestrian statue of King Edward VIIth which was earlier placed at the present car-parking zone. The statue was removed to the Victoria Gardens in Byculla, in the early 1970’s. This is the area where all the important cultural places in Mumbai, like National Gallery of Modern Arts, the Prince of Wales Museum, the Jahangir Art Gallery, the Bombay National History Society, David Sasson Library and the University are situated.

The poems from ‘Kala Ghoda’ present an altogether unusual face of the city. These are the poems about marginalized people in the society. The time in these poems is early morning when the city has not yet picked up it’s rapid pace. It’s the time, when the city is getting ready for the day, when we meet pi-dog, road cleaner, heaps of

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rubbish, lepers, blinds men, rat poisoning man, potato peelers, shoeshine boys, dogs, crows, old bicycle tires, charas pills, kerosene, lice, shit.....in their veritable third world style make their presence felt in Kala Ghoda.

It is a darker world than the one we saw in 'Jejuri'. It is an improvised, unjust, embattled world, subsisting more primal-perhaps the regenerative power of life itself. The people in Kala-Ghoda are marginalized, not on the basis of cast, creed or color. They are poorer working class of metropolis, in truth the very oxygen for the lungs of the city, purifying its blood forever. But they are the one, most neglected, disrespected and desolate by the elites of the city.

Kolatkars attitude towards all these people is absolutely free of sentimentality. He does not cherish the propaganda that will lead to political statements. Narrator, in poet's favorite phrase, is always in 'Wayside Inn'. It is the camera, who shows us things, places, people etc. This showing is so graphic that without being anything 'told' conveys the picture of all forms of discrimination, segregation, inequality, injustice and exploitation.

Kolatkars Poems display a very sensitive attitude towards everyman, his life, his worries, his miseries, sorrows and sufferings, happiness and joys. 'Man of Year' is truly a poem of this everyman. He expresses his anxiety towards the destruction of Man's life, his self, his physique, his environment etc. In the 'envoy' to the 'Man of Year' he writes:

"Breathing fire, coughing smoke,
 spitting ash,
 as firecrackers burst inside my pants'
 I wish a happy new year to you all
 As all my buttons pop,
 My chest opens and lungs collapse,
 as a feather of flame stars eating my hat
 I wish a happy new year to you all.
 As the Rajabai Tower cranes its neck
 to see me reduced to a smudge on the road,
 and burst into a joyous song
 I wish a happy new year t...²

The Man dies and is not able to utter full sentence.

Feeling, that nothing happens, static ness of situation, saturation of ideas, minds paranoid in the system, degeneration and loss of everything are the other issues about which the man expresses his anguish:

'There were no technological breakthroughs,
 no big leaps ;
 just a lot of hopping around on one foot

No new ideas.
 A lot of old ones served with a sizzle.
 With plenty of spice to mask the rotten smell'³

People come to Mumbai, in order to get employment, with the hope that the city will provide them with better tomorrow, better and more bread, better clothing and better shelter. These are the people who come from all parts of rural India, fighting with draught, famine, hunger, and unemployment, which is the result of lack of planning, insincere implementation of all programs and highly unsympathetic regime of neo-colonial black rulers wearing white masks.

These people come to Mumbai with many dreams, but very soon they get disillusioned. "The Potato Peelers" is one of such unique working class of Indian Metropolis :

.....Outside the entrance of a garage
 converted into a restaurant kitchen;
 elbow on knees,
 bare-chested above their shorts,
 hunched over potatoes
 rotating slowly in their hands,
 and the dark side of each one's mind.
 faintly visible in
 the reflected light
 of the other's unspoken thought...⁴

Geographically, Mumbai is a boundary to India. It is in true sense a gateway to India. It is through this gate, many people come here legally or illegally. They stayed here and become part of this city. The poem 'David Sasson' is an account of the invaders and outsiders who in real sense did not contribute to built the city. But they came here, did business here, became rich, achieved power and controlled it, corrupted it doing all unfair things, selling drugs, opium, opening gang war and causing the problem of law and order. His narrator in 'David Sanoon' says:

"I, who in my day
 was known as the merchant prince
 in Bombay
 and lived like a Persian potentate
 in this city
 that I had no mean share in building."⁵

Talking about the riches that he had achieved in the city he says:

“Not bad, eh?
 Not bad at all, I’d say
 for a Sephardic Jew
 a fugitive from Baghdad
 a runaway
 who had slipped through the city gate”⁶

Multiculturalism is one of the important characteristic of any third world Metropolis. Mumbai is representative of such Metropolis. ‘Words of cellist’ is the reminiscence of the union of western and eastern lifestyles. The cellist, lover of western music, finds him alone on the road. His clenching and unclenching of hands, cursing Purcell, Boccherini, and Beethoven sharpens his feeling of unrest.

In ‘Breakfast at Kala Ghoda’, also we have vivid description at verities of multicultural food being the specialty of different restaurants in Mumbai. Thus in the verse of Breakfast we read:

“They’re serving Khima Pao at Olympia,
 Dal Gosht at Baghdadi,
 Puri Bhaji at Kailash Parvat
 Aab gosht at Sarvi’s,
 Kebabs with sprigs of mint at Gulshan-e-Iran,
 Nali nehari at Noor – E – Mohamadi’s
 Baida Ghotala at the Oriental,
 Paya soup at Benazir,
 Brun Maska at Military cafe,
 Upma at Swagat,
 Shira at Anand Vihar,
 and fried eggs and bacon at Wayside InnZ”⁷

One of the positive aspects of colonization is that the colonized societies started questioning their own tradition. Such questioning arouses the vein of self respect among deprived classes. A possibility of equal rights emerged out of such questioning. Instead of directly questioning the tradition Kolatkar attempts to secularize the religious experience in poems like “Pi-dog”. While doing so, he also questions the superiority of human being over animals. His Pi-dog is an attempt to deconstruct the religious tradition where all Vedic literature is meant to be read by privileged upper casts in Hinduism. While reversing the tradition Kolatkar allows not lower class humans but his Pi-dog to recite Gayatri Mantra. Human beings are privileged over animals for being intelligent. But Kolatkar’s Pi-dog is a thinking animal, conscious of his self, his existence, his past and his future. The relationship between human beings and animals is same as that of the colonizer and colonized. The former exploits the later for own benefit. Giving a voice and a point of view to his dog, Kolatkar de-centers the place and authority of human be-

ings in earlier structure. This is a challenge and re-articulation of human/animal binaries. After talking of his great paternal and maternal descend Pi-dog demonstrates his knowledge of Vedas ;

“.....The tenth
 from the sixty second hymn
 in the third Mandala of the Rig,
 (and to think
 that Rig along contains ten thousand
 five hundred and fifty two verses.)
 It’s composed in the Gayatri Verse
 and it goes ;
 Om tat Savitur Varenyam
 bhargo devasya dhimahi
 dhiyo yonah prachodayat.
 Twenty four syllables, exactly
 if you count the initial Om”⁸

Kolatkars dog is one of a very high race but not the pure one. Matrilineal a foxhound imported from England, and from father’s side his descend going back to the dog of Yudhisthira, makes him hybrid. But he is the hybrid of the high class races from both the East and the West. The whole description of Pi-dog’s racial belonging goes mockingly parallel to the causes of human hybridity.

Another instance of this secularization of experience in ‘Kala Ghoda’ is his long poem, ‘Meera’. Meera in reality is a member of sweeper staff of Mumbai Municipal Corporation. Early in the morning she cleans the area near Kala Ghoda, with a coconut front, instead of usual broomstick. She enjoys it and the poet subtlety and graphically depicts each of her action. Kolatkar presents two faces of the character. He names a sweeper woman after Meera in mythology. Thinking of the realistic character, mytho-religious lingers at the back of our mind;

“.....and beings to dance
 within the narrow compass
 of the wicker bin.
 like a Meera before her lord
 a Meera
 With a broomstick for a lute
 shifting her weight
 from one foot to the other
 she turns around her self,”⁹

Lice, Ogress, Old Bicycle tires, Song of Rubbish, Reproductive Cycle

of the Rubbish, Kerosene, Knucklebones, are the poems embodying the indecent conditions of health and hygiene in which people are made to live. People stay in disgusting atmosphere. But they do not even have time to stop and think about it. Kolatkar portrays all these things with graphic correctness and touch of mockery. Though he mocks at the situation, his mockery is never inhuman and unsympathetic. The poet, who talks of Gala woman giving birth to a child in unhygienic conditions, Dalits being asked to eat human excreta in Andhra Pradesh or any other country in India, The Blind man, a Jew woman Lesa giving unsuccessful suck to her new born baby, also talks of the human aspects like an Idly woman Annapurna having motherly smile for everybody, a grandma feeding a little vamp, a poor man feeding the stranger out of his own plate, a lady serving food for the rat poison man

Though very extrovert, the narrator of Kolatkar's poems is never thoughtless. He is not unaware of the postcolonial scene of his own country. He records the happenings in the contemporary society, art, culture and literature. He talks of the new and old songs, of Babasaheb dreaming of society undivided by cast and creed, of modern obscure poet in his own language who tells of a rat dying in a wet barrel and also of other poets full with nostalgia and sentimentalism. Then, in the IVth verse of 'Rat poison Man's Lunch Hour' we read :

"Boy meets girl at the corner table is a story it never tires of telling.
 and remembers all the old songs from the thirties onwards
From saigal and Bessie Smith to guns and roses.....
 as new ones keep percolating from the music shop next door
 and creating new neutral pathways in it's cement.
 It remembers Babasaheb sitting all by himself
 with a pot of tea and scribbling notes?
 dreaming with an audacious pencil
 of a society undivided by cast and creed
 It remembers an obscure poet munching on welsh rabbit,
 and thinking of rats dying in a wet barrel
 That's the only bit the poster understands
 dismissing everything else
 as so mush bullshit mousse and sentimental custard.
 It even suspects that the wall
 spongy with nostalgia
 May actually have a soft corner for rats."¹⁰

Ngugi wa Thiongo says : "Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum. It is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of a concern by social, political and economic forces in a society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored".¹¹

Can we ignore it in Aran Kolatkar?

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4. Ibid The Potato Peelers lines 2 – 10 page 132.
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6. Ibid David Sasson (6) stanza 6 – 10 page 20, 21.
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