Divided Faces: On the Subversion of Essentialism and Essential Identities in Kolatkar's *Jejuri*

Sonali Arvind Chunodkar
Ph.D. Student, Department of English
Savitribai Phule Pune University

Abstract:

Arun Kolatkar's collection of poems titled *Jejuri* has often faced critical ire because of its stark, non-glorifying depiction of snapshots of daily-life in the temple town of Jejuri in Maharashtra. As a consequence, he has been labeled as an "atheist," "an agent of the West," and a "weekend tourist" among other things. To counter such simplified critical dismissals, this paper engages in a problematization of essentialism and essential identities *vis-à-vis* Kolatkar's *Jejuri*. The hypothesis of this paper is that the poet through *Jejuri* is destabilizing any attempt at essentialization through his choice of language and idiom, through his use of artwork and its imagery, and most importantly, through his choice of subject matter and its aesthetic treatment. It demonstrates how Kolatkar's collection of poems resist such binarized labels attributed to him by his critics.

Keywords: Kolatkar, *Jejuri*, Essentialism, Essential Identity, Subversion, Hybridity.

Arun Kolatkar (November 1, 1932–September 25, 2004) is a major bilingual poet who, through his experimental poems, influenced and contributed to the direction that Modern Marathi and English poetry were taking from the 1950s. In addition to *Jejuri*, his poetic collections include the *Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Sarpa Satra* (in English) as well as *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita*, *Chirimiri*, *Bhijki Vahi* (for which he posthumously received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2005), and *Droan* (in Marathi). Besides poetry, his graphic work is evident in *The Policeman: A Wordless Play in Thirteen Scenes*. Since the mid-1950s, Kolatkar's poems began appearing in magazines and periodicals. However, *Jejuri* was Kolatkar's first attempt at publishing a collection containing English poetry in book form. First published by Publishers Clearing House, an American publishing company, in 1976, the poetic sequence had earlier appeared in the periodical *Opinion Literary Quarterly*, a Bombay-based journal, in 1974. That it was the recipient of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977 also contributed to its and consequently Kolatkar's literary importance. Spread over 36 poems (including the poems that comprise "The Railway Station"), the sequence covers selected events from the poet's journey and stay in *Jejuri* from daybreak to sunset. This article engages in a problematization of the concept of essentialism and essential identity in relation to Kolatkar's *Jejuri*. The hypothesis here is that the poet through *Jejuri* is destabilizing any attempt at essentialization through his choice of language and idiom, through his use of artwork and its imagery, and most importantly, through his choice of subject matter and its aesthetic treatment.

Essentialism is a key concept in postcolonial studies, and as such, it is closely related to discourses on nationalism and identity politics. For the colonizers, essentialism was the means

through which they could propagate "the idea of the inferiority of the colonial subject" in order to "exercise hegemonic control over them through control of the dominant modes of public and private representation" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 78). Further, a particular essential identity was projected on the colonized subjects in order to project its own identity as being fundamentally or essentially dissimilar.[1] Further, the colonized or the formerly colonized would in turn resist such projections through an *inversion* that would entail the reversal of this process—the colonized would project an essential identity on the colonizers as a means of opposing the cultural hegemony and binary categorization by the imperial power. This inversion in turn tends to become a variant of conservatism, which proves resistant to necessary social change(s). This is one of the reasons why Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is viewed with suspicion—because it depicts a social setup that seems to call for psychosocial change. In this context, it must be noted that the poet does not assume the mantle of a preacher but simply depicts situations like a painter. In contrast, the poet through *Jejuri* attempts not an *inversion* but a *subversion* by attempting to destabilize identity binaries altogether in terms of religious, regional, national, philosophical, and linguistic identities. In other words, *Jejuri* can be considered as an example of a work that refuses to conform to the concept of essentialism.

That essentialism enforces a limitation to the reading of this work will be illustrated by examining a few select poems from *Jejuri* in light of a few select critical opinions. Here, it is important to remember that the "essentialism" that is being discussed in this article is different from the concept of "strategic essentialism," a term that is invested with positive connotations, which was coined by Gayatri Spivak. Unlike essentialism, strategic essentialism can be understood as a means through which marginalized, subaltern, or other such social groups endeavor to forge a collective or group identity for the sake of achieving a common socio-political purpose or cause, or in other words, "a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak 214). It is to be noted that in strategic essentialism, an essential identity is assumed by such marginalized social groups and the individuals subscribing to or supporting the cause of such groups, intellectually or otherwise—in other words, by the self. In this context, however, the poet of *Jejuri* does not assume any such identity, and any essential identity has been enforced or projected by critics and readers—in other words, not by the self; herein, one finds a key difference. However, it is important to note that any fixed, determined essential identity—self-assumed or projected on the self by others—is first of all a social construct that aims at simplification.

The following quote bears ample testimony to the myriad and diverse influence that the following writers may have exerted on Kolatkar. The list is exhaustive and conveys an amalgamation of literary and social cultures, perspectives, and languages:

> There are a lot of poets and writers I have liked. You want me to give you a list? Whitman, Mardhekar, Manmohan, Eliot, Pound, Auden, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, Kafka, Baudelaire, Heine, Catullus, Villon, Jynaneshwar, Namdev, Janabai, Eknath, Tukaram, Wang Wei, Tu Fu, Han Shan, Ramjoshi, Honaji, Mandelstam, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Babel, Apollinaire,

---

1. As is well known, Edward Said's *Orientalism* is a seminal work that investigates this phenomenon.

> Breton, Brecht, Neruda, Ginsberg, Barth, Duras, Joseph Heller … Gunter Grass, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, Nabokov, Namdeo Dhasal, Patthe Bapurav, Rabelais, Apuleius, Rex Stout, Agatha Christie, Robert Shakley, Harlan Ellison, Balchandra Nemade, Durrenmatt, Aarp, Cummings, Lewis Carroll, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Godse Bhatji, Morgenstern, Chakradhar, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Balwantbuva, Kierkegaard, Lenny Bruce, Bahinabai Chaudhari, Kabir, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, Howling Wolf, Jon Lee Hooker, Leiber and Stoller, Larry Williams, Lightning Hopkins, Andre Vajda, Kurosawa, Eisenstein, Truffaut, Woody Guthrie, Laurel and Hardy. (qtd. in Roy)

This list is illustrative of a subversive stance, and it reveals an underlying attempt to challenge the concept of essentialism and of an essential identity. In other words, it reveals the phenomenon of hybridity instead of subscribing to any illusory "pure" literary tradition. That hybridity attempts to challenge essentialism is well known: "[It is] a conscious and politically motivated concern with the deliberate disruption of homogeneity" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 120). Hybridity also "embraces the subversion and challenge of division and separation" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 120).

One of the chief ways through which *Jejuri* challenges the notion of essentialism is by destabilizing that essential identity that is related to a religious stance. In terms of religious identity, the view that most critics of *Jejuri* uphold is to assume that its criticism of religious institutions or of organized religion necessarily translates into an atheist stance, which in turn results in such critics condemning the poet as being an agent of the West (e.g., Kimbahune; Nemade; and Raykar). Such views in fact reveal a process of inversion that implicitly suggests that the West has an essential atheist identity—a generalization that is hardly empirical and detrimental to the reading of such texts. Consequently, the poet's motives are seen with suspicion, and this suspicion is also extended to the text, thereby ignoring the literary qualities, merits, and alternative yet valid readings revealed by the text itself. The work is thus interpreted in light of a pre-determined ideological, personal, regional/national, or artistic bias. However, such readings tend to be from a very simplified perspective, and such critics tend to overlook the complex problems conveyed by the poems.

To reiterate, since most critics of *Jejuri* attempt to see the work as that of a non-religious man,[2] this paper will largely focus on the question of religious identity. In this context, Kolatkar's response to an interviewer's inquiry on whether he believes in God is worth perusing: "I leave the question alone, I don't think I have to take a position about God one way or the other" (King 104). Here, he explicitly refuses to identify himself as a *religious* or a *non-religious* person thus challenging the notion of an essential religious identity. One questions whether it can be argued based on the above statement that the poet supports an apatheist stance. Apatheism can be described as complete indifference or apathy toward the question of belief as well as disbelief in God, in other words, toward theism as well as atheism. Is it justifiable to label the poet as an apatheist? More important to this paper is the question whether *Jejuri* reveals an apatheist

---

2. For example, this view is presented in Desai's "Arun Kolatkar's Jejuri: A House of God," Kimbahune's "From Jejuri to Arun Kolatkar," and Rushdie's "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist."

stance? However, the choice of subject matter or the setting of the poems seems to oppose this view. That Kolatkar thought it worthwhile to visit the temple town of Jejuri appears to contradict such a stance.

In addition, it is highly probable that the poems are a result of several visits: Kolatkar first visited Jejuri in 1963, but it was only in December 1973 that he began composing the poems (Chaudhuri 225, 227). The minute observation and description of the marginal and peripheral suggests a degree of familiarity that is at odds with a gradually diminishing accuracy in terms of memory that is caused by a gap of ten years (between his visit and the writing of the poems). It is also at odds with the commonly held notion of the poet being a tourist spending only one day in the temple town: "Kolatkar comes and goes like a weekend tourist from Bombay" (Nemade 98). Kolatkar in fact refused to be classified into any "quasi-religious categories" (Chaudhuri 228). His trip to Jejuri, however, does reveal an affinity for the religious and for a sense of spirituality that is characterized by an opposition to and contempt of rituals: "Jejuri, which seems to him a mixture of temples in disrepair, unreliable priests, and legends and religious practices of dubious provenance, nevertheless excites him oddly, though not to worship, but to a state akin to it but also quite unlike it" (Chaudhuri 228). Further, a close reading of *Jejuri* reveals that the poems are not concerned with challenging or even treating an omniscient, omnipresent entity or dwelling on the question of the existence or non-existence of God. Instead, the poems reveal that the poet is far more concerned with the problems of the business of religion—a business that is a *human* rather than *divine* enterprise. Hence, to claim that the poet is non-religious would be erroneous; at most, it could be said that he is merely anti-ritual.

It is to be noted that the earlier quoted list also includes saint-poets such as Jynaneshwar, Namdev, Janabai, Eknath, Tukaram, and Kabir, whose poems exhibit a scathing critique of the then social and religious institutions. As social rebels, their poetry was aimed at destabilizing the then current norms, and their lifestyles exhibit subversion of such norms in varying degrees.[3] In their scathing critique of institutions, God too became a target of their ire. Kolatkar had in fact translated nine of Tukaram's *abhangas* along with a few translations of other saint-poets such as Janabai, Namdev, and Muktabai.[4] As evident from the translations, he was aware of this distinct feature of saint-poetry: "The last of these [translating Tukaram's *abhangas*] was a real enthusiasm, and Kolatkar was translating, into English, the medieval poet's rather prickly, belligerent hymns to God" (Chaudhuri 225). Can these saint-poets be labeled as atheists or non-religious on the grounds that their poetry is critical and irreverent of traditional practices and beliefs? Can these poets be labeled as agents of the West because of their attempt to bring about social reforms and their display of rationality and pragmatism? While many such saint-poets did suffer varying degrees of social ostracization during their own lifetimes, subsequent popular opinion negates the former question; the latter is a purely anachronistic accusation. It is unfortunate, however, that Kolatkar's *Jejuri* often necessitates a defense on both grounds. It is

---

3. Such subversive features could be seen in their refusal to conform to caste hierarchical segregations; refusal to marry in some cases; and in their rejection of Vedic traditions, Brahminical authority and intervention, and religious affiliations.

4. See Kolatkar's "Translations from Tukaram and Other Saint-Poets," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 17.1 (1982): 111-14, *JSTOR*.

also unfortunate that most critics of Jejuri view rationality or criticism of traditional beliefs and religiousness or spirituality as binary opposites that are unable to co-exist within a single psyche.

The first poem "The Bus" sets the tone of this conflict as it recounts the poet's journey to Jejuri by means of a rickety state transport bus. This poem displays a good deal of surreal imagery, which testifies to Kolatkar being a visual poet—perhaps a natural extension of the graphic artist. The last lines of this poem have often been quoted while speculating the motives of the poet: "

> 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. (22-25)

Some critics such as S. K. Desai in his essay "Arun Kolatkar's Jejuri: A House of God" consider the old man's essential identity to be that of a spiritual seeker or a pilgrim or that of a religious man and that such a rejection on the part of the poet is indicative of the poet's own stance as Ravindra Kimbahune does in his essay "From Jejuri to Arun Kolatkar":

> The old man with the caste mark and the narrator are represented as clear contrasts. These do not merely represent two different attitudes but also establish, once for all, the narrator's alienation from the attitude of the man of faith…The narrator thus rejects at the very outset the possibility of transformation in his vision after his exposure to the landscape or to what *Jejuri* symbolizes. (Kimbahune 75-76)

It is in this imparting of an essential identity to the old man that in turn allows such critics to impart an essential identity to the poet himself. If the old man is identified as a seeker, a pilgrim, or a man of faith, then the implication is that the poet is not a seeker or a pilgrim, and neither is he a man of faith.[5]

However, one questions whether sufficient information is provided by the poem to suppose anything other than the fact that the old man is but someone who wears a caste mark. Here, it is necessary to question whether a caste mark is an indication of the religious, spiritual, or the merely ritualistic. One must also remember that the conflict between and the blending of the spiritual and the profane or in other words, of the *appearance* of spirituality and the *essence* of materialism or irreligiousness and *vice versa* has been a popular, evergreen theme for poets. This is also true in the case of the poetry of the saint-poets, and the poems in *Jejuri* too display this conflict: "The proximity between the disreputable, the culpable, and the religious—a living strand in Indian devotional culture, and an everyday reality in places like Banaras and Jejuri—becomes, in the act of translation, an aesthetic" (Chaudhuri 225). Such critics however often overlook another image in that same poem that can counter this labeling of an essential identity—that of the "divided face" (Kolatkar 10, 23). The surreal image of the reflection of the poet's face on the old man's glasses can also be interpreted as a projection as well as awareness of one's own dual if not triple identity. In light of this motif, the poet's rejection of the old man could be considered as a rejection of conforming to or identifying with a single essential identity.

---

5. cf. the priest in the poem "The Priest," who views all those who get off the bus, including the poet, as pilgrims (28-33).

The poet's satiric attack in *Jejuri* is directed against the representatives of the administrative priestly class and their exploitation of the downtrodden and innocent in such places of worship. Poems such as "Heart of Ruin" bring to light the poet's differentiation between a "place of worship" and "the house of god" (21, 22). In this poem, the ruins of a temple function as a place of refuge to the most downtrodden of creatures—in this case, a mongrel bitch along with her litter and a dung beetle: "No more a place of worship this place / is nothing less than the house of god" (21-22). For the poet, places (or objects) of worship, as seen in poems like "A Low Temple," "Manohar," "A Scratch," "Makarand," and "The Cupboard," are centers that are committed to the business of religion: "As in Jejuri, the devotional is inserted forcefully into the economic, where it always resided anyway … into the bread-and-butter transaction, the duty and slightly disreputable compulsion to earn a living" (Chaudhuri 227). This compulsion is treated satirically in the case of the priestly class. The poet seems contemptuous of the priest's anxiety for his "puran poli" in the poem "The Priest": "A catgrin on its face / and a live, ready to eat pilgrim / held between its teeth" (31-33). The "catgrin" is closely connected to the recurring motif of the "tiger," which could also be considered as an allegorical symbol of the priestly class, particularly in the poem "Ajamil and the Tigers." This compulsion, however, is handled sympathetically in the poem "An Old Woman." The poet is deeply affected by the old woman's dignified yet helpless plea: "What else can an old woman do / on hills as wretched as these?" (16-18). The fact that the poet dwells not only on such downtrodden, exploited people who are bereft of any agency but also wretched creatures such as dogs, dung beetles, rats, hens, and butterflies recalls yet another characteristic of the saint-poets.[6]

"A Song for a Vaghya" conveys this sense of compulsion and need in a matter-of-fact manner that is reminiscent of both the priest and the old woman:

> It's my job to carry
> this can of oil.
> Yours to see
> it's always full.
> But if I can't beg
> I'll have to steal.
> Is that a deal? (15-21)

In "A Song for a Murli," however, this compulsion manifests with a hypocritical tinge. After reproaching the addressee (perhaps the poet himself) as an "old lecher," the Murli attempts to solicit him: "let's see the colour of your money first" (11, 12). The Vaghyas and the Murlis are children offered to the deity at Jejuri by people who resort to a give-and-take attitude—an attitude that is oft-criticized by the saint-poets and here by the poet for the willful condemnation of children often by their own parents who later become entrenched in a life of poverty and prostitution. At the same time, the poem "The Priest's Son" conveys that the poet is also helplessly aware that the children of the priestly class will similarly be compelled into becoming unwilling participants of such traditional setups for their subsistence.

---

6. cf. Tukaram's *abhanga* "Je ka Ranjale Ganjale" (Tukaram 23).

The poet's pragmatic approach in *Jejuri* is also indicative of this refusal to adhere to any fixed philosophical position. Pragmatism can be defined "as the 'mediating philosophy' that enables us to overcome the distinction between the tender-minded and the tough-minded" (Hookway). Pragmatism is a philosophical worldview that is a curious combination of those standards that both the tough-minded and tender-minded aspire to achieve: "The tough minded have an empiricist commitment to experience and going by 'the facts,' while the tender-minded have more of a taste for a priori principles which appeal to the mind …. The tender-minded are 'free-willist' and dogmatic; the tough minded are 'fatalistic' and skeptical" (Hookway). However, it is the poem "Ajamil and the Tigers" that reveals that the poet's pragmatic approach is perhaps a result of the realization that idealism or utopia though desirable is sadly unachievable; this is brought out by the following lines:

> Ajamil wasn't a fool.
> Like all good shepherds he knew
> that even tigers have got to eat some time.
> A good shepherd sees to it they do.
> He is free to play a flute all day
> As well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same pond
> with a full stomach for a common bond. (84-90)

The pragmatic in the poet, like Ajamil, is aware of this double bind and of the necessity to negotiate between the common needs of two dissimilar peoples—the tigers and the sheep or the exploiters and the exploited. In contrast, the sheep dog of this poem—symbolic perhaps of the saint-poets, Chaitanya, and the idealist in the poet—is unable to perceive this. The *Vaghya* in "A Song for a Vaghya" gives voice to this predicament:

> 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 … (43-49)

In addition, a few poems in *Jejuri* reveal that the poet's pragmatism is tempered with a hint of romanticism; however, the poet does not lean toward nihilism.[7] The romantic aspects are brought to light by poems such as "The Butterfly" and "Between Jejuri and the Railway Station." In "The Butterfly," the spiritual faith in and appreciation of Nature that is characteristic of the romantics also conveys a keen distaste for glorifying objects or things by investing them with some tale or legend and some future expectation:

> There is no story behind it.
> It is split like a second,
> It hinges around itself.
> It has no future.
> It is pinned down to no past.

---

7. See Pratt for the concept of nihilism referred to in this article.

It's a pun on the present. (1-6)

Similar is the treatment of the trance-inducing dance of the cocks and hens that is characteristic of a celebratory harvest dance and which calls for an appreciation of the present rather than dwelling on the past or future:

> The typographical flourish in the penultimate poem, in, and through, which the narrator records the experience of witnessing cocks and hens dancing in a field on the way to the station, is the closest the poem comes to imitating a religious ecstasy and abandon, on the brink where both irony and the verbal are obliterated. (Chaudhuri 228)

Instead of the priest (entrenched in traditional rituals) and the stationmaster (representing the illusory promises of modernism), the poet appears to favor this non-ritual expression of ecstasy: a state that he compares to "a needle that has struck a perfect balance between *equal* scales" (21; emphasis added). In contrast, the poet is scathingly critical of the various attempts at deification that is a common occurrence in such temples towns. The three Chaitanya poems support this argument:

> come off it
> said chaitanya to a stone
> in stone language
> wipe the red paint off your face
> i don't think the colour suits you
> i mean what's wrong
> with being just a plain stone (1-7)

The "Chaitanya" in these poems is a reference to the famous social reformer of Bengal of the 16th century who is said to have visited Jejuri. Like other saint-poets, Chaitanya also abhorred the ritualistic practices of tradition that were being blindly followed and was a proponent of *Bhakti*, which superseded all other forms of religious practice.[8] In the first Chaitanya poem, the necessity to deify a stone into a god is questioned by Chaitanya himself in the first person. Here, the need to communicate with a stone in its own language reveals a subtle critique of the traditional function of the priestly class as mediators (as they would consider themselves the sole interpreters of the stone's stone language) between the human and the divine. If the stone were truly divine or a god (omniscient), then it should have the ability to understand any language. Rejection of this mediatory function is another characteristic of the saint-poets. In this context, the line "We feel that means are more important than ends," from the poem "Ajamil and the Tigers," sums up the conflict between the priestly class, for whom the observance of rituals is more important than the goal of realizing and becoming the divine, and the saint-poets and reformers like Chaitanya, for whom the goal of self-realization is far more important than the observance of ritualistic means (48).

The second Chaitanya poem can be considered a humorous take on the process of deification:

---

8. See the entry on the "Chaitanya Movement" in *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*.

> sweet as grapes
> are the stones of Jejuri
> said chaitanya
> he popped a stone
> in his mouth
> and spat out gods (1-6)

This poem also points out the ironical situation in which Chaitanya, who was vocal against such practices, had to undergo that same process of deification by posterity, where he is now worshipped as an incarnation of Krishna. This helplessness of reformers and also of the poet to bring about some change is allegorically highlighted by the third Chaitanya poem:

> 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 (1-11)

This poem implicitly suggests that the conditions at Jejuri would continue as they were and that any attempt by the poet to bring about some change would suffer the same fate as that of previous such attempts by reformers like Chaitanya. Here, the poet displays a keen awareness of human psychology and herd mentality. This criticism of unnecessary deification is also evident in the poem "A Scratch." Hence, it is in the ruins of such places that are no longer being invested with legends or an economic interest, or where such places have been reclaimed by nature or in nature itself, that the poet discovers "the house of god" as well as fodder for his creative endeavor. In this context, the poet endeavors to de-invest objects and people of the essential identities imposed through legends and stories: deification too is a process of imparting an essence to an object—in this case, a "divine" essence.

This de-investment can be seen in the poems "The Doorstep," "Water Supply," "The Pattern," "Manohar," "A Scratch," and "A Little Pile of Stones," whereas a mock replication or recounting of the process is seen in the "The Door," "Hills," "Yeshwant Rao," and select poems of the "The Railway Station." This stance is different from that of the saint-poets, who attempted to *invert* this process with their goal of realizing and investing the divine essential identity in everyone and everything. The poet, on the other hand, attempts to *subvert* it by questioning the process itself. To problematize this further, he also launches a subtle satiric attack on the alternative to tradition—modernity. What appears *prima facie* as a mere humorous adoption of a mock-ritual tone in the poems that comprise "The Railway Station," is in fact a satiric replication of the deification process; here, steel instead of stone becomes the object of deification and hence contempt:

> 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 (1-8)

In the above-quoted poem "vows," this ritualistic appeasement of the symbols of modernity and its vehicles—industrialization, commercialization, and technology—hints at a similar criticism of the powerlessness of the "new savior." It could be said that the poet also directs his skepticism toward the so-called solutions offered by modernism and the attempt to find a replacement or substitute for tradition in modernism. This view is supported by the mock ritual practices directed toward the "new religion." That the poet viewed modernity with suspicion can be seen in the fact that Kolatkar had not taken kindly to the telephone (Chaudhuri 222). In this context, it could be said that the commonly held belief that the poet considers "European modernity as the agent for the transformation of local sensibility" is not corroborated by the poems as far as *Jejuri* is concerned (Patke 199).

On his choice of writing in two languages, Marathi and English, Kolatkar again appears to challenge the concept of essential identity. The demand by nativists that writers should write in their respective mother tongues as well as their contempt and distrust toward those who write in English is a common feature in any post-colonial discussion. Further, a desire to defend the choice to write in English on the part of the writers themselves also exists; this is corroborated by the apologetic and/or defensive tone adopted by poets such as Kamala Das in "An Introduction" and Keki Daruwalla in "The Mistress." In contrast, Kolatkar is unapologetic and offers no defense, and through this seeming indifference, he further problematizes the question of identity—in this context, of linguistic, regional, and national identities. He is a Marathi poet as well as an English one; he is at the same time an Indian poet and simply a *poet*, in addition to being a graphic artist. He is also a poet who does not discriminate between an urban setting and a rural one.[9] While it is true that Kolatkar's English idiom does lean toward the Americanesque, one must remember that his language does not conform to the Queen's English or even standard American English. Rather, it can be said that he has appropriated and hybridized the English language in such a way that his writing does not conform to accepted prescriptive grammars or standards:

> A generation of Indian poets in English … had turned to the idiosyncratic language, and the capacity for eye-level attentiveness, of American poetry to create yet another mongrel Indian diction—to reorder familiar experience, and to fashion a demotic that escaped the echoes of both Queen's English and the sonorous effusions of Sri Aurobindo's Savitri and the poorly-translated but ubiquitous Gitanjali of Tagore; to bypass, as it were, the expectations that terms like "English literature" and "Indian culture" raised. (Chaudhuri 227-28)

---

9. The poet is at ease both in Kala Ghoda in South Mumbai (*Kala Ghoda Poems*) and in Jejuri (*Jejuri*).

Besides being a poet, Kolatkar was also a graphic artist, and he was responsible for creating the cover designs for his books. A discussion on the implications and the symbolism conveyed by the choice of design in the case of *Jejuri* is attempted here.[10] The cover design of *Jejuri* has a background of striking yellow. The title "Jejuri" is offset against the pervading yellow in saffron-red, whereas the poet's name appears in a shade of gold-grey. The front cover has the image of Khandoba with his wife Mhalsa astride on their horse, presented in what can be described as a brass bas-relief. On the back cover, one finds a similar brass image; however, this one is a picture that depicts the setting sun above railway tracks. This image finds it verbal counterpart in the last poem of the sequence—"the setting sun." The different components of this cover design are highly symbolic. It is commonly known that the color yellow is associated with *Bhandara* (Turmeric) among the cult of Khandoba. That this color is loaded with symbolic significance is also well known. It is significant that "Jejuri," the place of religious institution, is presented in saffron-red. The juxtaposition of the two images, of the brass image representing the traditional and the otherworldly on the front cover and of the railway tracks representing the modern and the industrial on the back cover, is noteworthy, and it conveys to some extent the attempt at destabilizing essentialism. This can be argued by the fact that the poems prove critical of both in that both are unable to meaningfully contribute toward a better human condition in Jejuri or perhaps even universally. They are presented as two sides of the same coin with his critique on both stored in between.

To conclude, it could be said that the poet and poems of Jejuri are resistant to the notion of essentialism and reject the assumption of any essential identity. While essentialism, as seen in the notion of "strategic essentialism," is at times beneficent and contributory to socio-political issues, the projection of essential identities in order to simplify the understanding of a literary text results in a biased reading that is unable to cope with the multiplicity of meanings that a text offers. Needless to say, such biases result in one becoming blind to or ignoring other valid readings and thus come in the way of appreciating a text to its fullest.

References:

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.

"Chaitanya Movement." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2013. Web. 1 May 2013. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/88600/Chaitanya-movement>.

Chaudhuri, Amit. "Arun Kolatkar and the Tradition of Loitering." *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature, and Culture*. Oxfordshire: Peter Lang, 2008. 221-34. Print.

Daruwalla, Keki. "The Mistress." *The Keeper of the Dead*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1982. 22-23. Print.

Das, Kamala. "An Introduction". *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. Mumbai: Orient Longman, 2004. 26-27. Print.

---

10. The descriptions of the cover design are based on the 2006 edition of *Jejuri* published by Pras Prakashan.

Desai, S. K. "Arun Kolatkar's Jejuri: A House of God." *Jejuri: A Commentary and Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Shubhangi Raykar. Pune: Prachet, 1995. 59-73. Print.

Hookway, Christopher. "Pragmatism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Spring 2010 ed. Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab, 16 Aug. 2008. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

Kimbahune, Ravindra. "From Jejuri to Arun Kolatkar." *Jejuri: A Commentary and Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Shubhangi Raykar. Pune: Prachet, 1995. 74-83. Print.

King, Bruce. "An Excerpt from 'Two Bilingual Experimentalists.'" *Jejuri: A Commentary and Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Shubhangi Raykar. Pune: Prachet, 1995. 100-104. Print.

Kolatkar, Arun. *Jejuri*. 1976. Mumbai: Pras, 2006. Print.

---. *Kala Ghoda Poems*. Mumbai: Pras, 2004. Print.

---. "Translations from Tukaram and Other Saint-Poets." *Journal of South Asian Literature* 17.1 (1982): 111-14. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 Apr. 2013.

Nemade, Bhalchandra. "Excerpts from Against Writing in English: An Indian Point of View." *Jejuri: A Commentary and Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Shubhangi Raykar. Pune: Prachet, 1995. 94-99. Print.

Patke, Rajeev. *Postcolonial Poetry in English*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.

Pratt, Alan. "Nihilism." 2001. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 3 May 2005. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism>.

Raykar, Shubhangi. "Jejuri: The Cross Cultural Dimensions." *Jejuri: A Commentary and Critical Perspectives*. Pune: Prachet, 1995. 105-26. Print.

Roy, Nilanjana S. "Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004): Speaking Volumes." *Business Standard*. Business Standard, 28 Sep. 2004. Web. 21 Apr. 2013. <http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/arun-kolatkar-1932-2004-104092801041_1.html>.

Rushdie, Salman. "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta, 1991. 61-70. Print.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1978. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography." 1985. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean. New York: Routledge, 1996. 203-234. Print.

Tukaram. "Je ka Ranjale Ganjale." *They Said It: Translations of the Poems of the Saint Poets*. Trans. Sharmila B. Prabhune. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012. 23. *Google Books*. Web. 27 Apr. 2013.