

**The Rhythm of Locality:
A Travel through Arun Kolatkar's Poem**

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Abstract

Literature is chiefly the communication of knowledge, experience and not information. Travel literature encompasses both experience and knowledge. It teaches us to enjoy and live happily. The article springs from the idea that travel is an integral part of human life. Human beings have travelled as nomads, hunters and pilgrims through the course of human evolution, but the seed of travelling sprouts and finds life even in this modern urban setting. I will try to focus on the poems of Kolatkar depicting aspects of travelling through this paper. The paper aims to give an insight into travel literature and an idea of local travel.

The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page.

Saint Augustine

Travel writing is not a new form of writing; if one looks at literary history, one finds evidence of travel writing in the Bible and other sacred books too. It is a rich resource for human development. It has a huge impact on the human psyche. Through the observation and experiences of different places, human beings gain enormous knowledge. There are different forms of travel writings such as travelogue, memories, essays, stories and poetry etc. The development of voyages and expeditions led to the documentation of experiences into travel writing literature. Travelling can take place across space, time and within the limited space of the country and a city too. The traveller moves to different spaces between nations and erases space and time.

We find grains of travel writing in many acclaimed literary texts, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, which are imaginative travel tales. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* are pilgrims travel tales. *Life of Pi*, and *Eat, Love and Pray* are modern adventurous travel tales.

Different thinkers and critics have defined travel literature in different ways. According to Carl Thompson, travel literature "encompasses a bewildering diversity of forms, modes and itineraries" (1-2). Barbara Korte opines: "travelogue is a genre not easily demarcated" (1). She further states: "As far as its theme and content matter are concerned, the travel account has not emerged as a genre hermetically sealed off from other kinds of writing" (8). Charles Forsdick describes "the generic indeterminacy of the travelogue, a literary form situated somewhere between scientific observation and fiction, while simultaneously problematizing any clear-cut distinction of those two poles" (58).

The reading of travelogue as a genre that is significant for interdisciplinary studies is both rewarding and enriching, as it incorporates and assimilates different approaches from varied fields. It encompasses broad spectrums, such as history, politics, religion, culture, economics, feminism, children, geography, ethnography, linguistics, literature and anthropological discourses. It surpasses boundaries and genres. It not only depicts the country travelled but also the growth of the self while travelling. It is the journey of the self, a journey into being, and penetration within oneself too. According to Hugh and Colleen Gantzer, the travelogue helps to bridge the gap between people, culture, time and space. In a way, it provides a new road map for a world based on sustainable development. This fecund genre emerged substantially in the past decades due to the interest in intersectional, cross-cultural, transnational and multidisciplinary studies. There is no neat demarcation of this genre; it blurs the boundaries of other genres and intrudes on them too. It is a confluence, convergence and conglomeration of different aspects.

Indian Travel Writings

The impact of colonization on Indian writing in English is evident in this genre. The traces of Indian travelogue are manifest in the earliest works, *Puranas*, *safarnamas*, *sthalamahatmyas*, *digvijayas*, *Kasimahatmya*, *Meghdoot*, *Upapuranas*, *tirthya-mahatyas*, *Kasi Yatra Charitra* and others. During the Bhakti movement, saints and preachers

travelled far and wide to spread the message across the country. Thus, travelogues help in the dissemination of culture and knowledge through the texts.

Indian writers in English have also enriched travel literature through their writings. R. K. Narayan through his travelogue, *My Dateless Diary* has pioneered the spirit of travel writing. He has given a fascinating and endearing account of America through Indian eyes. Among Indian poets we have, Nissim Ezekiel, Jayant Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar and other luminaries. Arun Kolatkar (1931-2004), a bilingual poet won *Commonwealth Poetry Prize* for his poetry collection *Jejuri*. He is a reticent writer who continues to write during this period, avidly publishing work. His other two distinguished poetry collections are *Kala Ghoda* and *Sarpa Satra*. His friends help us to learn more about him, as his other works were published posthumously.

Kolatkar's Poetry

Arun Kolatkar is a modern Indo-Anglican poet. He is influenced by the style of Western writers such as T. S. Eliot, Ted Hughes, D.H Lawrence, William Carlos Williams and others. He possesses an unusual synthesizing capacity that often enabled him to achieve in his work a successful integration of various divergent elements. Kolatkar is a non-conformist poet. In his poetry, he tries to find some ways of expressing himself that is not cluttered with stale conventions and that is at once intellectually valid and emotionally satisfying. There are long and rather tedious poems that give the impression of having been hurriedly written. The non-conformist quality of Kolatkar is analyzed by S. K. Desai as "the protagonist goes to *Jejuri*, not as a seeker . . . not as a pilgrim . . . He is a kind of a traveller . . . a tourist" (48-49). Kolatkar's poetry is concerned with "thisness"; things as they are: an object in his poetry does not correspond to anything outside its context. His poetry highlights alternative ways of perception, refusing the common and exclusive classical perceptions of identities and rootedness. He is a poet of the bizarre, the ugly, the downtrodden, the obscure, and the weird, but with his impeccable power of imagination, he enlivens these events. The theme of his poetry takes in myth, legends, belief, scepticism, globalization, industrialization and commercialization which are expressed in idioms with wry irony.

His poetry opens up an avenue of post-structural perspectives along with some psychic aberration that is in operation in contemporary society. However, the place that

Kolatkár describes through his writing is not of lush green scenic beauty but urban dismal space. In a way, one can interpret that he is grieving for the loss of environmental beauty and urging us at present to make efforts to bring some changes to the damage that we have done to the environment as well as find joy in little things. Urban men with grinding and hectic lifestyle depict not a pleasant picture, but rather a grave concern with humanity.

In the contemporary context of globalization, a term is gaining prominence and significance: Local. Kolatkár aspires to a kind of comprehensive, melodious and supportive mechanism in this tech-driven world. His “Journey Poems” describe the movement of people and travel. Here, the reader moves away from the filth, dirt and seedy side of the urban world. His *Jejuri* poems take readers to different temples and sights. It is a world where the countryside dance of Cook and Hen catches the sight of the poet. It takes us to the primitive world. The world from where we have come and the world where we want to go again are the same.

Writers through their writings revive the landscapes and their regions. The landscape becomes an instrument and agent in creating cultural and personal identities in postcolonial nations. Kolatkár, a seasoned artist in his craft, has rendered an invaluable service to his place and its landscape through his writing. He registers and records the things around him with his keen observation and experience of his culture and its manifestations in its transition. His poetry is unique, significant and invaluable. It is an accurate, deliberate, apt account of his experiences. Reading and analysing his poem will inspire and motivate others to look for local places as travel sites.

Kala Ghoda and other poems

Kolatkár finds joy and sees beauty in everything. For him, rhythm and movement have their charm. The poems in *Jejuri* question the ritual of worship and faith. The other collections as *Kala Ghoda* and *Sarpa Satra* are about modern urban dwellings and the significance of myth in the present time. His poems depict a space where dreary and beautiful, light and dark, mingle. The modern man brooding over his lost identity is aptly presented in the poem “Pi-Dog,” where the dog recalls his lineage in the backdrop of globalization as:

I like to trace my descent

- no proof of course,
just a strong family tradition-
matrilineally,
to the only bitch that proved
tough enough to have survived,

first, the long voyage,
and then the wretched weather here
-a combination
that killed the rest of the pack
of thirty foxhounds,
imported all the way from England. . . .

And my ancestor become the only dog
to have made it to heaven
in recorded history (CPE 76-7).

Kolatkhar seems to mourn over the loss of individuality, identity, and community in the face of modernity. The mushrooming of industries has ushered us in an era of commercialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism eating into human values like love, justice, humility, tolerance, equilibrium, equanimity, sanity, truth and beauty

Kala Ghoda is a collection of variant types of poetic sequences. In *Kala Ghoda* poems, he changes the pace rapidly, an urban space changes into a historical place in a jiffy. While reading one travel in time and space simultaneously. In the poem “pi-dog”, pi-dog laments about his migration, movement and his history. The poem depicts the change from colonial to the post-colonial period which has brought no change in the life of a commoner.

I look a bit like
a seventeenth-century map of Bombay
with its seven islands

not joined yet,

Shown in solid black
On a body the colour of old parchment;
With Old Woman's island
On my forehead,
Mahim on my croup,

And the others distributed
Casually among
Brisket, withers, saddle and loin

-with a pirate's
Rather than a cartographer's regard
For accuracy (CPE 75).

The pi-dog belongs to a lineage whose ancestor had a link with the *Mahabharata* and the British period. This poem highlights the change that the colonial period has brought into India. It also depicts the picture of modern cities all over the world where animals have no place. The dog which is considered to be man's best companion for ages is forced to live a lonely life in the city. Sachin Ketkar aptly comments: "the appearance of a mongrel and an old map of the city with a history of cultural hybridization is not simply a technical device but a revelation, a discovery of truth" (162).

In the poem "Man of the year", the poet grieves over the ecological imbalance caused due to industrialization and 'improving' economy as:

Nothing much happened, except
that the Himalaya rose by another inch,
fewer flamingos came to Kutch,

and the leaning tower of Pisa leaned
a little further out
by another 1.29 millimetres,

the Danube poured

two hundred and three cubic kilometres
of fresh water into the Black Sea,

the hole in the ozone layer widened,
the earth became poorer
by two thousand seven hundred plant species (CPE 180).

These lines speak of the greed of the powerful people, who sell the beauty and bounty of the mother earth for a few bucks. The line “Nothing much happened” indicates the lackadaisical way most of us look at the exploitation of nature. Kolatkar takes his reader to travel along with him from Himalaya to Kutch, and from Pisa to Black sea, and pictures unprecedented devastation that has caused havoc on nature.

In “Irani Restaurant Bombay” poem, Kolatkar describes a dark interior that holds landscapes where “dogmatically green and elaborate trees defeat/ breeze; [a] crooked swan begs pardon/ if it disturbs the pond” (CPE 224). The poem presents an interior landscape of a depreciating dilapidated restaurant in Bombay.

A recurring topic in Kolatkar’s poems is the sense of place and the literary mapping of India. His love for the various places in his home state is revealed in his several poems as he goes on describing “Dadar, Parel, Lalbaug, Byculla, Bori Bunder . . . Flora Fountain” (CPE 123). Karen Smith rightly observes: “Kolatkar could have intended his chosen locale to be a microcosm from the present state of the Indian civilization” (24).

In Bandagere
in Andhra Pradesh,
or may be somewhere else in India, (CPE 128)

He draws various states of India through his writing. His poems unite the country and encapsulate a feeling of belonging. *Kala Ghoda* poems or the transitory spaces of rest found by his various travelling personas. “Through such depictions of the places, Kolatkar proposes a history and a geography of the city that take into account the oppression of the marginalized communities and also the domination and lack of concern of the privileged. These literary maps chart the differential in power relationship in a place that refuses to completely succumb to such unjust separations” (Nerlekar “The

Cartography’ 7). Some of the poems are a pointer to the idea of unity in the diversity of India through different cuisines as in the poem “The Breakfast at *Kala Ghoda*”:

They’re serving khima pao at Olympia,
dal ghost at Baghdadi,
puri bhaji at Kailash Parbat,
aab gosh at Sarvi’s
kebabs with sprigs of mint at Gulshan-e-Iran,
nali hehari at Noor Mohamdi’s,
baida ghotala at the Oriental,
paya soup at Benazir,
brun maska at Military Cafe,

upma at Swagat
shira at Anand Vihar
and fried egg and bacon at Wayside Inn (CPE 129).

Kolatkhar has blurred the boundaries of castes and nations through this poem. By picturing varied cuisines at the breakfast table of Kala Ghoda, Kolatkhar holds the hope for a unified world. The cuisines and places describe various communities that are popular in making these dishes such as Marathi, Muslim, Irani, Christian. The poem celebrates multifarious aspects of Bombay; it allows us to get an intimate view of diverse cultural, geographical and social spaces. It also suggests India in its true colour that is unity in diversity. It gives a glimpse of eateries to a foodie tourist. It presents a global culture where identities are but blurred, indicating a secular outlook. “Kolatkhar’s city of Mumbai represents India at a microcosmic level and his concerns transcend the cartographic constraints to encompass the entire humanity under the pangs of marginalization” (Hemang Desai n. p).

Kolatkhar has a remarkable eye for things around him. His eyes compensate for his poor ears. He reports everything with delicate rightness. That is his thought is proved not by logic but by his literary gift. His thought proceeds through metaphors, symbols, and imagery. An experience is converted into thought like the mud lump becoming a pitcher. Another of his poems, “The Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads”, presents a city-

dwelling woman who is washing her clothes. The folds of her sari describe various places in Bombay: Dadar, Parel, Lalbaug, Byculla, Bori Bunder, Flora Fountain and Kala Ghoda. Each fold of her sari is a location in Bombay.

she holds the sari away from her
at arm's length
at a halfway point along the border,
from where it's a short walk
to the belly
for her three fingers and thumb,
as they collect the sari
along the way
in neat accordion folds
(flip flap, flip flap,
Dadar, Parel, Lalbaug, Byculla, Bori Bunder,
flip flap, Flora Fountain
and flip, we come to Kala Ghoda,
which is where
we've been all along). (CPE 123)

It seems that the woman is holding Bombay in her sari. And one tours these places in her sari by moving from one fold to another. His *Kala Ghoda* poems home different topography and trajectories of India but it also encapsulates places across the world:

The clock displayed outside
the Lund & Blockley shop across the road
is the big daddy of all clocks,
and will correct me if I'm wrong;
but I think it's tonight already
in Tokyo
where they're busy polishing off
sliced raw fish,
sushi balls and tofu with soy sauce;

and the emperor's chopsticks are poised,
at this very moment,
over Hatcho Miso, his favourite dish.
In a restaurant in Seoul,
a dog is being slowly strangled
before it's thrown into a cooking pot (CPE 125)

By juxtaposing the local and international places around the world, Kolatkar has given a global setting to its inhabitants. His poems are a travel itinerary. The poem "Turnaround" reflects his journey at the time of his struggle. It blurs the boundaries of the travelling places; the words "beggar", "peepul leaves", "a lump of jaggery" point to the struggle which any villager goes through when he comes to Bombay (CPE 237). It also seems to present the inner journey of man. In this poem, Kolatkar gives a heart-rendering picture of the poor who need no commentator:

Bombay made me a beggar.
Kalyan gave me a lump of jaggery to suck.
In a small village that had a waterfall
but no name
my blanket found a buyer
and I feasted on just plain ordinary water.
I arrived in Nashik
peepul leaves stuck between my teeth.
There I sold my Tukaram
to buy myself some bread and mince.
When I turned off Agra Road,
one of my sandals gave up the ghost. (CPE 273)

The various places are the movement of travelling from one place to another in the course of Kolatkar's formative years of his life. "The documentation of journeys, travels and movements of people and self is only one perspective on his work, which deals with the notion of hierarchy and power, and with ideas of freedom and imprisonment through the use of mapping structure" (Nerlekar "The Cartography" 3).

Boatride

Despite its oversimplicity and plainness, Kolatkar's language is a perfect balance of form and image, thought and feeling, symbols and imagery, sense and sound. Thus, the language of "the boatride", though written in an extremity of form and plain language universalises a simple boat ride and finally brings up the image of life's journey like Philip Larkin's "Whitsun Wedding". The present tense and the absence of punctuation marks contribute to the effect intended by the poet. Readers need to contemplate the poem in a new perspective or else to quote his lines, "the gesture withers for want/of correspondence" (CPE 329):

after a pair of knees
has shot up and streaked
down the mast after
the confusion of hands about
the rigging

an off white miracle

the sail
spread

*

because a sailor waved
back
to a boy
another boy
waves to another sailor
in the clarity of air
the gesture withers for want
of correspondence and
the hand his knee accepts
as his own

is the hand
of an aged person
a hand
that must remain patient
and give the boy it's a part of
time
to catch up (CPE 329)

The poem has not been provided with any full stop, and not even after the stanzas. This conveys the sense of continuity, but not in terms of progressiveness or advancement; rather, it is a standstill state having so many sites that are at once seen. This causes a bit of trouble to the readers as to how to encapsulate such a wide area as the mimesis of the real experience and in the language of the poet himself. "In the small space of this poem, there seems to be plenty of room to fix a moment of time, to fill it with movement, to define the psychological consequence of the action and to complete the temporal circle by connecting the present instance to the future" (Walsh 145). Here the unusual style combined with asymmetrical indentation and spacing completely disregarding regular line-pattern has the special effect of highlighting the movement of the sea, which can take place even in the everyday, paced, inexpressible reality of everyday experience. Exquisiteness as an invisible flame of life can shine and enlighten the world around. The movement of sails in the air visible with the poet's keen observant eye gives us a kaleidoscopic view of the wholeness in a floating language. Usha Kalyani makes an apt analysis of the poem:

Kolatkár's "The Boatripe" is a long poem illumined by minute observation and brilliant use of metaphors. Each stanza presents a still picture, at times boring, but mostly wonderful. It takes even trivial, stereotypical and commonplace things and turns into aesthetic experience. Taking delight in free association and visual design, he orders the structure of the poem in different sections and offers cameo-like pictures, which range from satire on the absurdities of social behaviour to surreal fantasies" (53).

For his part, Bruce King, in his essay "Two Bilingual Experimentalist: Kolatkár and Chitre", comments:

on. But Kolatkar's poems reflect on the inward journey of human beings too. In this way, his representation of the local connects with the global.

Jejuri

Kolatkar's *Jejuri* poems shun the materialist and consumerist culture of the tourism industry. They relate his travel trip to a temple town near Maharashtra. In these poems, he describes the ruin and the dilapidated state of the temples. He delineates the rock, insects and animals that inhabit this place in his poem collection, *Jejuri*. He describes them with indifference and as a distant observer. Most of the poems in *Jejuri*, whatever their prosodic and thematic structure, present a mixture of wit and wisdom, wit supporting the revealing or satirical exceptionality of expression, and wisdom revealing the strange facets of the ordinary life of today. Kolatkar visited *Jejuri* not as a pilgrim but as a tourist. He does not delineate the temple, the gods and the legends in his poems but was more interested in the nasty rats, mongrel bitch, butterfly etc. The poems reveal a lack of religious fervour expected from a person visiting such a place of worship. The earlier concept of the pilgrimage on foot is contrasted with the bus journey which shows a desire for comfort in modern man. The poem "The Bus" is about the tedious and wearisome journey of drab reality, it conveys the ". . . ironical, sceptical and pessimistic accounts of the journey" (Nagar 24):

The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned. . . Jejuri.
when you get off the bus

you don't step outside the old man's head (CPE 42).

In the poem which appears in the beginning, a section of the *Jejuri* Kolatkar reflects on the tedium of such a journey:

Your own divided face in a pair of glasses
on an old man's nose
is all the countryside you get to see (CPE 42).

The word "divided" indicates the belief and scepticism of the modern sophisticated man in the backdrop of a religious place as Jejuri. The poet's irreverent tone is further expressed as: "You seem to move continuously forward/towards a destination" (CPE

42). The word ‘destination’ depicts Jejuri to be a kind of tourist spot for the poet. It is further accentuated as the poet “[doesn’t] step inside the old man’s head” which has “the caste mark” conforms Kolatkar’s non- conformist attitude towards a pilgrimage (CPE 42). “[I]n this poem the subjective and the objective flow in and out of one another, modifying, correcting and dissolving each other” (Walsh 147).

In *Jejuri*, the travel motif is more prominent than in other poems. The last section of *Jejuri* is rounded off with the beautiful description of the ‘the setting sun’ with a note of sombre thoughtfulness and discourse, it confirms “. . . the poet’s interest in the way a place is experienced rather than in what it officially signifies” (Bird 240). The wheel, as it were, has come full circle and it is, moreover, dark:

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 (CPE 72)

Time moves from dawn to dusk, and all that happens in between is a routine drudgery, a cumulus of futile human endeavours indicating the vanity of existence. The pilgrimage comes to an abrupt conclusion without the hints of a coruscating vision, without a sustained hope and it is a sort of an inverted pilgrimage, a “Paradiso” getting metamorphosed into an “Inferno”. The journey reminds us of T.S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi”. The journey described in the poem is taken as a metaphor for life. The difficulties encountered during the journey symbolically stand for the difficulties, failures, and frustrations one comes across in one’s life. Even when it seems to be devoid of meaning and confusion, one has to face it boldly and live it to the full. What is needed is peace of mind which is becoming increasingly precious and rare with the passing of each day. “Kolatkar’s strategic figuration of the sequence as a microcosm of Jejuri the place invites

the reader to experience the events and impression along with the narrator, and in doing so, reveals the act of reading to be an active and participatory process” (Bird 230).

Kolatkar’s poetry juxtaposes the two worlds, the local and the global; it also commingles the realities, transforms, recreates and renews space and time. His different poems with different themes, such as modern and rural, depict a motif of travel narrative. This motif transforms, leaps and bounces into the entire structure of the poems and lends a touch of travel poetry. The constant swings in his poems from subjective to objective, religious to a relative, real to unreal lends a postcolonial and post-modern touch to his writing.

Travel writing helps us develop cultural and geographical sensitivity. It is a blend of fiction and non-fiction writing. It helps to develop a cosmopolitan attitude towards our surrounding. Kolatkar’s poems are his homage to the various places that constituted a part of his beings. They sing for the lives that live on these parts of the country and connect it to the macrocosmic level. The local transcends itself to become global. However, there is an undercurrent of despair and loss in his tone, which he feels due to enormous damage done to certain places.

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