
Arun Kolatkar's Aesthetics of Dissolution and a Reading of *Bhijaki Vahi*

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Article Received: 08/05/2022, Article Accepted: 28/06/2022, Published online: 28/06/2022

DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.65

Abstract

Bhijaki Vahi ('Tear-stained Book'), published in 2003, is a collection of Marathi poems written by Arun Kolatkar. Kolatkar, a bilingual poet, writes in English and Marathi. His poetic works in English include *Jejuri*, *Kala Ghoda Poems*, *Sarpa Satra*, and *The Policeman*. His poetical works in Marathi include *Jejuri*, *Chirimiri*, *Arun Kolatkarachya Kavita*, *Dron*, *Bhijaki Vahi*, and *Arun Kolatkarachya Char Kavita*. *Bhijaki Vahi* for its artistic perfection won Sahitya Akademi Award. The text tries to reinterpret the historical and the mythical time and relocate them to the present context. It encompasses the narrative of female characters from different cultures and times. However, the text is not merely a reinterpretation of myths or history. It is more critical as Kolatkar reveals his art of dissolution very specifically through its prefatory lines. His desire to dissolve this tear-stained book into the flowing river of the sorrow and its reinvention in the generations of new poets marks him the poet of the masses. Heir to the tradition of Bhakti poetry, he intends to dismember his art to lose its authority and reunite it into the social consciousness of the masses. It is also an urge of Kolatkar to take his poetic work from its print tradition to the oral tradition and place it into the collective

consciousness of the society, of its commoner. Hence the present research article intends to communicate the aesthetics of Kolatkar revealed through the text of *Bhijaki Vahi*.

Keywords: Arun Kolatkar, *Bhijaki Vahi*, reinterpretation of myths, history, aesthetics of dissolution, dismemberment and recreation, Bhakti poetry, oral tradition.

How does any poem come into 'being'? What does a poet imagine of the future? What about its existence? What happens to a reader who comes in contact with that poem? These are ever prevalent questions for both the readers and very particularly to the writers. Questions like these may lead us to inquiry into poetry's origin, nature, and function. Often such questions are dismissed at the very outset for their apparent banality or are tried to be answered through literary history. At certain times the theoretical framework is set to answer these questions. The probing leads to different locales, spaces, and times and different sets of knowledge as poetry as an art form intertwines the diversity of its origin.

“Any number of things can set a poem off—the cry of a bird, a rhythm in the head, a visitor, or another poem.”, says A. K. Mehrotra (*Absent Traveller*, xii), and of course, a list is not exhaustive. India has witnessed ‘the coming into being ‘of a poem after the cry of a bird and how the same verse has given birth to several other new poems. Indian poetry encompasses Vedic scriptures, grand epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, oral poetry like Gathasaptashati, a medieval tradition of Bhakti poetry, Sangam poetry, and a vast arena of multilingual and multicultural poetic expressions, articulates these questions in different forms and ways at other times. At every age, these questions are inevitably and inherently present with any piece of literature. In the 21st century, where poetry collections are printed sporadically, the poems are often shared on social media but read infrequently. When there has appeared a significant breach between the people and the poets, the questions associated with the function and value of literature have become more pressing. Every writer tries to respond to these questions in their way. The same becomes very specifically visible when one reads the introductory lines of Kolatkar's *Bhijaki Vahi*. The stripes stand as testimony to Kolatkar's aesthetics.

Arun Kolatkar is widely regarded as one of the great Indian poets. He writes in English and Marathi. He is a poet who has absorbed the world's literary traditions and, at the same time, is strongly connected to his regional poetic tradition. He has been hailed as the "heir and equal of Kabir, Tukaram, and Ghalib" (*Boatride*, coverage).

He belongs to that generation of poets who have witnessed the transformation of human culture in the last decades of the second millennium. These decades mark the incredible exponential growth of technology, bringing rapid change in every sphere of life. The advancement of technology, the emergence of new power structures, and the new ways of exploitation in this period have given birth to new value systems in the global arena. The change has also swept the nature and status of the arts. This second millennium that witnessed the emergence of the printed book has also seen the virtual appearance of a literary text. Naturally, at the beginning of the 3rd millennium, the questions related to the role and value of literature were constantly raised and discussed. Kolatkar, whose literary works emerged in this span of literary history, envisages the nature and function of his poetry and vocalizes it in his distinct way.

Literary history provides many instances of poet-critics who, besides their poetic works, have communicated their stance towards poetics through different forms of writing. Their treaties, essays, interviews, and many such papers have helped formulate their aesthetics. We have instances of such poet-critics (Wordsworth, Mathew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, to name a few) in every culture and every period of literary history. However, Arun Kolatkar defies any such attempt. Generally, he has been seen as a person of reclusive temperament. Very few interviews and biographical documentation are available about him. Naturally, his

poetic works themselves stand as testimony to his aesthetics. The present article modestly attempts to explore Kolatkar's idea about the function of poetry by interpreting the text of *Bhijaki Vahi*.

Bhijaki Vahi, published in 2003 in Marathi, is a collection of 25 poems. Each poem is further sub-divided into many short poems. All these poems seem to be individual. However, as is typical of Kolatkar's style, carefully reading these poems exhibits a kaleidoscopic vision of a single thought. Hence the 25 lyrics make a single poem, a long narrative of perennial grief and enduring sorrow. Perhaps Kolatkar, too, intended to treat them as a single poem on the content page. He does not number them separately but includes them under one entry called *Sar*. The word '*star*' in Marathi means a necklace woven of different beads, pearls, or diamonds. The present poem is a necklace of 25 drops of tears shed by the other women in extra time of history, confirming the aptness of the title of this collection, *Bhijaki Vahi*. It is translated as a "tear-stained notebook" (Mehrotra, *Boatride*30), which would lead to the meaning of the title as a 'notebook that is sodden' with the tears of these women.

In 393 pages, the reader is given to brood over a piercing question despite the age-long cultural mutation and so much techno-based advancement, is there any transformation in the status of women? A journey into the mythical and the historical time reinforces this question. Though different functions, myth, history, or

legends comprise the form of narration. *Bhijaki Vahi* exploits these narrative structures in a generous order and leads it towards the epic length of modern times. Mythical and historical time has always been used as a great resource. But it is never a simple excavation of history as it is. Instead, a poet always makes history his prerequisite. "There can be no poetry without history, but poetry has no other mission than to transmute history," said one of the famous poets Octavio Paz (qt.in K. Satchidanandan6). Transmutation is a shift that allows writers to rethink and reformulate the world from their perspective. These particular visions, a thought, form a great piece of art.

In these 25 poems, a reader comes across a reconstruction of the historical or mythical narrative with a new perspective that transcends the cartographic boundaries of nations and cultures and encompasses the global reality. It presents an alternative aspect of human history that has been shaped in a framework of a patriarchal value system. Here we listen to the voice of Mary; the mother of Jesus, of Apala, a daughter of great sage Atri, of Nadezhda, wife of famous Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, of Cassandra, a cursed visionary and the daughter of King Priam, of Muktaayakka, a sister of Ajaganna, of Hadamma (a legendary skeleton Woman from Inuit folktale) who was thrown away in the sea by her father, of a fetus of a girl who fears of her pre-birth death, of Rajani, the poet's sister who lost her son. In some other poems, a narrator presents the life of Laila, the beloved of Majanu, of Isis,

an Egyptian Goddess, Hypatia, a great Greek philosopher, Helen of Troy, of Kannagi, a central character of Tamil epic Silapathikaram, of Maimun a prey to honor killing, etc. The poems spring from this vast arena of references comprising various nations' cultures exploiting their mythical and historical world. History identifies them always as a particular man and not as a person. In the narratives of *Bhijaki Vahi*, these women reveal their part of the story.

The great Italian poet Calvino answered the question 'what is the use of literature?' by stating that the actual value of literature is "to give a name to what is still nameless, a voice to those still voiceless" (qt. in Re 132). For years, Kolatkar's poetry has remained busy finding the authentic voice and name for those voiceless and nameless. *Bhijaki Vahi*, like *Kala Ghoda Poems*, where he depicts a group of society that has lost its voice under many ruling power structures, is the best example of it. It becomes a notebook grasping and expressing the diversity of the agents and times. Through this alternative discourse, Arun Kolatkar exposes the inhuman power structures that have exploited womanhood. To communicate it, he abandons the time-culture-specific register of the language of the concerned narrator/persona. He reestablishes the whole discourse artistically in the contemporary informal Marathi diction and relocates these personas in the context of the 21st century. The range of women characters who expose the other form of history through their narratives shows that irrespective of nation, culture, and time, exploitation of women

has remained a common trait of human civilization. However, the text of *Bhijaki Vahi* cannot simply be understood for its feministic perspective and reinvention of the mythical and historical world. Underneath this discourse lies a complex poetic narrative that reveals Kolatkar's aesthetics.

The very publication of *Jejuri* Kolatkar's poetry has reflected a very explicit social criticism. A close reading of either *Kala Ghoda Poems* or *Bhijaki Vahi* and even of *Sarpa Satra* opens an avenue for people who are exploited and subverted daily. Jaratkaru of *Sarpa Satra*, Parameshwari, Meera, Ogress, and many others of *Kala Ghoda Poems* typify the group of society that have lost their voice under many ruling power structures, and Kolatkar's poems provide them the vote. A perfect modernist in his stance, he has always communicated his poetic world in a highly ironic vision. The ironic tone is found at its height in many poems of *Bhijaki Vahi*. Irony in Kolatkar's lyrics evolves from his seemingly objective and impersonal point of view. One of the poems named 'Camera' included in *Bhijaki Vahi* (an exceptional in the general narrative structure of the text) provides Kolatkar's detached and impersonal point of view, where the speaker of the poem points out:

You(camera) have avowed to see /each object/
In its true nature (poem no.8, lines no34-36)

...

you do not get saddened to see the sorrow/
and don't carry the handkerchief/, but you
know very well/ how to capture the tears of

anyone's eye/without any touch or before they roll down or perish its light. (8:64-72)

Such 'photographic' depiction forms the very peculiar feature of Kolatkar's poetic narrative. However, a close reading of his poetry reveals that behind this detached presentation is a porosity that absorbs and perceives the inequality, brutality, and inhumane behavior of human culture and transforms it into the discourse of *Bhijaki Vahi*. In its inter-textual structure, the narrative of *Bhijaki Vahi* helps to resonate the tale of Helen with that of Seeta from Ramayana or Draupadi from Mahabharata. In the poem "Helenche Guntaval"(Helen's Hair), he intertwines the events as follows:

There is no need to have any honest Helen (1.31-33)

... and there is no need that someone should abduct Helen in person/Her shadow even would do to cause the great wars (1.37-42)

or

There is nothing simple and persistent in the life of Helen/except her soft, silky hair(1.58-63).

The love stories of Laila and that of Maimun get fresh interpretations in a narrative form where the narrator of Maimun's tale addresses Laila and exposes ironically how the 20th century is a more horrible place for a girl to live with the feelings of love. Thus in the whole discourse of *Bhijaki Vahi*, one perceives that the narrator behind all these narrations is 'a self' that fragments itself into different figures and personas and, in an empathetic form, restructures it into a unified whole.

Though *Bhijaki Vahi* received the reputed Sahitya Akademi Award in Marathi, the book was received silently due to its vast range of references. Allusive in nature, the narrative of the text became a complex phenomenon. It was thought that Kolatkar assumed a particular class of Marathi readers for this text. But when one perceives the twofold narrative structure of *Bhijaki Vahi*, one understands that the allusions and references do not stand as the obstacle but become the signposts that lead toward Kolatkar's aesthetics. Like the thread of inter-textuality, the twofold layers of narration enrich the total discourse of *Bhijaki Vahi*. At one level, there is a dialogic form in which the first-person narrator tells her tale, and at another and more important story, there is the narration of the 'poet-narrator' leading the whole discourse to its metaphysical ground. The preceding lines weave the narrative structures through the poems 'Ashru', "Rabia," and "Kim" and merge into the narrative of the last poem 'Shevatacha Ashru' ('The Last Tear'); in between echo the voices of various figures resounding the different modes of subversion connoting the paradox of unity in diversity. One may or may not know the myth of Appala or Hypatia, but one can relate them to mundane, day-to-day reality and find such modes of exploitation in the present world. By collocating them in our times, Kolatkar intends to vocalize their songs of sorrow and make them a part of our consciousness. He does not simply state their world but desires to perceive it by every commoner who he thinks is capable of perceiving the

river of their tears and who may become one with the river of grief. It is dissolution of one's voice into multiplicity, a dismemberment of the self in the dream of multiple recreations that Kolatkar intends to achieve through the narrative of *Bhijaki Vahi*. In a very artistic manner, he conflates the poem's content and form and, through the multiple fragments of poems, tries to build a new way of 'being of a poem'. It is complex but a well-conceived phenomenon in the age-long poetic tradition to which Kolatkar claims his legacy. This is the nature of Kolatkar's poetry, his idea about the status and function of poetry in the third millennium. Hence, it appears very perceptive when one reads the introductory lines of *Bhijaki Vahi*, where Kolatkar, in an invocative form, expresses and very earnestly:

Do not keep my notebook dry/let it be soaked/let its ink explode/ let the letters dissolve /let the poems turn to pulp / let them rediscover /in the milk of buffalos that graze at the bank of this river" (Preface).

The lines echo and direct us toward the life of Tukaram, a very famous Indian poet of the Bhakti tradition. In the case of Tukaram, there have been popular legendary accounts regarding his poetic works. It has been told that Tukaram being a revolutionary saint poet, was considered a heretic by the upper-class society; hence to restrain his popularity among the masses, these people tried to immerse his poetry named *Gatha* (a collection of his *abhyanga*) into river *Indrayani*. Tukaram took fasting for fifteen days, and as a result, his poetry

appeared floating up the river. God blessed him, and the book remained intact despite its immersion in the water. In another version, it is mentioned that when *Gatha* was immersed in the river, all the devotee-followers of Tukaram recreated it orally by reciting it. In that way, it was preserved through the masses.

In modern times, Kolatkar intends to recast that poetic tradition and desires the dissolution of his poetry into the collective consciousness of the masses. It is the aesthetics of Bhakti poetry in which Kolatkar finds his legacy. In one of the interviews taken by Eunice de Souza, Kolatkar stated his lineage towards the tradition of Bhakti poetry. "I want to reclaim everything I consider my tradition" (qt. in Zecchini 261). In another instance, he opines about Bhakti poetry, "I can relate to it, perhaps because it's an area where some of the world's best poetry- its bhakti poetry- meets folk music. It's people's music rather than musician's music, a joyous noise, and it's for everybody" (qt. in Zecchini 263).

Kolatkar's aesthetics thus emerges from that tradition where poetry is not a fantastic work of art but the very cause of life. The poem is expressed to be merged into the social consciousness of its masses to learn the truth the poet has discovered. It denies any authoritative claim and aspires to turn and grow from the confinement of its written script to the ever-growing form of its oral version. The poet wishes the fragmenting of these tales told into *Bhijaki Vahi* and gets it reinvented with its

pinching truth into different other poets and personas. At the end of this poetry collection, he surrenders to the very "Womanhood, 'the primeval Mother addressing 'Vishwatmake') and states:

*O' Mother Creator,

Let all the dirt get cleaned from your eyes... and let this dirty world flood away from your cry. Once this dirt of the world is removed from your eyes, there will be left the last year, a pure one, preserve it in your eyes that would help you create a new world(Shevatacha Ashru 38-48)

Though highly crafted and allusive, the narrative of Bhijaki Vahi reveals the core truth of human civilization that transcends the cultural and contextual boundaries and puts forth an age-long cry of 'Womanhood' that needs to be perceived by the collective consciousness of human generations. Like any great poet, Kolatkar intends to create his poetic world that highlights a locale where poetry and the community stand inseparably, weaving together the thread of art and society.

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How to cite this article?

Dr.Shubhangi Nitin Jarandikar " Arun Kolatkar's Aesthetics of Dissolution and a Reading of Bhijaki Vahi", Research Journal Of English(RJOE)7 (2), PP: 481-487,2022, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.65>