RE-READING ARUN KOLATKAR: A STUDY IN ORNATENESS

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INTRODUCTION:

Arun Kolatkar is somehow different from other Indian English poets both in terms of images and music in his poetry. As a believer of objective co-relative, a theory of T.S.Eliot, he also co-relates his images with feelings and emotions that he finds in them. His images are not fully ornamental like Tennyson but those are conceptual. His images and his use of rhetoric like alliteration suggest a journey towards the ultimate truth that he wants to explore. His images are not natural but concrete and abstract. It is also true that his use of imagery and sometimes different sound and musical elements are unique and in this case he is noteworthy for his contribution to Indian English poetry.

Before starting the discussion of Arun Kolatkar’s use of imagery in his poems, a short definition is needed about imagery. Actually imagery is nothing but pictures which are made from words and sometimes simile, metaphor and other phrases are needed to convey images. C.D.Lewis aptly says, “An epithet, a metaphor, a simile may create an image; or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or a passage on the face of it purely descriptive, but conveying to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality.” (Lewis, 4). It is also necessary to quote what The Imagist poets say about imagery. They lay down six rules or characteristics, “six principles for themselves to practice- (1) to use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly exact, not merely the decorative word; (2) to create new rhythm- as the expressions of new moods and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods, insisting on the use of free verse for the sake of liberty and individuality; (3) to allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject; (4) to present an image in order to avoid vague generalities; (5) to produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite and (6) to believe the concentration in the very essence of poetry.” (Louis Untermeyer, 305). Arun Kolatkar too some extent follows these in his poetry and his imagery confirms his place among immortal Indian English Poets.

Arun Kolatkar uses a lot of images in his poetry and they all are used for specific purpose. One can agree totally what L.S.Deshpande says about him and his use of imagery, “says “Arun Kolatkar’s ‘Jejuri’ is a poem remarkable in many ways; it is complex in terms of theme, characterization and imagery. Its structure is as much symbolic as and mythological and naturalistic. Its most striking qualities are ambiguity and multi violence, the relating to its tone
and the other to its meaning. But what impress one, at the very outset, is its miraculous. The poem lore tends to be special, but is not actually so. It is neither theistic not atheistic in tone as unfolded at times in our study of its diction also, style, and imagery.” (Deshpande, 25)

‘The Bus’, the opening poem of Jejuri provides many images. Here his use of imagery is concrete and mixture of living and non living elements. The bus is heading towards Jejuri and the bus is full of passengers. Some of them are pilgrims. They are going to that temple to offer worship. While some are going only to visit the place with a mind divided between tradition and modernism. There two passengers sit opposite, an old man and the narrator. The narrator sees his own reflection in the old man’s glasses of spectacles. Even natural elements are seen in this poem. So a close reading shows that here Kolatkar employs so many images like cold wind, passengers, old man, the sun, spectacles, the bus and many more. Here are some lines which show this:

“A cold wind keeps whipping
and slapping a corner of the tarpaulin
… Your own divided face in a pair of glasses
on an old man’s nose
…outside, the sun has risen quietly
… The bus seems to change direction.” (The Bus)

His ‘A Scratch’ gives us the image of a murdered wife of Khandoba. The big rock in the poem is actually the wife of Khandoba as Khandoba kills her in a fit of anger. The rock is compared with the bedroom for its shape. So many images like stone, murdered wife, bedrooms are found here along with the image of god and corn:

“there is no crop
other than god
… that giant hunk of rock
the size of a bedroom
is Khandoba’s wife turned to stone.” (A Scratch)

Images of god is seen in his ‘A Low Temple’, ‘Makarand’, ‘The Temple Rat’ and may other poems. In his ‘A Low Temple’, the temple is low without a high ceiling. As a result, the pilgrims are not able to see the various bronze and stone images of god. Kolatkar further describes the stone and bronze image. Apart from this imagery of light can be seen from the light emerging from the match which is lighted in order to see the statues of gods. Here the poet shows us:

“A low temple keeps its gods in the dark
you lend a matchbox to the priest
one by one the gods come to light
amused bronze. Smiling stone. Unsurprised.” (A Low Temple)
Not only this, Kolatkar also shows the images of human beings in his poems. In his ‘Woman’ he gives us the picture of woman and her doings. The poem is half serious and half mocking in tone. Here are some lines from the poem:

“a woman may coolect cats read thrillers
...a woman may name her cats
...a woman may shave her legs regularly
a woman may take up landscapes painting
a woman may poison
twenty three cockroaches.” (Woman)

An image of old woman is found in his ‘An Old Woman’. Here he shows the poor condition of woman and her ultimate efforts to earn something from the pilgrims. Here the narrator describes her face with the help of images also. These lines from the poems show:

“An old woman grabs
...And as you look on,
the cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.”

In his ‘The Priest’s Son’, he uses the images of five hills, demons, the priest’s son and the butterfly in a very beautiful way. Here when the boy is asked about his own believe about the story that he tells, he looks uncomfortable and wants to divert the narrator’s attention by seeing him a butterfly. All the images are shown here in these lines:

“these five hills
are five demons
that Khandoba killed
says the priest’s son
a young boy
who comes along as your guide
as the schools have vacations
do you really believe that story
tou ask him
...look
there is a butterfly
there.” (The Priest’s Son)

His ‘The Railway Station’ is such poem where he provides the images of station, tea stall, indicator, station dog, railway clerk and the setting sun. The indicator is a concrete image. Here the indicator is not in a position to work properly. So it is quite tough for the passenger to know the train time table. He gives the images of the station dog which is affected from skin disease
and doing penance. He also gives other images like a stall boy who throws away water on passengers’ face, images of introvert booking clerk and the sun which looks like a big wheel when it sets. Here are some lines from the poem which shows all these:

“the indicator
has turned inward
…the spirit of the place
lives inside the mangy body
of a station dog
…the young novice at the tea stall
…he exorcises you
by sprinkling dishwater in your face
…the setting sun
large as a wheel.” (The Railway Station)

Apart from these images, he uses images of animals and insects in ‘The Blue Horse’, ‘The Heart of Ruin’, ‘The Butterfly’, ‘The Pattern’ and other poems. His poems show a very beautiful reflection of animal power and importance. He shows the rampant, wild aspects of nature with the images of animals and it also helps him to discover the ultimate truth. In his ‘The Heart of Ruin’, he gives more importance to dog and it is the backward of god. So he says that the ruined temple is now the place of dog, not god. And he shows this with beautiful imagery:

“A mongrel bitch has found a place
for herself and her puppies…
The pariah puppies tumble over her.
May be they like a temple better this way.” (The Heart of Ruin)

In his ‘The Butterfly’, he shows the beauty of nature and insect. The butterfly has no future and no past. Further it does not belong to any god or myth or legend. It lives in the present and it shows the eternal life force. It shows the vivacity and vitality of life. Here Kolatkar uses imagery as:

“It’s a little yellow butterfly
It has taken these wretched hills
under its wings.” (The Butterfly)

Sometimes he uses images of animals in human being to make a comparison between them and also to satirize human beings. In his ‘The Priest’, he uses cat imagery and employs it to show the actual character and motive of the priest. Like a cat, he is ready to grab his prey, the pilgrims. Here he shows:

“a cat grin on its face
and a live, ready to eat pilgrim
held between its teeth.” (The Priest)

The discussion regarding the ornateness in Arun Kolatkar will be incomplete without the discussion of musical elements in his poetry. And he creates a fine sound and music in his poems with the use of alliteration. It means same sounding words or letters are found in his poetry. Some of those lines are:

“A cold wind keeps whipping” (TB-13)
and under his lazy lizard stone”. (TP-14-15)
a brass mouse with a broken neck”. (WS-18)
“He is free to play a flute all day”. (A&T-36)
San stroked thighs or sand stone”. (H-29)
“Sand blasted shoulders bladed with shale
“A demon a demigod
And certain ceremonies connected
The parallels of a prophecy” (TRS-56-62)
“The pariah pappies tumble over her”. (HOR -16)
“Shoots straight up
“fleeing from flint”. (HS-23)

Apart from Jejuri in his Boatride, One can easily find his use of alliteration. Here are the lines:

“The briny brunt
hurl its hunk
a gull hitched on hump
the long trial toils on.” (The Boatride)

Actually like all other postmodern poet, he uses it with purpose and it serves for different purpose in different poems. His ample use of alliteration shows his command over the language and rhetoric and it also gives his poems a musical flow and swift rhythm. In his ‘The Butterfly’, the ‘p’ sound is found four times the two lines from second stanza:

“It is pinned down to no past
it’s a pun on the present.” (The Butterfly)

CONCLUSION:

In a nutshell, it can be said that Arun Kolatkar’s poetic craftsmanship rests on his use of imagery and sound rhythm. He uses different images freely and deliberately and his use of imagery aptly fits with his poems. He does not use those like others only to enrich the poem but to give the poem a deeper meaning and thought. Apart from imagery, he uses alliteration in his poetry to give the poems swift flow and rhythm. He is really a poet par excellence as he does all these very successfully and also these give his poem depth in thought and meaning.
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