



## Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita: Modernity and Stylistics

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**Abstract:** Arun Kolatkar, a major poetic voice of Indian poetic scene, a bilingual poet who prolifically composed in Marathi and in English, an important translator of saint poets like Tukaram and Janabai, self- translator of phenomenal potential started writing poetry in the decade of fifties. His first collection of poems in Marathi titled “Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita” came out in 1977. Seventy-three poems have been compiled in this first collection. Out of these, 40-50 poems of first half are extremely complex and elusive. These are the very poems which set up Kolatkar’s image as exceedingly elusive poet in Marathi. Critics and readership of the time made every attempt to understand the ins and outs for the elusiveness of his poems. At the same time Kolatkar proved to be the first modern poet in every sense on the canvas of Marathi Poetry. Linguistically, he is still the most experimental poet in Marathi. The article attempts to study various aspects of modernity and stylistics of the poems in this first collection, in the context of the contemporary literary scene, the readership and the politics of taste of the time of the sixties, which proved instrumental for the cold reception of these really valuable bunch of poems which in several ways could set the tone and trend of Marathi Poetry.

**Keywords:** Modernity, stylistics, imagery, criticism, readership, Marathi poetry.

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Kolatkar’s early poetry is a challenge to criticism, readership and world of poetry in Marathi. He repudiates all the established norms about what poetry is and hence it becomes difficult to acquire experience of his poems, even for a trained readership. In order to understand any of his poems, it is necessary to know what tradition they belong to. His poetry is so radical that it is difficult to trace back such a tradition in Marathi literature. It is often said that these poems have certain native features. Indeed, he uses the rhythm of folk songs and themes from folk stories for many of his poems. Equally, he uses the traditional poetic forms in Marathi like ‘*ovi*’ and ‘*Abhang*’, conventionally the forms of religious expression, with immensely secular content, for many of his poems. He practices these forms in a modern context with a lot of experimentation. They are combined with modernist techniques of composition, which are borrowed from the world poetry, of which he was an assiduous reader. His conscious attention to the traditions of literature in his own language and the other languages, mainly through English translations made him local and global simultaneously. His poems deal with the modern thematic material in a language which is defined anew to address the requirements of contemporary expression.

The tradition of Marathi poetry (excluding *bhakti* (saint) poetry) belongs to romantic, humanistic mode. The seeds of the romantic expression in post British Marathi poetry could be traced back into the English education in India which brought romantic literature in India through the canonical syllabi, that resulted into adopting the British forms and modes of expression in Indian regional languages. This romantic tradition was first challenged by B.S. Mardhekar. Romantic humanist world view believes in the ideal relationship between the

individual, nature and the universe. It proclaims oneness of all of them and expectantly believes in romantic values. Mardhekar denies romanticism in poetry but his relations with humanism remained still intact. His poetry depicts his own anxiety over loss of values. But the later poets of modernist tradition, Sarang and Kolatkar cut themselves off from ruins of humanism. Mardhekar's poems show individualistic world view. But his individual belongs to a liberal humanist tradition, which differs from the modernist individual of Chitre, Sarang and Kolatkar. Secondly, though Mardhekar denies romanticism still the idea that the poem as a manifestation of poet's personality subsists. Kolatkar's poetry throws away this idea which was a shock for the tradition of Marathi poetry which always tried to find out poet's personality in his poems. Thus, the myth of Mardhekar being the first Modern poet in Marathi could be easily debunk. But the myth has created an inadequate notion of Modernity among the Marathi critics and readership which could not grasp the profundity of 'the modern' which Kolatkar practiced in his poems.

Themes of Kolatkar's early poems are centered round dehumanization of individual in metropolitan cities, aggressiveness of objects and human inaction, helplessness, impairment, obstruction, threat, castration, absurdity of human life, threatening consciousness of death, loss of personality, loss of self, etc. Mardhekar's poetry does express these themes but it retains certain emotional point of view which Kolatkar's poetry entirely denies. His poetry is marked by scarcity of everything. This 'scarceness' and 'absence' makes him radically different from Mardhekar. It achieves an extreme pole of individualism.

It denies all existing norms of what a poem should be which poses problems about how to experience the poetry of Kolatkar. Vilas Sarang (Sarang:2007) opines that one has to get acquainted with the modernist tradition of poetry in the western languages (French and English) and internalize the modernist aesthetics before reading Kolatkar. Directing towards the contemporary situation of critics and readership in contemporary Marathi literary world, Sarang points out that such a conversant approach is hard to find among Marathi readership because it still believes that Mardhekar brought modernism in Marathi. Truly speaking, though Mardhekar composed revolutionary poetry during his time, his poetry does not clearly express the modern aesthetics in true sense of the term. The confusion in comprehending Kolatkar occurs mainly because of the undue reliance on Mardhekar for the understanding of modernist worldview. Mardhekar's poetry does not confirm to the French imagist or Eliot's surrealist tradition. There are two important maxims of modernist aesthetics: first the poetry should not be logically coherent; it should not be meant to paraphrase and secondly: should not 'tell' but 'show'. As Archibald MacLeish in his *Ars Poetica* (MacLeish:1926,1928) says: 'A poem should not Mean but be.'

Kolatkar depicts the difficulty and destruction in modern life in a picturesque and graphic manner. He could achieve it through pungent irony and stark objectivity which completely abolished the sentimental and the subjective. Both these features mark his relationship with western modernism. His comic vision and humor make his irony more intense. Touch of humor makes self - mockery possible. The humane touch that we see in irony of Mardhekar is completely wiped out from Kolatkar's poetry, consequently it becomes more sinister and grotesque. Kolatkar's humor is often directed towards the self and he mocks the ways and means of his own life, making self-derision becomes an instrument of his humor. The poems in a collection titled '*Hospital Poems*', '*Charitra*', '*Kay danger wara sutlaya*' are examples of such humor and self -mockery.

Objectivity is a unique characteristic of Kolatkar. It has no parallels in Marathi poetry. It is extreme and radical. It shows no relation with Marathi poetic tradition. It has no links with the classical objectivity of Marathi poets like Tambe, Rame or Bee. Ashok Kelkar (Kelkar:1998) calls his objectivity fresh though it is marked by emotional dryness, coldness in human relations which dissociates it from saint poetry. In his views, other modern Marathi poets except Vilas Sarang displays such emotional coldness. This stark objectivity has certainly caused some aesthetic problems for Marathi readers who are not acquainted with other traditions of world poetry. Because of such objectivity he can write each poem a new. It becomes difficult to relate one poem with the other and make a fixed judgment about his poetic sensibility. He chooses his words meticulously and constructs a structure which amputates the poet's personality. Poem is an image expressing life through images which in itself is not acute reality but in some way, relates to the world and its realities. His poetry creates unprecedented distance between the poet and his poetry. The idiosyncratic treatment of the realities of life in his poetry brings a complete metamorphosis in the existing notion of contemporary Marathi poetry.

Critics like Chandrakant Patil (Patil:1995) and Vasant Patankar (Patankar: 1998) complain that Kolatkar meticulously constructs a structure that surprises the reader. Reading of his poetry provides a kind of intellectual pleasure of solving a riddle. But beyond the construction of structure, his poetry seems to have no other intention. The very end is to surprise the reader by such a closed structure and tire him with the intellectual exercise in attempt to comprehend it. There seems to appear no other end or a prominent world view beyond this. Few poems of his first collection partly approve this argument. Despite these strictures, one should not neglect the fact that the thematic interests of the poet take the reader beyond the outer form and make him agitated. Sometimes these interests are so serious and valuable that they achieve the metaphysical stature. Each of his poems and the whole of his poetry make a strong statement about the universal human condition. The difficulty of understanding his poems on the part of critics and readers results mainly due to the ignorance of strategies that he uses. It demands a profound and comprehensive acquaintance with varied trends of poetry in the world literature. He does concentrate on form but the form is not the ultimate end like formalist poets. Kolatkar experiments with lines, stanzas, metaphors and metonymy at various levels. Personification in his poems is of a unique type. It shows its relations with surrealist tradition. His experimentation gets expressed in different forms. He uses various media techniques, combines them and creates things anew. It provides a pictorial quality to his poetry. The influence of French symbolist poets, surrealist techniques and entirely personal use of symbols make his poetry even more elusive.

As Prakash Deshpande Kejkar (Deshpande-Kejkar:1998) opines, "Kolatkars poetry is a comprehensive, deep and angry expression of metropolis sensibility. He has considerably improved the circumference of metropolis sensibility that first found its expression in Mardhekar. He removed from it the reference of social consciousness and conventional spiritualism. Dashing away the element of belief in Mardhekar's poetry, he scatters the element of heterodoxy thorough out his poems. It projects directly and intensely the frightful formidable nature of metropolis culture. The direct expression of dehumanized, inhuman, unsafe, boring, economically exploited world of people living in mega cities becomes pungently satirical due to his typical ironic style."<sup>5</sup>

Kolatkár's poetry is saturated with the existence of inanimate objects. They seem to have established their own world parallel to human world and try to overpower it. They attempt every act which otherwise may be possible only to human beings just like a building locks the door and goes to meet her lover, burning matchstick wakes up in a circle made by cup of tea on the table, first drop of the wax makes a burning signature, flame of a candle prepares to contest the election, walls blackmail, ring winks etc. Inanimate objects cross their limits, perform their actions beyond their own world, and become active and shake the static world of humans. Their actions are marked by speed and violence. They are aggressive and in a mood of fight. They intend to attack, kill, and fall up on fiercely, threaten the world of human beings and so on. A threatening and destructive violence marked by the world of objects in Kolatkár's poems shake his readers completely. These objects seem to end the humanity of human beings. This attack of inanimate over animate (Human) is fearful. Even the poet seems to get involved in this attack over the human, which in a way is attack on his own self. Therefore, in a poem like '*Anna*' (Food), he has chewed and thrown many dentists away, his shirt is lost in his own body, his wrist takes a bite of the watch, and the poet narrator nibbles his own intestines, digests his lips and tongue and then laughs freely. The self - assassin and the fear of the self is the result of all vengeful powers that are set to end the humanity.

Along with the inanimate objects, there is a parallel, world of non- human beings, of animals in his poetry. Animals act like human beings, leopards drink the moonshine, lizards on the wall display the '*kundali*' i.e. the horoscope, spider in a corner observes the masturbation, the bedbugs irritate lustful couples, flee ties a '*rakhi*' to a loafer, and these actions of animals are a check to human world. Apart from two references i.e. 'siblings of snakes weave their necks and watch you' and 'see those two crabs wait and watch you patiently', the animal world, as compared to the world of objects is not very violent. It challenges the human world indirectly. But the world of objects cause harm to the animals as well. As a result, the animals appear powerless and reluctant to act. Hence, we come across images like highbrow camel, high- heeled ostrich, spectacled leopard, lions congealed in carpet, goat of glass, crooked dove, bad omen cat, the slavish horse with his mouth watering for carrots, mare that died on a battlefield' two unconscious healthy lions, sluggish dog near the heap of waste and an ox that dies in the temple which mark the degradation of animal world. The destructive attack of the world of objects is intended to all living beings. The world of animals finds no refuge out of it. Even animals become lame before the violence of objects. On the background of castration of animal power, the destruction of humanity stands even more fearful / fierce. The de- humanization of human beings on the background of the violent attack of the objects and loss of power in the animal world is an important motif in the poetry of Kolatkár. In the world of human beings, the subtraction of humanity has taken up speed and the humanity, humane qualities are being insulted. The status of man as man has been deteriorated to the extent that it has no place with animals and even the objects have overpowered him. His manliness, his spirit and even the minimum respect has been looted from him. Such a stark depiction of dehumanization is the unique feature of Kolatkár's poetry.

The motif of dehumanization is dominant in Kolatkár's narrative poems as well. The poems that mainly tell stories delineate a theme of journey but the journey that leads to death. This is the journey that celebrates the death of humanity. Kolatkár does not attempt to philosophize death. He does not celebrate vain heroism about treatment of death or does

not even try to escape from it. He merely accepts it with indifference as one of the essentials of human life. The consciousness of dehumanization becomes more effective due to ironic point to view that the poet adopts. His irony sometimes gets expressed out of pure humor and his humor is often marked by cruelty. His humor and cruelty make him capable to accept the hard truths of life with conventional wisdom. His irony thus is marked by multiple dimensions; likewise, its range is wide. It is driven towards all the symbols of humanity. In images 'a poem by a professor', 'Helen painted by a painter', 'a map of India', and in a statement like what is there in India ('*Indiamen rakha he kya hain?*'), the arts like painting and poetry or the idea of the nation and nationality become the target of his irony. Women equally turn out to be but of fun in images like a 'woman that urinates in a dark'. Sometimes, his irony gets struck on himself. This self -derision gets starker in hospital poems. Self-derision is the real strength of Kolatkar's irony. The destructive process of dehumanization on one hand and a consistent vicinity of death provide a serious background to his irony.

Just like his irony, Kolatkar's treatment of sex instinct in his poems is unique one. Similar to romantics, he does not try to romanticize sex instinct or like realists; he avoids the cheap exposition of the same. There are very few references in his poetry that will appear obscene to middleclass taste. Even in these references we find characteristic ease and honesty instead of a cheap presentation. The instinct of sex is beyond the reach of his characters and therefore they grow helpless.

For a poetry that depicts a deterioration of modern civilization, it is required to use the linguistic style suitable for the same. 'Stylistics' is the analysis of literary style with the help of linguistic tools. It is an applied criticism but it does not mechanically impose extra literary principles and literary theory on a literary work. The literary principles already exist during the reading, interpretation and evaluation of a literary work. Stylistic criticism can evolve by making these linguistic principles more evocative through scientific implementation. One of the important features of modern literature is the experimentation on the level of language. Symbolist movement of 19<sup>th</sup> century in European literature provided linguistic base to modernism. European modern writers like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were influenced by French symbolists. Symbolist writers emphasized on expression of personal and subconscious processes of human mind through linguistic symbols and images. The connotative, implied levels of meaning became more important for them. They used the language, different from day to day uses, which was subtle and ambiguous implying multiple levels of meaning, and had fragmented syntax as compared to the traditional uses of language. The modernist literature hence is characterized by intense linguistic trialing. Due to intrinsic nature of modern literature, it becomes necessary to focus on linguistic organization of a literary work. Like all avant` grade writing, Kolatkar's poetry is extremely experimental on technical and linguistic levels. Kolatkar deviates from each and every linguistic item, words and word forms which further appear in an altogether new context not just by changing their places but by referring to new semantic context which had not been experienced so far. The usages and the lexicon which otherwise is not found in poetry, forms an integral part of Kolatkar's writing. The words, phrases and sentences do not show the conventional correspondence with each other. All this is done with subtle touch of irony and an intrinsic semantic rhythm. He attempts many experiments with rhythm of language. The traditions of folk literature and *Bhakti* literature are used in new context with radical experimentation. Uses of various dialects of Marathi and Bombay Hindi which is a pidgin

used on the streets of Mumbai are unique in history of Marathi poetry. He slashes all the conventional norms of lyric poetry popular in his time and exploited new possibilities of language for poetic uses. His proximity with painting and commercial graphic designing made him efficacious in bringing in graphic details and pictorial quality to his poetry. Use of prose helps him make his poetry dramatic and communicative in nature.

As Ravindra Kimbahune (Kimbahune: 1993) observes, “Kolatkār’s poetry utilizes minimum words and constructs a closed structure. He does not give chance to verbosity and waste of words. Meticulous selection of words and phrases in order to express given context is the unique feature of his poetry.” His poetry is characterized by saturation of images and objectivity which results from the deliberate removal of sentimental and abstract language. It is a result of subtle observation and deep and genuine sense of humor. He completely avoids the emotional side of words and constructs his poetic world which is the hallmark of his poetic genius. Out of sportive exaggeration, novel word formation, pairs of words created out of deviation of rhythmic words, irony, subtle and precise observation which is result of intellectualization, detailed account of pertinent references from history and scriptures and controlled word play, he depicts the modern sensibility. He keeps his focus changing by mixing the spot on visuals. It does not even get obstructed by the norms / scheme he himself has created. Hence, each of his poems is completely different from the earlier and challenges the capacities of its reader.

It is interesting to study the metamorphosis of first-person pronoun ‘I’ in Kolatkār’s poems. With mere exception of the narrator of ‘main manager ko bola’, all his narrators are unable to act. They are more acted upon than acting. Instead of men being active, actions happen to them. A poem, like ‘Biograph’, a pair in ‘black poems’, loafer in ‘Irani’, narrator of ‘new year day’, ‘I’ of ‘Hospital poems’, all have lost their will to act. On the locale of inaction of his characters, the world of objects is markedly active and aggressive. On observing the expert use of symbolist and surrealist techniques, his poetry appears to be a fresh and ultra - modern instance of personification. Loss of self, tension, threat, fruitlessness, loneliness, the powerless pale biographies that fall prey to a flow of time and are forgotten soon, are the favorite themes of Kolatkār. He makes an effective and motivated use of different techniques to depict helplessness of human existence. Instead of making candid statements about human existence, he expresses the universal state of human existence with graphic imagery and concrete lexicon. His poetry points towards the complex state of being in modernist lifestyle.

The most important feature of Kolatkār’s poetry to Manohar Oak, “Is his unique way of using language. He deconstructs all the elements of language of which it is made. He removes idioms, old songs, myth and folk stories from their conventional semantic circumference, provide it a new sphere of meaning and instigates an explosion of meaning out of it. He uses new, creative words and word forms, finds out novel symbols suitable for his themes and applies an architectural method of composition. His being a commercial graphic designer has obviously brought media techniques, visual impact, pictorial and graphic quality to his poems.” (Oak:1998)

Treatment of first-person narrative ‘I’ in Kolatkār’s poetry is highly unconventional. His ‘I’ does not appear as the owner of meaning of theme but makes its presence known through the application of media techniques. The dialectic of his poems synchronizes the tunes of varied texts, implements the techniques of visual media, brings in the use of varied

linguistic dialects and objectively brings forth the patchwork of the whole shebang, keeping the integrity of the self away from the sphere of the poem. Thus, 'I' of his poems has become ambiguous. The relationship between 'self' and 'other' is equally ambiguous. Often the 'other' is nothing but one of the aspects of the 'self'.

Kolatkars poetry expects a reader who is well versed with the systems of conventional linguistic uses and that of literary uses. Only such reader could better understand how Kolatkar creates a wonderful surprising world through unconventional linguistic uses. As Milind Malshe (Malshe:1998) opines, "One of the ways to analyze Kolatkar's language may be study of lexical patterns. The nouns that Kolatkar uses belong to different spheres of human experience. As he enlists them, they are related to nature, animals, social and historical, politics and war, cultural-mythical, sex and sex instinct, human body, health and death, art, versification and literature, domestic, modern city life, objects and people, architecture etc. The list easily enables the reader to guess about his themes and consciousness of Kolatkar as a poet. For e.g. it markedly gives less importance to emotions and feelings to physical instinct, love is hardly found while sexuality is dominant, nature imagery easily comes along with images of modern city life." Along with study of nouns, it is interesting to study the objectives who qualify these nouns. The linguistic system of any language regulates the use of nouns and objectives. If the noun is an object, the adjective has to be a word which tells some feature of that object and if the noun is a person the adjective should be a word which properly qualifies that person. Kolatkar often deviates from this rule. The adjectives proper to person are attributed to objects and vice versa. Thus, the nouns are connected to new sphere of experience. *Imaret (Building) is janmajat and payalu* - one that is born with legs foremost. Here both the words are adjectives proper to plus human nouns. Even the pairs like '*Behadda namatra ghoda*', '*prakhar utter*', '*sarvabhaum ghanata*', '*phasavi zudpe*', '*narmansabhakashak ashru*', '*kesal rhudaye*', '*bewarsi trupti*', '*mulabhut pinjara*', '*trasik bichana*', '*lachar zop*', '*narali kolokh*', '*panthal wel*', '*sasmit kach*', '*vidrup nishkarsha*', '*prakashache karja*', '*hasri aag*', '*wedache table*' etc. (Extremely noble horse, Intense answer, sovereign density, deceptive bushes, tears of flesh, hairy heart, wasteful satisfaction, basic cage, irritated bed, helpless sleep, coconut darkness, wetland time, smiling glasses, ugly conclusion, debt of light, laughing fire, ad table etc.) make the point even more clear.

Kolatkar's linguistic experiments are found in relations of two nouns with each other. These relations may be in terms of simile (as, like) or in terms of metaphor (one is other). He uses similes like '*ghodyacha ugam ani vikas gudh cancersarkha*', '*ghodyachay tapche bol bhakartukadyaitake dhaldhalit*', '*sphotak cigarettepramane niragas disnari nani*' etc. His metaphors like, '*abhavacha sap*', '*yamkaya tapa*', '*nesucha satyagraha*', '*dishechi chindhi*', '*nirvanichi ghuha*', '*aghatache tel*' '*bairagipanacha jamav*', '*alinganchi hodi*', '*waryachi bote*', '*cheharyachi bajaraphet*', '*nakshatrache vriksha*', '*khaplichi papni*', '*jakhameche dole*', '*dolyanche zudup*' etc. are highly unconventional. He deviates from the rules that regulate the relationship between nouns and verbs. For e.g. in phrases like '*Imaratine mala vicharle*', '*imarat abhisarika zali*', '*ghodyachya hadamansane matishi droha patkarlela*', '*chinnila pahila kombha phutato ritepanacha*', '*pakshi mazya pathiwar gite gondato*', '*mi tuzi hatya hoto*', '*maza pran deshantar karto*', '*building zulayala lagte*', '*hanger zadap ghalatil*' etc. the normal concord between noun and adjectives is violated, by establishing new relationship between them. Through such deviations on various levels, Kolatkar creates an unconventional and surreal world. While discussing Kolatkar's poetry stylistically we

come across some of the features that mark the individual style of the poet. Style may not just connote linguistic style, it includes the way poet perceives the world, and his unique way of expressing the variety of motives and the techniques he uses to express them. All these aspects decide the poet's individual style.

For a specific time phase, a common form of style becomes a standard and most of the literary writers experience their world within the parameters of available stylistic conventions. But for some poets, due to novelty of their experiences, it becomes impossible to express themselves within constraints of conventional style. Hence, they create a new style by breaking and making rules, with new permutations and combinations, deviations and creations on various levels. Kolatkar does all these things at extreme level and hence remains one of the most modern and stylistically phenomenal poets in Marathi Literature.

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