

Navigating Faith, Perception, and Identity in Arun Kolatkar's "The Bus"

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Abstract

Arun Kolatkar's poem "The Bus" frames a pilgrimage journey as a site of philosophical, social, and spiritual conflict. The pilgrimage setting is used to critique modern Indian society. This paper examines some of the interconnected themes identified in the poem: the bus as a metaphor for postcolonial state failure and collective spiritual blindness; caste identity and the old pilgrim's socially conditioned role; the liminal nature of the journey (ritual pilgrimage versus personal quest); the effect of the second-person narrative voice on subjectivity; and the poem's sensory imagery as philosophical commentary. Analysing the different metaphors and motifs, such as the state transport bus, the castemark, and the "sawed off" sunbeam used in the poem as a backbone, this study integrates critical perspectives from various thinkers and global theorists. The analysis delves deep into the poem's symbolism, the speaker's subjective experience, and its satirical commentary on societal and religious practices. It tries to examine the mundane journey of "The Bus" as a critique of postcolonial India: the dilapidated bus and its dark tarpaulin symbolize a failed state and "blind" faith, the castemark inscribes caste-conditioned identity, and the journey's dissonant imagery. The fragmented second-person oration of the poem engages the readers in its ideological matrix. In sum, the poem's irony-laden pilgrimage exposes the confrontation of tradition and modernity in contemporary India, inviting readers to become co-creators of meaning.

Keywords: Indian Poetry, Spiritualism, Skepticism

Introduction

Arun Kolatkar is one of the prominent figures in Indian English poetry. He is well known and celebrated for his distinctive voice and extensive body of work in both English and Marathi. His poetic style is characterized by sharp observation, minimalistic language, and a surrealist sensibility that adeptly captures the inherent paradoxes of Indian life. He is one of only two Indian poets, alongside Kabir, to be featured on the New York Review of Books' World Classics titles. His contributions and association with the modernist movement in Indian English poetry, as well as the 'little magazine movement' in Marathi, during the 1950s and 1960s have cemented his place as an innovative and influential voice.

"Jejuri," a sequence of 31 poems that chronicle Kolatkar's visit to the pilgrimage city of Jejuri in Maharashtra, India. It was first published in 1974 and subsequently issued in book form in 1976. 'Jejuri' attracted significant critical acclaim and won the prestigious Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977. "The Bus" is a key poem from this renowned collection.

The Bus as State Failure and Spiritual Blindness

The poem opens with a description of a state transport bus. The readers get to know about the wretched

condition of the bus. There are no proper windows, and tarpaulin flaps cover them. The passengers could not see the outside landscape. So, there is no aesthetic pleasure for the passengers to enjoy. This description of the dilapidated condition of the state transport bus is not just coincidental. It holds more than that. In a way, the passengers are blinded by the state. They can't have the sensory pleasure of seeing through the window. This also indicates the role of society and religion, which blinds people to believe in such traditions. But their suffering is not just limited to how they see or comprehend things with their own eyes. The cold wind and rain keep them busy, making the presence of the natural elements felt by continually slapping at their elbow. This imagery serves as a constant reminder of the reality and the condition of life they are in right now. Though the pilgrimage is supposed to take them beyond natural and mundane attachment, offering a divine experience, still, they aren't able to transcend themselves. They can't see the outside world but feel it; something is there. All covered up bus exposes the failure of state machinery in keeping the bus in its proper functional condition. It forces the common people or passengers of the bus to ignore these worldly mundane affairs and look beyond, search for the ultimate reality or the alternate reality. These pilgrims, though full of inconveniences they are willing to take it. Perhaps the state will use all its propaganda machinery to convince the people to take on such a pilgrimage and look for a better life in the alternate reality or the afterlife. The buttoned-down flaps may have blinded the senses of the old man, as usually does. Still, the cold wind is whipping and slapping as the reasoning and logic do to the blind faith.

In Foucauldian terms, the bus is also a machine of power/knowledge. Foucault famously wrote that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge". The state bus, "as an ideological state apparatus" (in Althusser's sense), shapes the pilgrims' experiences by limiting what they can see and know. Althusser argues that ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects" by "hailing" them so they respond as a social type. Kolatkar's bus addresses the traveler as "you", an anonymous everyman, transforming the young skeptic into a generic pilgrim-subject. While riding the state bus to a temple, the narrator becomes an involuntary subject of cultural ideology: he must share the space of ritual, even as he doubts its validity. Thus, the vehicle itself enforces the old social order – it is the state exerting control over both space and belief.

The motif of blindness recurs. The dark journey (at night) leaves little light inside; when dawn finally arrives, its ray is "sawed off" and "aims through an eyelet," only to briefly splash on the old man's glasses. The sun's gentle beam suggests enlightenment, but it is incomplete ("sawed off"), and its beam "shoots at the old man's glasses," metaphorically illuminating the barrier. Meanwhile, the protagonist sees only himself: "your own divided face in the pair of glasses on an old man's nose is all the countryside you get to see." Kolatkar, therefore, links the bus's physical darkness with ideological blindness: the only "light" the young man perceives is his own reflected face, split and distorted. The state and tradition make the truth invisible. Overall, the bus is a closed system that carries blind faith around town—a relic of a failing state system that both literally and figuratively blocks sight. Its journey lacks direction, and its purpose is unclear, much like the unexamined faith of its passengers.

Caste and the Pilgrim's Conditioned Identity

On the other hand, society encourages one to take up these pilgrimages. Which symbolises the ritualistic aspect of religion or the religion itself. Society conditions someone to go on such journeys. And they do follow the tradition to keep them intact and socialized in society. There are more rewards in following the traditions and rituals. Someone like that old man in the poem is supposed to take up the journey. Society

at large expects such adherence from its people. He may not get the same respect or courtesy if he doesn't do the pilgrimage.

It is also very interesting that the narrator has only noticed a few details about the old man, like his age, glasses, and the caste mark on his forehead. The old age and the caste mark, both of them are very closely related to the orthodox tradition and culture. The speaker never talks about the other aspects of the old man. For instance, what clothes the old man may be wearing. Either the caste mark representative of a higher caste and subsequently the wealth and status attached to it, or the old man may be so poor that his caste mark is the only possession he has. But that one caste mark is very important for the old man, and also for the speaker, reinforcing Omvedt's observation that hierarchies persist even in secular settings. Others may question his choice of wearing caste marks, but for him, it's a marker of identity and uniqueness. It makes him stand out from the rest. Bearing the caste mark on his forehead, he becomes noticeable. For the old man, caste marks hold special importance, but the inquisitive speaker wanted to go beyond the caste mark and understand the nuances behind such practices.

In Indian society, caste plays a very crucial role in shaping the overall lifestyle of an individual. From worshipping to everyday life, whatever a person does, eats, or wears has something to do with caste. Either restricting or dictating those actions. These lifestyle practices also differentiate from one another. A society that has so much history behind it, it is very obvious that these caste groups and people belonging to these groups would try their best to uphold the sanctity of their caste. In a way, it is a compulsion also, a duty for them. It is quite understandable why the narrator has given such importance to the caste mark. Ambedkar's insights, although not quoted directly here, resonate: he insisted that caste is maintained by religious custom, and that no genuine spiritual progress occurs without castes' annihilation. The poem dramatizes this: the old man's caste-bound devotion leads to a hollow ritual rather than true insight.

Finally, the state transport bus carries pilgrims of all castes, yet the old man's caste-mark stands out. The irony of a secular vehicle serving a religious hierarchy. The state can move the people, still the old caste order persists within it. Kolatkar subtly indicts both: the state is too corrupt to reform itself, and society remains blind to inequality. The old man's identity, ordained by tradition, epitomizes what Ranjit Hoskote calls the "bilingual Indian" – rooted in tradition yet confronted by modernity. Ultimately, caste in "The Bus" is not just background; it is a constitutive element of the protagonist's journey and the poem's critique of Indian society.

Ritual Liminality and the Metaphysical Journey

Speaker's insistence on "a destiny" emphasizes the oldness of the old man. This may be his last pilgrimage. All his life's journey has led him to this culmination point where he has taken on this ultimate pilgrimage. There can be several reasons behind his decision to take on a pilgrimage. On the other hand, the doubtful speaker has just begun to see the other side of the world. His logic doesn't always follow a predictable path. There is something beyond what the general conception can experience and observe.

They are moving continually forward without any stoppage in their journey. Though the condition of the state transport bus was not that convincing. Still, the bus has managed to run through its pre-assigned path. This may be suggestive of the inevitability of their destiny. The old man, full of belief and hope, his life condition may have been like that bus, not in good shape. That didn't stop him from taking on the pilgrimage. The statement that the bus is continually moving forward also suggests the inevitability of time. It always moves forward, no matter what the circumstances are.

The phrase “roaring road” may be suggestive of the dilapidated condition of the road and the bus. The extra noise or the “roar” may have been caused by the not-so-well-maintained bus hitting the uneven road full of potholes. The rain may have also made the overall condition not so desirable for driving the bus. The journey wasn’t very pleasant from the beginning. Still, their hopes and beliefs are continuously pushing them forward.

There is not just that old man bearing it all; many others are also there. One of them is a person whom the narrator calls “you”. Perhaps the speaker is referring to himself as “you”. He may have wanted to come out of his old conceptions and beliefs. He is just going there to experience and observe the whole process. For him, it is not a pilgrimage but a mere journey. Thus, he has tried to make himself somewhat distant by using the second person. He is also maintaining some distance from the other passengers, like the old man. Acting as an indifferent observer, he doesn’t want to be influenced so easily. He isn’t a believer like the old man but a seeker.

Here, the pair of glasses of the old man acts as a reflection of the self and society. The speaker or the “you” is only seeing the countryside as reflected in the old man’s glasses. Perhaps the narrator is somewhat biased because he can’t see the countryside with his own eyes. His perspective or vision may have been corrupted by his linkage to the urban setting.

Narrative Voice and Identity Fragmentation

By using the second person “you”, the speaker may be indicating the readers too. He is also taking them overboard on the journey. It is also a journey for the readers, and the onus is wholly on them, on how they’re going to approach this. Do they want to make this a journey to a certain destination or make it into a pilgrimage!

For some people, that blind journey may be exhaustive and suffering. As the speaker searches for daybreak. Though there may have been a daybreak but it has not been able to illuminate the bus completely. The speaker in the poem looks at his own divided self. There is the self, one who sees how the old man is enduring everything just to reach the divine abode. The old man’s determination makes him question his conceptions. If the old man is suffering all this without even a sigh of exhaustion, there must be something that he doesn’t understand or feel. On the contrary, the other self of the speaker questions the whole process and doubts its legitimacy in making someone’s life better. He is more connected with this mundane world and its bittersweet surroundings. For him, it may be very hard to understand why the old man is doing what he is doing. The old man has already spent the greater part of his life and is more interested in the afterlife.

The narrative style positions the narrator as a detached guide and casts the reader as the protagonist. The effect is startling in poetry: we are not guided by “I” or “he” but by “you”, a pronoun that implicates every reader. Wayne Booth calls this an example of an “implied author” who speaks through a persona; here the implied author (Kolkar himself) is filtered through a second-person figure who is at once “extremely influential—almost predestinate-yet detached and removed”. Althusser’s idea of interpellation also applies: the poem literally “hails” us into a subject position. We become the traveller on the bus, the “bilingual Indian” Monohar, whose sensibility frames the experience.

Sensory Imagery as Philosophical Commentary

The aesthetic approach of the narrator also comes to the forefront when he is seen closely watching the sunbeam falling on the old man’s glasses or resting against the right temple of the driver. The speaker is

constantly looking for the daybreak or the light to extinguish the darkness of understanding about the world. The old man is rather happy to reflect and make peace with whatever is there already. As they were blinded by the tarpaulin flaps, they did not see the sun rise. The old man's urge to gain the blessings of the lord and the speaker's attempt to understand him have caused their indifference to the surrounding world. That's why they are unaware that the sun has risen quietly.

Kolatkhar fills "The Bus" with vivid sensory details that double as symbols. The symbols of tarpaulin, wind, and sunbeam are raw "material" that each reader assembles into a coherent interpretation. Kolatkhar's sensory details do more than just set a scene; they comment on knowledge and ignorance. The reflection of oppressive darkness and barriers in society critiques blind belief; the shaft of light suggests, ambiguously, that truth is present but obstructed. The poem weds the physical world to the metaphysical, showing how a bus journey can represent a journey of the mind.

Though the speaker's motif was different from the old man's, he was still not satisfied. As the bus changes direction, his face is on the other side. After overcoming all the bumpy rides, he is still unable to step into the old man's head. He did not understand why the old man was on the pilgrimage. Perhaps he is questioning the existence of such a pilgrimage. For what particular reasons might people undertake such a pilgrimage? Without looking inward or finding inner peace, most of these pilgrims are on their way to find everything outside. Maybe it is a short and simple way for some people to find spiritual well-being. Especially in a society where it is very much expected of individuals to follow traditions and rituals obediently. In this way, they are maintaining their status quo, also performing the obligatory duties. For the old man, reaching the destination is more important because only then can he show his devotion. He can expect to get the blessings of the lord in return. But for the speaker, the journey mattered most. The curious speaker always wanted to go beyond the ritualism to seek the daybreak. Where sun rays illuminate and enlighten the dark minds blinded by faith. Perhaps, the age gap and the disparity between their backgrounds prevented the speaker from "stepping inside the old man's head" and fully understanding the whole process of penance and pilgrimage.

A deeper understanding of the speaker's motif in this journey as an observer. Who has boarded life's bus with the eye of a curious passenger. He is open to every experience that this journey has to offer. He is not afraid to share and spend a journey with someone who doesn't necessarily share his views. He can even see the outside world through the old and orthodox glasses of the old man at certain times. He is also willing to endure the hardships for the causes he may not believe in entirely. He is so much different from the old man, who has outsourced his well-being to some lord living in a distant land. Rather, the speaker is all about seeking, not believing blindly in some idea or ideals.

Conclusion

Arun Kolatkhar's poem "The Bus" may appear as a deceptively simple poem. But its narrative richness lies in the contradiction and incompleteness of the poem. The spiritual landscape of postcolonial India is uncovered by scrutinizing various metaphors and symbols used in the poem. Crumbling institutions of the state, blinded pilgrimage of the citizens, all of that comes to the forefront. The caste mark of the old man constrains his world and separates him from the narrator. The seemingly sacred journey failed to yield any higher truth for the narrator. The only transformation is the coming of a mundane dawn. The second-person address brings the readers into the text's ideological play. "The Bus" leaves them in transit. Kolatkhar gives only symbols rather than answers. Like the imagery of light and darkness confronts the readers with what they can't directly see. The poem's ironic tone and fragmented narrative force readers to examine

their assumptions. Kolatkar's "The Bus" stands firm as a testament to the power of poetic vision, persuading us, the readers, to see not only what is shown but what lies beyond vision.

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