Exploring Elements of Travel Literature in Arun Kolatkar's Poetry

Pulkita Anand

Abstract

Literature cannot be compartmentalized into water tight compartment, if we try to do that we find that they blur into each other. It is difficult to define and categorize travel literature as such as it has borrowed elements from various genres and various genres reflect elements of travel literature. The travel literature explores the themes such as quest motif: quest for identity and spiritual quest too, gender and sexuality so on and so forth. History reveals that people travel since time immemorial, this helps in transportation of culture, religion, tradition, knowledge, way of living, values from one part of the world to the other. That's why we find temples, churches, mosques, pagodas in various countries. The present paper is an attempt to analyze travel writing and elements of travel literature as it is refelected in Arun Kolatkar's poetry. The paper endeavors to explain travel writing through the view of various critics. The paper presents an overview of the development of travel writing and elements of travel writing in literary works.

Key Words : History, culture, religion, tradition, knowledge, wya of living, narative techniques, quest, self realization, self - actualization

Travel writing creates worlds, it does not simply discover them. (Peter Bishop)

Travel is an inevitable part of our life. We travel form one place to another willingly or unwillingly. We meet different people while we travel, through the interaction with different people we discover and define ourselves and try to identify others. It makes us realize that how small we are in this entire creation. Traveling is very important in one's life as Mohammed said "Don't tell me how educated you are, tell me how much you travelled". Call Thompson defines it as one that "encompasses a bewildering diversity of forms, modes and itineraries" (1-2). Charles Forsdick described "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). According to Barbara Korte "the travelogue is a genre not easily demarcated" (1) she further adds "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). "It accommodates the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note and polished table talk with indiscriminate hospitality"(Raban 254)

There has been shift in the scene over the past decade with the resurgence in critical attention on travel writing genre. With the better means of transportation and facility of internet traveling has become quite affordable and convenient. Hence, it resulted in increase in number of travel writing. There are different forms of travel writing and different genres too as ethnographies, maritime narratives, memoirs, road and aviation literature, travel journalism and war reporting. Some travel writers present an authentic picture of their travel experience while others tend to manipulate and invent necessary details to suit their purpose.

In this regard it becomes pertinent to see various views of the critics on this. Casey Blanton observes that "the journey pattern is one of the most persistent forms of all narratives" (2). Hulme believes that "authors must have travelled to the places they describe. There is an ethical dimension to their claims to have made the journey they recount" (3). Korte says that, "As far as the text and its narrative techniques are concerned, there appears to be *no* essential distinction between the travel account proper and purely fictional forms of travel literature" (10) For Korte, " 'particular attaraction' of travel writing 'lies on its very heterogeneity in matters of form and content" (14).

Travelling is popular but travel writing is slowly making its way in academic arena. There is a biased attitude towards travel writing, it is not considered as serious, substantial body of literary work. In this new travel writing what matters is "not *what* we say, but *how* we see" (Birkett ix). Edward Said's *Orientalism*(1978), highlights travel writings of the nineteenth century looked at the ways in which other cultures are represented. His work shows that how the mind of the traveller gets influenced by reading the travel accounts of the travelers. Postcolonial studies have given impetus to travel studies.

Modern travel literature has its root in earlier writings where people travel and tell their tales of travel. Most famous of travel from classical times is *Odyssey* by Homer, which portrays a great journey home after Trojan War. Herodotus, in his *Histories* looms wars between various nations. *The Bible, The Mahabharata* too have references of travel enmeshed in the tale. Pilgrimage is the earliest forms of travel literature. There are many travel stories based on pilgrimage such as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* Spenser's *The Faerie Queen,* Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Marcol Polo and Mandeville were considered as the earlier travellers. The most work of early modern travel writings are by Richrad Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations* and Sir Walter Ralegh's *The Discoverie of the large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana.* Francis Bacon has given a beautiful account of travel, in his essay *Of Travel*, it is interspersed with his advice on travel.

Eighteenth century fiction writing has the grain of travel writing as in the works of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders,* Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones,* Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey.* In tone, style and narration travel writings of the period reveal picaresque traits. The genre of travel writing is not restricted to prose but it includes poetry too. Coleridge's *Kubla Khan,* Cobbett's *Rural Rides* and Bryon's *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* too wrote travel poems. Most notable work of nineteenth century is Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad Or The New Pilgrim's Progress* other writers of this period include Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor,* Stanley's *In Darkest Africa,* Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Modern travel writers include Graham Green, Auden, E. E . Cumming, D.H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Katjerine Mansfield, John Dos Passos, Evelyn Waugh, Rebecca West, George Orwell, Christopher Isherwood. These writers have enriched the genre of travel writing through their enduring work. Twentieth century travel writing emphasizes on lone traveller, which is at times considered as enriching and invaluable. William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns* is a beautiful and

interesting narrative about Delhi. Darlymple suggests that there is no fixed rule for travel writing, that the author should signal reader what they are trying to do.

However, its popularity, travel writing too has its limitations. The most important problem faced by the travel writer is how to represent dialogue. Another problem is translation of the local words and character of the community. Travel writers have to be faithful in the description of their account of the place they visited. With the advent of Postclonial studies travel writings are being critiqued as depicting colonial mindset and representing a false picture of colonial nation. Not only this, with the emergence of all modern critical theories resulted in looking at everything with critical eye, travel writing can't remain aloof from it. Travel writing is looked from various critical angels such as Marxism, new historicism, deconstruction, ecocriticism, theories of gender and sexuality.

Among various themes explored by the travel writers is the theme of quest. Quest is an important part of journey it for different purposes as material, spiritual, inner, outward, collective, individual, psychological, so on and so forth. Earliest example of this in literature is Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote,* a picaresque novel mocking chivalry. Most popular of quest writing, both inner and spiritual quest is Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard.* With the influence of Freud and his psychoanalytical theory, inner journey and unconscious fear and desire has become problematic as case in this regard is Graham Green's *Journey Without Map.* Among many travel writers who have contributed to this field of literature.

Among Indian Writing English, writers who have contributed to this genre of literature are a few in numbers. But it can be said that they are fit though few. One can find elements or themes of travel literature in the writers of different genre they have undoubtedly enriched the soil of this genre in one way or the other. Arun Kolatkar is one such writer whose poetry reflects streaks of different elements. Arun kolatkar (1932-2004), a bilingual poet wrote seamlessly both in Marathi and English with equal proficiency. A graphic artist who won Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977 for his long poems *Jejuri* published in 1976.Before his untimely death he wrote two further books in English *Kala Ghoda* poems and *Sarpa Satra.* Arun Kolatkar is a modern Indo-Anglican poet. Arun Kolatkar has clearly been influenced by the style of the Western writers such as T.S.Eliot, Ted Hughes, D.H Lawrence, William Carlos William etc.

Though Arun Kolatkar is not a writer who belongs to the category of travel literature yet his poems are imbued with the themes of travel literature. Writers of Travel Literature mostly explore the themes of quest, desire to travel to explore exotic place, sexuality and so on. One finds some of these elements in the writing of Kolatkar's poetry. The paper is not an exploration or implication of any theory of travel literature but it attempts to trace some of the elements of travel literature in general. The poem "Turnaround" reflects the poet's real journey during the time of his struggle. It presents the blurring of boundaries of the city and rural life, the words "beggar", "peepul leaves", "a lump of jaggery" etc points towards the struggle which any villager goes through when he arrives in Bombay (CPE 237). It also seems to present the inner journey of man. In this poem, he gives a heart rendering picture of the poor who need no commentator. "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).

The poem "the boatride" is a metaphorical poem. It seems to be the journey of life. It presents a journey of the sea with the boat. The vast sea and rough waves suggest the struggle of human life. Man fights and emerges victorious. So it is a celebration of life with life force. The mastery of the poet lies in giving artistic treatment to a commonplace incident. "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). The poem has a profusion of surreal imagery. Through variation of typography he gives a feel of sea and boat ride to readers:

along the rim of the boat
lightly the man rests his arm
without brushing against
his woman's shoulder
gold
and sunlight
fight
for the possession of her throat
when she shifts
in the wooden seat (CPE 330)

Through alteration of lines, words, images, tone, sense and sound Kolatkar has transformed a dull boring and vapid trip into a poetic experience. It is surely an aesthetic delight for readers. Every poem of Kolatkar has a message about cosmic and mystic philosophy as in his long poem "the boat ride" which A. N. Dwivedi describes thus:

> Metaphorically speaking, the whole journey by boat may be interpreted in terms of a man's journey of life. The frequently mentioned sea, its surges and water may thus denote the expanse of life itself; the boat may signify the small support that the man gets in his life- journey; and its departure and arrival may symbolize the 'two shores' of life, namely birth and death. The mooring of the boat at the same landing is an indicator that after his life – journey the man will have to return to the same source whence he sprang. (193)

The poem depicts alienation, boredom, isolation and non-communication of modern man amidst the crowd. It is his art that has transformed the trivial into significant, the ordinary into extraordinary, the dull into vibrant and the meaningless into meaningful. "He often uses flat, toneless voice and takes up cool non-committal attitude" (Kalyani 54).

Jejuri is a sequence of poems surrounding a religious place of the same name in the State of Maharashtra. Jejuri originally written in Marathi had already won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2004. *Jejuri* is about a temple town famous for the presiding deity Khandoba. He visited Jejuri in 1963 accompanied by his brother and a friend, and seems to have composed some poems soon afterwards. *Jejuri* can be regarded as an example of searching for an identity or "...the poet's inability to relate to the place"

(Ramakrishnan 91), which turns out to be the major obsession of the previous generation of Indian poets in English. . V. A. Shahane and M. Sivaramkrishna rightly say that *Jejuri* ". . .represents a significant step in the assertion of Indian identity" (Quoted in R. S Pathak 11). "Arun Kolatkar's "Jejuri" has…been regarded as a 'quest poem', as a presentation of modern urban scepticism impinging upon ancient religious tradition" says M. K. Naik (118). His approach is constantly exploratory like in the following lines:

> The bit of betel nut
> turning over and over on his tongue
> is a mantra (CPE 43)

The priest who sanctifies the place of god is indulging in defiling the place. These lines point out the indifference of the priest towards his sacred duty. It also expresses the priest's interest in enjoyment and recreation. It reminds one of the priests of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Kolatkar is true to his poetic creed. He does not hesitate to mirror the image of the priest as spiritually barren:

> A catgrin on its face
> and a live, ready to eat pilgrim
> held between its teeth (CPE 44)

With the priest as a predator waiting for his prey displays his function in the modern times. In his own sly ironical tone he tries to present the hypocrisy prevalent in our sacred institutions. 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 has not delineated the temple, the gods and the legends in his poems but was more interested in the nasty rats, mongrel bitch, butterfly etc. Thus the poems lack the religious fervour expected of a person visiting such a place of worship but are ironical in tone. 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, 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 "don't step inside the old man's head" which has "the caste mark" conforms Kolatkar's non conformist attitude towards a pilgrimage (CPE 42). ". . . in this poem the subjective and the objective flow in and out of one another, modifying, correcting and dissolving each other"(Walsh 147). The terms 'old man's', 'caste mark' etc. depict the old system of faith and the line "you don't step inside the old man's heads" (CPE 42) presents the modern sceptic attitude. It is an irony of the modern life that while a pilgrim is supposed to think about God, here he is detached from God instead of being immersed in Bhakti. 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. Thus the analysis of Kolatkar's poems revel elements of travel writing, through his use of metaphor, symbols, images and diction he brings out these elements to fore and consolidate the points made in the present paper.

The genre of travel writing is beginning to expand and explore different facets of life. "Travel writing today is beginning to take on a multicultural ethos. It is becoming increasingly difficult to justify the traveler's "one-way" vision-his or her perception, regulated from the imagined safety of the metropolis, of people, places and cultures seen as alien or remote" (Holland 22). We can appreciate how travel writing can become an important part of academic history and, when done well, how it can present a perspective that until now has not been considered in a serious fashion. Travel indeed imparts new vigour to our life, it helps us in exploring and discovering our own self, it also helps in self-realization and self-actualization. With the further growth in tourism industry, we hope that this genre of literature will grow further in future.

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