

Self-Conscious Pleasure-Seeking: Equality in Arun Kolatkar's Poetry

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ABSTRACT: *Arun Kolatkar celebrates sexuality in his poetry even as he presents it in a realistic way. Taking the example of the "Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads," a poem from his collection Kala Ghoda Poems, this paper analyzes Kolatkar's understanding of the nature of sexuality, of sexual relationships and of sexual exploitation. The framework that will be used for understanding sexuality will be the third century scripture on sexual love, The Kamasutra. Together the two texts, Kolatkar's poem and Vatsyayana's sutra, will illustrate that moralizing in sexual matters on the basis of laws is untenable and that there needs to be a gap between laws or customs and one's understanding of and response to the situation / person being assessed.*

Key Words: *Arun Kolatkar, Sexuality, TheKamasutra, Sexual exploitation*

Arun Kolatkar's poems are a celebration of the lived reality of sexuality. In this paper I will examine the representation of sexuality in Kolatkar's poem "The Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads" from his collection *Kala Ghoda Poems* that was published in 2004, the year of his death. Kolatkar was a poet of the streets. He sat every Thursday for at least fifteen years at the Wayside Inn Cafe in the Kala Ghoda area in Mumbai observing life on the streets from his perch. As is typical of flâneurs his gaze in his poetry is admiring as well voyeuristic. Self-consciously voyeuristic, his gaze nevertheless lends such beauty to the subjects / objects which otherwise go unnoticed that it is difficult to assess whether the gaze is laudatory or exploitative of its subjects / objects. Kolatkar puts one in a dilemma about the line between exploitation and celebration and leads one to question the relationship between subject and object in sexual relationships. In doing this we are also lead to think about the nature of sexuality itself -- is it necessarily exploitative because the persons involved engage with each other for their own pleasure? Can there be other than a relationship of subject and object in sexual ties? Can an other be anything other than an object? At what point in the relationship is oneness experienced, if ever?

Laetitia Zecchini's (2016) monograph on Kolatkar discusses at length the defamiliarizing gaze of the speaker in Kolatkar's poetry that invariably focuses on objects (thing, spaces, people, etc.) that go largely unnoticed in our world giving them a new lease of life so to speak by describing them with interest and delicacy. Quoting Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" she says that in Kolatkar's verse familiar objects are seen "in a state of newness" "free from the different historical or perceptual blinkers, pre-given representations and intellectual conditionings, which obscure our perception of the world" (p. 103). Speaking of his vision she says it is "also naive in the etymological meaning of the word, like someone who is new to the world and may renew it, with the same 'child-like perceptiveness' that Baudelaire identified in "The Painter of Modern Life": 'a perceptiveness acute and magical by reason of its innocence' (p. 12)" (p. 103-4). The poem "The Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads" describes a woman getting dressed on the streets. She is wearing a blouse and petticoat and drying her hair and by the end of the poem has put on her saree. The speaker recognizes towards the poem's end that she is being stared at by "the voyeur world revolving / around her / -- the dirty old men with clean noses, // the bug-eyed painters, / painters with their tongues hanging out, / and other jerks and assorted arseholes" (Kolatkar, 2010, p. 124). He is very aware of the "exploitativeness" of his gaze and yet he continues to stare. This could be considered child-like or it could be perceived as unequivocally callous. A woman getting dressed on the streets is a familiar sight in our country. Some stare, others turn away their eyes, some even their noses in scorn. Kolatkar calls her a queen who is at best scornful of those who stare at her, one of whom is the sun whom she ignores: "She has washed her hair this morning / and she's standing with her back to the sun / to dry it // and the huge damp patch / on her clean white / but slightly rumpled petticoat, // which is what she's wearing at the moment, / apart from a yellow choli above / and silver anklets below // playing hide and seek / in the scalloped shadow of her petticoat, / She has yet to wear her sari." (p. 120). The gaze follows her so closely and observes her in such minute detail that the whole gets lost in the process. When one reads of the patch on her rump, an otherwise erotic image loses its familiar connotation, becoming merely itself sans any other meaning. The reader revels in the description alone forgetting that a woman is being eyed surreptitiously. The words appear to be

creating one vision after the other instead of being inspired by sights themselves. Speaking of Kolatkar's verse, Zecchini says "the meaning of several poems seems to reside in the resonant labile quality of the language itself, rather than in the designated object" (p. 111). There might be some danger in saying that language is all in all and the thing described secondary. But Kolatkar's writing takes away from this kind of doubt: "The damp patch is about the size of China; but its borders that stretch / from her buttocks in the north // to the bend of her knees / in the south / are rapidly shrinking in the sun." (p. 121). The woman is made larger than life -- she is at least bigger than China, rather the attention she receives from the poet, the degree to which the speaker engages with her noticing every move she makes expands her contours exponentially so much so that the reader is awestruck by her and the eye moves from one fascinating aspect of her to the other. In another ingenious description of her a usually derogatory gesture loses its objectifying quality turning the sight of the woman into a thing of beauty: "She whirls around, with a start almost, / as if the sun / had slapped her on her bottom -- hard." (p. 121). The description thus far is very erotic and reveals the minds of the voyeurs whom he mentions at the end of the poem. The next set of lines have such aesthetic force, it becomes difficult to imagine the woman a victim even as attention is being drawn to her body: "Her eyes close; / the sun explodes / and goes nova behind her lids. // The sun covers her face with kisses. / It flutters / like a hummingbird before her navel // and drinks up / a sparkling drop of water / like nectar from a buttercup" (p. 121).

The poem offers four pages of description of the queen of the crossroads before it quickly casts a sideward glance at the shameless voyeurs and then ends. Given that the speaker is aware that he is at some level exploiting the woman in staring at her when she is getting dressed and because the description is "new" and beautiful can his fascination be termed child-like? Perhaps it cannot. Is it exploitative? The woman is made such a force to contend with in the poem that the latter description also does not fit. Foucault criticizes psychology for turning small pleasures like staring at women into perversions. That people stare and men in particular is a given. But how does one define the line between being disrespectful and being child-like or oneself? Charles Baudelaire (1995) says of the flâneur's genius that "it is nothing more than childhood recovered at will -- a childhood now equipped for self-expression with manhood's capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated" (p. 8). A genius, for Baudelaire, is someone who can give perspective to his child-like engagement with the world.

The speaker in Kolatkar's poem is self-consciously voyeuristic. The queen of the crossroads is indifferent to even contemptuous of those who stare at her. The voyeurs do what they cannot help doing and the woman deals with them such that her dignity is restored -- in ignoring them, she is above them. In a way, observer as well as the observed deal with the situation both by pampering themselves *and* giving in to the other: the voyeur by ogling at the woman and rebuking himself for doing it and the object of his gaze by showing contempt for him while she's being stared at. In this the relationship is one of mutuality -- even utopic. Whether such a balance is always seen in life is another matter.

The ancient Indian scripture on sexual love, *The Kamasutra*, says that a sexual relationship necessarily involves conflict. It likens these relationships to combat (1994, p. 159). In the above example the interest of the observer is in conflict with the interest of the woman, who it is assumed, does not want to be stared at. But even in relationships of mutual attraction, sexuality that involves another, is a challenge, and it inspires hatred as it gives pleasure. The gap between the self and the other creates an emotional melee which is difficult to handle and hence pleasurable or thrilling. The *Kamasutra* suggests that sexual relationships require understanding the other such that what pleasures the other can be done. For this one needs to be observant of and in synch with the other's moods and preferences. The intensity of the sexual makes these needs imperative and dissatisfaction or disappointment in these matters is likely to evoke a stronger reaction than in the case of other needs. Hence the frustration with the other, the hatred of the other that follows from having to deal with the other is also intense. And hence sexual satisfaction that requires taking into the consideration the needs of the other as of oneself is difficult to manage and constantly challenges oneself and one's emotions. On the other hand, synching with the other, who like oneself is emotionally complex, when it happens, however ephemeral, affords immense pleasure.

When one's emotions are intense, as they are when one's sexuality is at work (or play), it is difficult to notice the world. One needs to act on those emotions and objectification, which means not treating the other as oneself, inevitably follows. Being self-conscious about such treatment of the other in the process of satisfying one's desires could in this context be seen as an attempt to treat the other as an equal. The *Kamasutra*, as mentioned above, says that pleasuring the other is important in order to attain true satisfaction. And hence experiencing sexual pleasure might be a greater task than it appears to be. The

speaker in the verse above allows the woman to treat him with scorn, thereby satisfying her need to be respected in the process of getting what he wants. However unrealistic the above-mentioned situation it illustrates how sexuality, which is inherently competitive and exploitative, can also be humane. It also suggests that an overall ethical attitude may compel a person who is exploitative in one way to compensate in a different way not always discernible to others. The *Kamasutra*, a book on sexual ethics, acknowledges that people tend to lose control in the face of desire, and prescribes the right conduct even for such cases. That sexuality leads one to do what one “should not” appears to be a likely lapse to which a lot of people are prone. To term every lapse a misdeed deserving of the label of perverse or a punishment might not be the most appropriate way to address the issue. On the other hand when societies advance materially and people get more liberty to choose how to live they have more avenues to satisfy their desires. Perhaps additional responsibility might also be expected in this case and what might be acceptable in a more restricted society might become unacceptable in a more liberal one. This however is a matter to be considered in a different essay. What one can conclude on the basis of the analysis undertaken in this paper is that whatever laws a society legislates either officially or unofficially (in the form of customs) to regulate sexuality for its smooth functioning should be separated from moralizing about the situation or persons involved because easy categorization is likely to miss the intricacies of sexual matters.

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