

A Critical Re-Reading of the Poem “Sarpasatra” by Arun Kolatkar

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Abstract:

The word subversion implies or indicates an urge to rethink and present an alternative system of thought by challenging and questioning the authority and validity of the existing systems of thought. Subversion is essentially an act of non-conformity and this act is clearly visible in Sarpasatra- one of the seminal collections of English Poetry by Arun Kolatkar where the speaker rewrites and subverts one of the founding texts of Hinduism by retelling from an alternative perspective the myth of the Snake sacrifice in the Mahabharata and along with this myth he also exploits the myth of the incineration of Khandava forest by Krishna and Arjuna. A myth is often thought to be a lesson in story form which has deep significance for Pre-literate cultures, who preserve and cherish the wisdom of their elders through oral traditions whereas in the present narrative there is a striking transfiguration in the poet's outlook and approach towards the use of myth. Here the speaker uses myth to critique the authoritarianism and bigotry of Hindu Brahmins and intellectuals and the subterfuges or machinations devised by them to warp the minds of people who believe in the concept of religion. The objective of my paper is to offer a critical analysis of the poem and also to analyse how Irony and humour are important structural devices through which the speaker subverts the established notions of religion.

Key words: subversion, bigotry, Hinduism, myth, religion

1. Introduction

The word subversion implies the presence of an already established order which is undermined or overthrown by someone. It is an essentially an act of disruption and dissension and this act is distinctly evident in Sarpasatra- one of the recent post-modern work of art by Arun kolatkar which was published in 2004., where the speaker rewrites and subverts one of the founding texts of Hinduism-The Mahabharata. As Rizio Raj says “ Departing from the epic in its view of things through a Naga’s eyes, Sarpasatra talks of the furious fires of hatred that continues through generations. One act of violence leads to another”. (Review of Sarpasatra pp. 37-42) Sarpa Satra retells the opening story of the Mahabharata, the snake sacrifice conducted by Janamejaya. The Mahabharata is narrated for the first time by Vaishampanaya, one of Vyasa’s (the author of the epic) disciples, during a snake sacrifice conducted by Janamejaya with the motive of exterminating the entire species of snakes. Janamejaya is the great grandson of Arjuna, the great warrior of Pandava dynasty. He comes to know at a later stage in his life that his father was murdered by Takshaka, a snake, which lost its family when Arjuna and Krishna torched the Khandava forest; hence, he decides to take revenge for that by decimating the entire species of nagas from the planet. For this purpose, he conducts a Yajna, which will bring all the snakes into a pit of fire. (Hari and Komalesha

11) Lastly Jaratkaru, Takshak's younger sister enjoins her son Astika to stop Janamejaya from this appalling act. So by adroitly revamping the two myths the speaker expresses his extreme deprecation of the cycles of abhorrence and mass extermination that have happened in history since time immemorial (For eg The partition, holocaust of the second world war and Godhra massacre). His poem is a response to this cultural hostility and antagonism between communities- the dreadful cycle of avengement and virulence and he skilfully employs the motive of vengeance from the two myths of Mahabharata to deride and disdain Hindu scripturalism which uses religion to contaminate the minds of people. Just as Hinduism convolutes religious scriptures to further their own ends the speaker is also using religion as a weapon to counter their strategies and unveils the inane of politics of revenge and malevolence.

2. The Poem as a parable of Zealotry

In Vyasa's Epic narrative Krishna and Arjuna are esteemed personalities. The poem becomes disruptive because the poet categorically and intentionally diverges from Vyasa's narrative and holds up the heroes as deplorable and unrighteous. For instance Jaratkaru who almost becomes the spokeswoman of Kolatkar adjures Astika her son to learn the truth about the Khandava forest,

before venerable Vyasa gives
his own spin
to the whole of human history (Kolatkar 265-267)

as if implying that the grand narrative of Vyasa will be fabricated and a prejudiced version which will unremittingly favour influential figures. The poem is an allegory of fanaticism and recurrent theme of perpetual cycle of brutality and cruelty Everything was destroyed in the fire of Khandava forest but Krishna and Arjuna could not obliterate bitterness and malice from the mind of Takshaka. Takshaka's revenge of the destruction of Khandava forest is in Jaratkaru's view a heinous act. Takshaka's villainous act is followed by Janamejaya's Snake sacrifice, however Jaratkaru empathises neither with Takshaka nor with Janamejaya. The urgency of the situation and the ludicrous behaviour of Takshaka and Janamejaya is successfully highlighted by the pragmatic and logical questions asked by Jaratkaru. For instance Jaratkaru says to Takshak "Don't you know that true revenge accepts no substitute" (Kolatkar 464-465) which clearly implies the stupidity of Takshaka's counter-attack. So Jaratkaru is completely unable to comprehend that why did Takshak made parikshit- the grandson of Arjuna his target instead of punishing Arjuna himself. Jaratkaru questions the virtuosity and purity of the maharishis by wondering how they can be an accomplice in the completely nonsensical retaliative act of Janamejaya. The bizarre nature of Janamejaya's project is reflected in the following lines:

But I mean all the great sages
as well.
Yes, they actually encourage him

and invent a yajnya
– complete innovation
called the snake sacrifice (Kolatkar 121-126)

Yajna, is meant to be performed with a pure mind for the well-being of all living beings. It should not be used as a means to harm anybody. The decimation of snakes is exalted and is considered a solemn act by naming it 'sacrifice' (Kolatkars 126). The gravity of the sin increases not just because Janamejaya is insane with rage but with a practical reality that he is the ruler of a large country. History is a testimony to the fact that the world suffers a lot when influential people go hysterical in their motives. Here Janamejaya defiles the sanctity and chastity of the religious ritual with his malignance and spite. His intentions are evil and immoral. Jaratkaru wants Astika to give an intimation to Janamejaya that the wrath and resentment of Shesha will devastate the whole earth if he becomes aware of the atrocious act of Janamejaya. Jaratkaru, very solemnly implores Aastika to ask Janamejaya to discontinue this wicked sacrifice and not to be responsible for the massacre. She feels that the psyche of Aastika is not contaminated with worldly vices which can be understood in the following lines: " your brain is not maggoty yet, with perceived wrongs or prickled in the brine of hatred". (Kolatkars 652-654) His innocence and holiness are certain seminal virtues which will allow him to have an objective stance or comprehension of the issues explained by Jaratkaru to him. That is the sole reason why Jaratkaru considers Aastika as an ideal choice who has the potential to prevent a great butchery from taking place.

The poet wishes that the readers should be prepared to face the harsh reality of life. That is the reason why the last section of Sarpasatra entirely departs from ending described in Mahabharata. There is no clear description of Aastika's victorious intercession. He warns us that the future generations are still to witness many more wars to come. The world will be in shambles because kolatkar knows that there is no antidote to the venom of avengement and malice which is entrenched in the psyche of humanbeings which is clearly demonstrated in the lines mentioned below:

When these things come to an end,
 people find
 other subjects to talk about

 than just
 the latest episode of Mahabharata
 and the daily statistics of death; (Kolatkars 854-859)

but at the same time the speaker warns us by saying ' But do not be deceived ' (Kolatkars 865)
 because

like everything else
 the fire - the fire lit for purpose
 can never be put out. (Kolatkars 869-871)

it continues to consume
 rakshasas
 rocks
 trees (Kolatkars 889-892)

The speaker here points out that this carnage ritual is categorically a replication of indiscriminate mass slaughters by generations through the centuries.

3. Irony used as a subversive device in ‘Sarpasatra’

In the poem we notice that there is a noticeable variation in the poet’s attitude and approach of using myth. He is not using myth to extol or venerate someone rather he is using it to critique the obstinacy and bigotry which is inherent in Indian politics and religious scriptures. The alternative reading of the poem becomes more forceful as the poet gives it a new dimension by employing modern idioms. The purview of the poem is not confined to communal antagonism rather the poem effortlessly and skilfully acts as a mirror to the world because it highlights how the root cause of all the wars which have taken place in history is hatred which invariably gives rise to vengeance another animal instinct and how all mortal beings are entrapped by these evils. For eg The following lines are taken from the last section of the poem ‘ The Ritual Bath’ and are spoken by an unidentified narrator

And yet again:

When these sacrificial jamborees
come to an end,
The officiating priests ,

honoured guests, Vedic Wizards
and other
intellectual superstars of the show

go back to their respective homes,
ashramas or whatever,
bearing wealth beyond measure-

cartloads of gold
herds of cattle with golden horns
slavegirls dripping pearls.(Kolatkars 821-832)

The above lines serve to highlight how the use of Irony is at the heart of modernism and Post-modernism which usually sharpens the discordant features of reality. Irony and humour are important structural devices through which the speaker subverts the established notions of religion. Irony is not just a literary device, it is a larger function of language. Satire, juxtaposition of mythic subject with modern terminology and humour are subsumed under this larger function of language. The above lines serve as a good example of the combination of Irony and humour. The Irony lies in the use of contemporary expressions like sacrificial Jamborees, vedic wizards, intellectual superstars of the show which indicates speaker’s interest in suggesting how dissimulation and greed has seeped deep within the conscience of rishis and Maharishis. The impudence of the speaker becomes more sharper when each Brahmin is ironically called “ mantra mutterer” and towards the end of the snake sacrifice ironical phrases like “ hangers-on” and “ assorted free loaders” are used for Brahmins who strip the place of everything that isn’t nailed down. These phrases indicate how Brahmins are considered as some sort of sycophants by speaker. Zecchini Laetitia has very aptly commented about the language used in Sarpasatra. She writes that “ Kolatkars poetry doesn’t confirm to the

orderliness of the world, or to the orderliness of language, to its instrumental transparent function. It refuses the camouflage of a standard, official and hygienist linguistic code.” (Zeechini 137)

Sarcasm and humour in the poem are brought out cogently by the use of modern world terminology like dapper, costume designers, slippers, payroll, awesome, fantastic, kicks, blank cheque, crony, editor, secret police, wholesale, berserk etc which are interlaced into the texture of the mythical subject of Sarpasatra which indicates that by using a contemporary framework of looking at the obsolescent myth the speaker brings out the pertinency of the whole myth to today's times and shows how cycles of zealotry and revenge are unabating and timeless. The Irony in the poem becomes more pronounced and razor-sharp when we notice that Jaratkaru- a snake woman and mother of Astika who is a peripheral character in Vyasa's gran epic assumes the central voice in their present narrative which makes her antithetical narration even more rigorous. The poet utilises irony as a powerful tool to perturb and to derail against all authoritative figures of Mahabharata which is clearly reflected in the following lines which are spoken by Jaratkaru to her son in an unrelenting and a unsparing manner:

But what did you expect of
an old man
who saw it as no part of his business

to interfere, let alone try
and stop
the madness of his grandchildren

from getting completely out of hand;
who let it run
its full course to the inevitable

tragic ending;
saw them all kill each other off;
just stood by

as a whole nation destroyed itself
and, instead of being
ashamed

of the whole saga
and his own role in it,
or trying to forget it all,

quietly set out
to put down the whole wretched chronicle
in black and white

and in polished verse
to the eternal shame of

posterity (Kolatkar 211-234)

The outspoken narration and the undertone of disillusionment in Jaratkaru's words helps the reader to comprehend the conniving and Machiavellian psychology of eminent figures of Mahabharata who serve as an epitome of virtuosity and nobility. The utter meaninglessness and the triviality of Janamejaya's act is brought out when the speaker compares the act of performing the snake sacrifice with the act of cleansing the ants because one bit your mum. In Vyasa's narrative Krishna and Arjuna are highly exalted figures. The poem becomes disruptive as Jaratkaru's antithetical-narration unequivocally contravenes from this perspective. She absolutely dismisses the character of epic heroes and is completely contemptuous of the abominable act of depredation of Khandava forest by Krishna and Arjuna. While describing Krishna and Arjuna the cynicism in phrases "very first act of heroism" as soon as Arjuna lays his hands on "new toys" and "thorough job he made of it" clearly indicates that acclaimed figures like Arjuna and Krishna are thoroughly denigrated and are considered as criminals who are responsible for the shattering of the whole environment. The speaker highlights the imbecility and ruthlessness of the whole act in the following lines:

They were certainly determined to make sure
that nothing got out
of that conflagration alive.

The moment anything tried,
they drove it back into that inferno
or mowed it down,

as the two of them
thundered around the burning forest
in their divine chariots (Kolatkar 364-372)

The scathing tone in the above lines brings out strong irony in phrases like "divine chariots" Their sole aim was the procurement of land and liquidation of Nagas suggesting that instinct for violence and avarice seem to be the only motives behind mass butchery. The lines also serve to show the barbaric tendencies of powerful people in the world and reminds one of pulverisation of the entire races across the continents. So besides condemning Mahabharat the speaker is also reviling the corridors of power. Zeechini laetitia has notably commented on the kind of language used in Arun Kolaatkar's poetry. She writes that "His work celebrates a world and a language without borders or limits, a plastic reality which does not hold. This perpetual and unstable transgression of rigid frontiers is always synonym of creative poetic interlacing. His poetry estranges us from the world and renovates our perception, reveals the otherness and the multiplicity of reality". (Zeechini 164)

The end of the poem is petrifying as it raises very bewildering questions about certain human weaknesses which transcend time. After the Ritual Bath the anointed kings return to their kingdoms

wondering
which neighbouring kingdom to attack next
or what new taxes to levy

to refill the coffers
and ask their ministers to come up
with recommendations. (Kolatkar 848-853)

The above lines combine Irony and humour to bring out the failure of ritual bath by suggesting that water of ritual baths cannot really absolve or purify the human ills. Though innumerable disasters have taken place in human history as a result of human avarice and human drive for revenge but even then people have closed the doors of their mind and soul and are unable to grasp the lessons that history wants us to learn from it.

Conclusion

Thus the force of subversion lies primarily in the use of Irony which then creates humour. The impertinence and dissidence of the speaker is expressed through the use of irony. Through the use of irony as an integral device the speaker succeeds in transforming our perception of the whole myth and at the same time disorients and questions the established ways of perceiving religion. It is through the sharp parody or mockery in Jaratkaru's narrative that we come to realise how in Jaratkaru's words " the gangrene of insensitivity" (Kolatkar 661-662) has permeated deep not just within the souls of Arjuna, Krishna, Takshaka and Janamejaya but it has entrapped the whole of humankind.

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