



Surrealism In Arun Kolatkar's Poetry

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Citation: Santosh Suman, (2024), Surrealism In Arun Kolatkar's Poetry, Garhwal Region, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(6) 1267-1271

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i6.9155

ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004) was a renowned Indian poet known for his distinctive voice and contributions to both Marathi and English poetry. Born in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, Kolatkar navigated between his cultural roots and the rapidly changing urban landscapes of India, producing work that bridges the traditional and the modern, the sacred and the profane. His poetry is characterized by sharp observation, minimalistic language, and a surrealist sensibility, capturing the paradoxes inherent in Indian life. Kolatkar's most celebrated collection, *Jejuri* (1976), which won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, explores the pilgrimage town of Jejuri through vivid, fragmented imagery that is both reverent and irreverent. In *Jejuri*, Kolatkar employs surrealist techniques such as absurd juxtapositions, playful tone, and unexpected shifts between the real and the imaginary, presenting the mundane alongside the mystical. Through scenes of crumbling temples, indifferent gods, and stray animals, he questions the constructs of faith and divinity, revealing the arbitrary nature of the sacred. This surreal quality emerges in his irreverent treatment of gods and rituals, inviting readers to question accepted norms and consider alternate perspectives on spirituality. Kolatkar's later work, including *Kala Ghoda Poems*, shifts from the rural to the urban, capturing the vibrancy and decay of Mumbai while continuing his exploration of identity and cultural dislocation. His work's surrealist elements allow him to blur boundaries between reality and fantasy, providing a critical lens through which to view human experience. Kolatkar's poetry, marked by humor, irony, and a deep understanding of cultural complexities, continues to resonate, offering an incisive commentary on modernity, tradition, and belief. His work stands as a testament to the power of surrealism in addressing the layered and often contradictory nature of contemporary life.

This research article has taken lines of poems of Kolatkar to show the manifestation of surrealism in his poetry.

Keywords: Surrealism, Indian Poetry, Modernism, Multiculturalism

Introduction

Arun Kolatkar, a prominent Indian poet known for his distinctive voice and bilingual works in English and Marathi, incorporates surrealism in his poetry to reflect the complexity of modern Indian life. His poetry, particularly in works like *Jejuri*, shows a blending of realistic and surrealist elements that convey an almost dreamlike quality to his observations of the world around him. Surrealism in his poetry isn't as overt or fantastical as in Western surrealist traditions; rather, it arises subtly through unique imagery, a fluid sense of time, and unexpected juxtapositions that unsettle ordinary perceptions of reality.

Key Surrealist Techniques in Kolatkar's Poetry

1. Fragmented Imagery: Kolatkar often uses fragmented images and disjointed scenes to depict the places and people around him, creating a surreal effect by destabilizing conventional visual expectations. For example, in *Jejuri*, he describes decaying temples, strange idols, and decrepit landscapes in ways that blend the mystical with the mundane, making the real seem uncanny and otherworldly. Some examples where fragmented imagery in Kolatkar's lines creates surreal effects:

“The bus goes round and round the temple / round and round / and the garish statues / all purple and gold / don't move at all”- These lines, from the poem *The Bus*, use fragmented and repetitive imagery to capture a dizzying, almost dreamlike view of the temple. The bus itself seems to orbit the temple, as

if trapped in a surreal loop. Kolatkar's use of color ("all purple and gold") gives the statues an almost otherworldly appearance, while their immobility contrasts starkly with the constant movement of the bus. This fragmentation between motion and stillness enhances the surreal quality, as the scene appears both real and oddly detached.⁴

"A three-headed cow / stands still as a statue / its eyes fixed / on a point in space"-In these lines from *The Priest*, Kolatkar introduces a surreal image of a three-headed cow, frozen like a statue. The cow, which itself is an unusual and supernatural creature, appears lifeless and uncanny, its gaze "fixed on a point in space." This fragmented description draws attention to both the ordinary (a cow) and the fantastic (a three-headed cow), blurring the line between reality and imagination. The cow's stillness and staring eyes evoke a feeling of eerie timelessness as if it exists in another dimension.

"The doors of the temple are open / But there's no god inside"-This line from *A Scratch* strikes with its minimalist, fragmented imagery that evokes a surreal emptiness. The image of a temple without a god is both simple and profound, suggesting a void where one would expect divinity. The gap created by this absence unsettles the reader, raising questions about the nature of faith, ritual, and emptiness. This fragmentary approach emphasizes absence as a presence, lending a surreal weight to an otherwise ordinary observation.

"No questions / no answers / just the stray dog / sitting on its haunches"- In *Chaitanya*, Kolatkar presents a scene where a stray dog is "just sitting" without purpose or motion. The fragmented phrases "no questions / no answers" suggest a sort of existential emptiness, where purpose and meaning are suspended. The lone figure of the dog is left to sit, detached and still, reinforcing a surreal feeling of timelessness. By focusing on this single, isolated figure, Kolatkar captures a haunting sense of disconnection that is both familiar and uncanny.

"A mongrel bitch has just delivered / a litter of puppies / in the middle of the road / and they are all / without exception / dead"- This bleak image from *Heart of Ruin* presents the birth and death of puppies within a single, fragmented scene. Kolatkar isolates this tragic moment, allowing it to resonate as an absurd, surreal vignette. The lifeless puppies in the middle of the road create a stark, unsettling image, blending life and death into one surreal tableau. The sense of loss and decay here is almost otherworldly, amplifying the pathos through fragmented, bare-bones language that hits with shocking immediacy.

"Between the temple and the brothel / there's nothing / but silence / and the eye / of a lizard"- In *An Old Woman*, Kolatkar creates a surreal atmosphere by juxtaposing the sacred and the profane—a temple and a brothel—with "nothing but silence" in between. The "eye of a lizard," a small, eerie detail, bridges this divide, suggesting a silent, watchful presence that connects opposites. This fragmented focus on a minor detail gives the scene a surreal stillness, making it feel both alive and frozen in time.

2. Blurring of the Real and the Imaginary: Kolatkar's poetry often features characters and settings that feel real but seem haunted by a sense of detachment or otherness. For instance, the pilgrims, priests, and deities he encounters in *Jejuri* exist in a space that's both physical and metaphysical, highlighting a surreal boundary between life and spirit. Some examples from *Jejuri* where Kolatkar blurs the real and imaginary:

"A crack / runs right across the floor... / the crack begins to act like a black vein / filling with blood"- This line from *A Scratch* portrays a crack in the temple floor that takes on an eerie, almost sentient quality as it "begins to act like a black vein / filling with blood." At first, this seems like a mere description of a structural defect, but Kolatkar personifies the crack, making it feel alive, as though the temple itself is bleeding. This shift blurs the line between the real—a crack in the floor—and the imaginary—the suggestion that it "fills with blood." The image becomes surreal, implying that the temple is a living being, wounded and bleeding, heightening the mystique surrounding the place of worship.

"The gods are all stone. / Only the rain / sees them naked"- In *The Priest*, Kolatkar creates an image of stone idols exposed to rain, almost as if they were alive and could experience vulnerability. The rain "seeing them naked" personifies both the gods and the rain, blending real elements (stone statues and rain) with the imaginary sense of gods being "seen" or exposed. This line suggests a surreal moment where gods, traditionally revered as powerful, are rendered vulnerable in a way that blurs the boundary between inanimate stone and living beings, drawing readers into a reflective space on the nature of divinity.

"A butterfly spots the goddess's cheek / and thinks it's a flower / and sits on it"- In *A Butterfly*, Kolatkar describes a butterfly mistaking the cheek of a goddess statue for a flower. This imagery brings the goddess to life through the butterfly's perception, blurring the line between the statue (the real) and a living presence (the imaginary). The butterfly's confusion lends a surreal, almost humorous touch, as if the goddess herself were a living being capable of attracting creatures. This gentle blurring elevates the divine figure, making her a part of the natural, everyday world without sacrificing the mystique of her presence.

"You can't find your way / in or out of the blue cross hospital / without a nurse / to hold your hand like a mother"- In *The Blue Cross Hospital*, Kolatkar paints a hospital as a bewildering place where one cannot navigate without a nurse's guidance, casting the hospital in an almost nightmarish, surreal light. The line likens the nurse's care to a mother's touch, blending real experiences (getting lost in a hospital) with an imaginary, childlike sense of vulnerability. This blurring of reality and fantasy infuses the hospital, a modern space, with a surreal quality, as though it exists in a disorienting dreamscape where adult independence is stripped away.

"A crow shakes off a raindrop / from its beak and walks / into the temple"- In this line from *The Butterfly*, Kolatkar describes a crow entering the temple after shaking a raindrop from its beak. The crow's nonchalant entry into the sacred space imbues it with a surreal quality, as if the bird, a creature of the mundane world, were a part of the divine environment. The line blurs the boundaries between the sacred (temple) and the ordinary (a crow), suggesting that in Jejuri, even the most common creatures can partake in the divine, lending a surreal sense of unity to the space.

"No water / in the sacred tank"- This line from *A Low Temple* reflects Kolatkar's use of absence to blur the real and the imaginary. The "sacred tank" is traditionally a symbol of purification and spiritual renewal, but here it is empty. This emptiness creates a surreal sensation, as if the absence of water is itself a mystical sign. Kolatkar leaves the tank "empty," inviting readers to question whether the absence is physical or symbolic, leading them into an imaginary realm of interpretation where the sacred and profane overlap.

3. Playful and Irreverent Tone: Kolatkar's tone frequently veers into the absurd, poking fun at religious rituals, gods, and cultural icons. This irreverent treatment of sacred subjects gives his work a surreal quality, as it challenges the reader to see these entities in a new, often unsettling light. His detached, humorous style evokes a surrealist attitude by questioning the very nature of reverence and belief. Some examples where Kolatkar's playful and irreverent tone contributes to surrealism in his poetry:

"The door of the temple is half open. / A dog sprawls / across the doorway"- In *The Door*, Kolatkar describes a dog lazily blocking the entrance to a temple, a sight that undercuts the seriousness typically associated with sacred places. The casual tone and indifference of the dog create a humorous image that challenges readers' expectations of a revered temple. The surrealism here arises from the contrast between the ordinary (a stray dog) and the divine (the temple) — the juxtaposition suggests that the sacred space has been reduced to just another place where a dog might nap. This irreverent tone disrupts the sanctity of the scene, making the temple feel strangely and humorously mundane.

"The bastard's / completely unreliable / He'll settle for a handful of rice / and a pinch of salt"- In *Yeshwant Rao*, Kolatkar describes a local deity with a mixture of sarcasm and humor, calling him "completely unreliable" and claiming he'll "settle for a handful of rice and a pinch of salt." Referring to a god as "the bastard" and questioning his reliability in such casual language is both irreverent and surreal, deflating the traditional reverence one would expect toward a deity. The playful tone here brings the god down to a human level, portraying him as a figure who can be bargained with, thereby mixing the divine and the absurd in a way that is distinctly surreal.

"Scratch a rock / and a legend springs"- This line from *A Scratch* reduces the grandeur of legends to something as ordinary as scratching a rock. The playfulness of this line hints at the absurd ease with which myths are created and sustained, suggesting that the supernatural power attributed to the place is a mere fiction waiting to be uncovered. This irreverence toward local legends adds a surreal quality, as the line challenges the idea of divinity and history with an almost childlike skepticism. It implies that myths are fragile, easily dispelled by a simple scratch, creating a surreal disconnect between perception and reality.

"What is god / and what isn't / between a toe-nail and a toe?"- This line from *The Butterfly* humorously elevates something as ordinary as a toenail to a philosophical question about divinity. The irreverent tone here suggests that the difference between god and the ordinary is as subtle as that between "a toe-nail and a toe." By introducing such a mundane image into a profound existential question, Kolatkar mocks the lofty nature of religious inquiry, suggesting that our conceptions of divinity may be arbitrary and almost laughable. This line blends the philosophical and the ridiculous, blurring them into a surreal questioning of what truly constitutes the divine.

"He has no music / to offer. You'll have to pipe / your own tune on your flute"-In *Yeshwant Rao*, Kolatkar describes the god as having "no music to offer," implying that worshippers must create their own devotional experience. This statement reflects a humorous irreverence toward the deity's power, suggesting that faith is more about the individual's actions than the god's abilities. The tone here is playful and irreverent, as Kolatkar implies that the god's presence is not accompanied by miracles or divine intervention. The surreal twist comes in the idea that a god might simply be a silent witness to human actions, making divinity something that the worshipper must animate.

"A low temple keeps its gods in the dark"-This line from *A Low Temple* captures the absurdity of a temple that "keeps its gods in the dark," suggesting that even the divine figures are trapped in neglect. Kolatkar's choice of words implies that the gods, who are supposed to bring enlightenment, are themselves shrouded in darkness. The irreverent tone here hints at the irony and absurdity of worshipping neglected, hidden idols, and it adds a surreal layer to the religious experience by implying that gods may be as powerless and forgotten as the objects around them.

4. Unconventional Juxtapositions: Kolatkar's surrealism also emerges from his use of stark contrasts, often bringing sacred and profane images together. The result is a collage-like effect that forces the reader to confront the complexities and contradictions in Indian culture, especially in the collision of traditional beliefs with modern realities.

Some examples from *Jejuri* where Kolatkar uses unconventional juxtapositions to evoke surrealism:

"Between the temple and the brothel / there's nothing but silence / and the eye of a lizard"- In *An Old Woman*, Kolatkar places two highly contrasting spaces—the temple and the brothel—next to each other with “nothing but silence / and the eye of a lizard” in between. The juxtaposition of these spaces, which represent purity and sinfulness respectively, creates a surreal impression. The lizard’s “eye” becomes a witness to both, observing but indifferent. This unusual combination points to the underlying similarities between the sacred and the profane, suggesting they are merely different aspects of the same reality. The juxtaposition thus prompts readers to reconsider the meaning of holiness and morality, introducing a surreal detachment from conventional judgments.

"Scratch a rock / and a legend springs"- In *A Scratch*, Kolatkar places the simple act of scratching a rock alongside the powerful image of a legend being “born” from it. This unlikely juxtaposition, which connects a trivial physical act with something as grand as myth, creates a surreal moment. It hints at the arbitrary nature of legends and beliefs, suggesting that what we consider sacred may be no more than a superficial mark. This blending of the everyday with the mythical gives a surreal twist to the idea of sacred places, questioning whether there is any true distinction between the two.

"The bus goes round and round the temple / round and round / and the garish statues / all purple and gold / don't move at all"- In *The Bus*, Kolatkar contrasts the dynamic image of a bus circling the temple with the static presence of garish statues that “don't move at all.” This juxtaposition of constant motion with lifelessness creates a surreal effect, highlighting the contrast between the mechanical and the sacred. The vividly colored statues (“all purple and gold”) are frozen in time, as if indifferent to the world outside. This juxtaposition emphasizes the sense of disconnection between modern life and religious symbolism, making the temple feel like a surreal relic that is at once vibrant and lifeless.

"A three-headed cow / stands still as a statue / its eyes fixed / on a point in space"- In *The Priest*, Kolatkar presents an image of a three-headed cow—a creature that is both real and fantastic. This unnatural image, where the cow is both animate and inanimate (“still as a statue”), creates a surreal juxtaposition. The three-headed cow represents a blending of the sacred and the strange, and its stillness adds a mythical, dreamlike quality. This combination of a common animal with an otherworldly form suggests the fusion of reality and myth, making readers question whether this creature belongs to the physical world or to a space of imagination.

"The goddess gives you a cold look / as if you were a worm"- In *The Door*, Kolatkar contrasts the divine figure of the goddess with the image of a “worm,” creating an unsettling juxtaposition between grandeur and insignificance. This surreal contrast diminishes the worshipper, placing them on par with a lowly creature. By positioning a revered figure like a goddess alongside something as humble as a worm, Kolatkar undercuts conventional religious hierarchy. The goddess’s “cold look” also suggests an indifference that is chillingly surreal, as if the divine figure is detached from human concerns and unapproachable, almost alien in her attitude.

"A mongrel bitch has just delivered / a litter of puppies / in the middle of the road / and they are all / without exception / dead"- In *Heart of Ruin*, Kolatkar places the sacred setting of Jejuri—a pilgrimage site—alongside an image of a mongrel bitch giving birth to lifeless puppies. The juxtaposition of life and death, hope and despair, is disturbing and surreal. By setting this image in the middle of a holy town, Kolatkar contrasts the expected sanctity of the place with the stark reality of death and suffering. This incongruous pairing makes the scene feel surreal, as the sacred site becomes a background for a grim, everyday tragedy, stripping it of its mystical allure.

5. Exploration of the Absurd: Kolatkar shows an affinity for the absurd aspects of everyday life, a hallmark of surrealism. The way he describes temples as rundown, or gods as neglected and commonplace, reflects an almost Kafkaesque quality, suggesting that divinity and decay coexist in a surreal continuum. Some examples from *Jejuri* where Kolatkar explores the absurd as a means of expressing surrealism:

"The door of the temple is half open. / A dog sprawls / across the doorway"- In *The Door*, Kolatkar presents the image of a stray dog blocking the entrance to a temple. The absurdity of a dog casually lying in a place of supposed reverence undercuts the sanctity of the temple and challenges conventional expectations of holy spaces. By placing a mundane creature in the way of worshippers, Kolatkar reveals the absurdity of our reverence for inanimate symbols and spaces. This scene has a surreal effect, highlighting the gap between what is sacred and what is ordinary, and questioning the boundaries that separate the two.

"A scratch / a scratch as long as a goat's tail / a scratch as long as a tonga driver's whip... / and you've got a god"- In *A Scratch*, Kolatkar describes how a scratch on a rock becomes the source of a legend or god. The absurdity lies in the idea that a simple scratch could hold such significance, transforming into an object of reverence with little reason beyond a mark on stone. This surreal imagery calls into question the basis of sacredness, suggesting that what people worship might be arbitrary or meaningless. By exposing this absurdity, Kolatkar implies that faith itself can sometimes rest on superficial marks, creating a surreal and unsettling vision of religious belief.

"The bastard's / completely unreliable / He'll settle for a handful of rice / and a pinch of salt"- In *Yeshwant Rao*, Kolatkar humorously describes a local deity as “completely unreliable,” as though he’s a human figure with capricious needs. The absurdity of calling a god “the bastard” and talking about his whims

in a casual, almost mocking tone challenges the reverence usually associated with deities. Kolatkar's irreverent attitude highlights the surreal nature of faith, where gods can be "bargained with" or "unreliable." This absurd view of divinity creates a disorienting effect, encouraging readers to question the very human nature of belief systems.

"A mongrel bitch has just delivered / a litter of puppies / in the middle of the road / and they are all / without exception / dead"-In *Heart of Ruin*, Kolatkar describes the grim image of a stray dog giving birth to a litter of dead puppies in a holy town. The absurdity here lies in the stark, disturbing contrast between life and death, sacred and meaningless, all taking place within a religious site. This image suggests the randomness of existence, where even a sacred place does not shield creatures from suffering and death. Kolatkar uses this surreal scene to emphasize the absurdity of human beliefs about holiness, as life and death coexist in ways that defy explanation or purpose.

"A three-headed cow / stands still as a statue / its eyes fixed / on a point in space" - This line from *The Priest* depicts a fantastical, almost cartoonish image of a "three-headed cow" staring off into the distance. The absurdity of this creature, with multiple heads but an empty gaze, gives it an eerie, surreal quality. The three-headed cow becomes a symbol of the bizarre, half-believable nature of myth and faith. By describing it as "still as a statue," Kolatkar blurs the line between animate and inanimate, creating a surreal and absurd portrait that questions the validity of belief in supernatural signs.

Conclusion

Arun Kolatkar's poetry, with its unique fusion of surrealism and Indian cultural themes, offers readers a lens into the paradoxes and absurdities of life, particularly in the spiritual landscape of modern India. Through works like *Jejuri*, Kolatkar invokes surrealism not by flamboyant imagery or illogical sequences, as seen in Western surrealism, but through a nuanced interplay of ordinary and mystical elements, blurring the real and imaginary in subtle, profound ways. His fragmented imagery and unconventional juxtapositions of sacred and profane reveal a world where gods are as vulnerable as their human worshippers, where temples decay alongside the faith that sustains them, and where mundane scenes take on a surreal significance. Kolatkar's irreverent tone further amplifies this surreal effect, presenting the divine with a sceptical, often humorous edge that invites readers to question the sanctity of what they perceive as holy.

His surrealism serves not just as a stylistic choice but as a critical lens on the tensions within Indian society—between tradition and modernity, faith and skepticism, reverence and indifference. Through his poetic exploration of the absurd, Kolatkar sheds light on the fragile constructions of belief, suggesting that divinity and myth might rest on mere scratches in stone or in the incidental arrangement of ordinary scenes. His work ultimately transcends cultural boundaries, resonating with universal themes of existential inquiry, the search for meaning, and the surreal nature of everyday life. By blurring reality with imagination, Kolatkar's poetry compels readers to see beyond superficial appearances, drawing them into a dreamlike yet deeply insightful reflection on the human condition, making his contribution to surrealism in Indian poetry both significant and transformative.

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