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Abstract

This paper considers how Arun Kolatkar's 1976 Commonwealth Prize winning sequence *Jejuri* constitutes a challenge to the interpretation of postcolonial poetry. In particular, it is concerned with examining the interpretive demands *Jejuri* makes of its readers, arguing that its microcosmic spatial and temporal composition requires the reader to dispense with his or her own sense of exteriority to, or distance from, the text. At the same time, Kolatkar's use of cross-cultural and trans-historical imagery situates *Jejuri* within a macrocosmic, global network that implicitly compels the reader to adopt an interpretive position undetermined by national or cultural preconceptions. *Jejuri* is thus a sequence that prompts specialist postcolonial readers to question the set of methodological practices they work within. Moreover, the interpretive demands made of the reader confirm the ethical imperative of the act of reading more generally, requiring the non-specialist audience to also abandon preconceptions about the meaning of the sequence. This paper draws on Edward Said's notion of worldliness in order to suggest that Kolatkar's sequence requires a particular kind of critical response: one that is attentive to the historical and cultural specificities of the text, and yet one that is able to acknowledge the wider political implications of reading the poems.

Keywords

aesthetics, Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri*, postcolonial poetry, the postcolonial reader, worldliness

Introduction

In this paper, I consider how Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* (2010/1976) invites a reconsideration of the way in which poetic texts are read and interpreted. *Jejuri* is a sequence of

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poems depicting a day-trip to the temple town of the same name in Maharashtra, chronicling the narrator's experiences there over the course of a single day. As I establish in the opening discussion, reviewers at the time focused on the sequence's critical portrayal of religion, and subsequent critics have often extensively commented on the way the poems engage with and unmask the unequal power relations of organized religion in Jejuri. Departing from these thematic analyses, my paper will consider instead how *Jejuri* compels readers to continually re-orient and re-position themselves in relation to the text, and question their assumptions about the processes and methodologies of interpretation. Paying particularly close attention to the aesthetics of the poems, I argue that Kolatkar's strategic figuration of the sequence as a microcosm of Jejuri-the-place invites the reader to experience the events and impressions along with the narrator, and in doing so, reveals the act of reading to be an active and participatory process. This paper argues that the spatial and temporal particularity of the sequence forecloses on readings of the poems as a representative postcolonial text, and compels the reader to acknowledge that his or her own interpretation will never be comprehensive. At the same time, the localized references found throughout *Jejuri* are accompanied by a stylistic and figurative internationalism, ensuring too that the sequence cannot be read as a regional, or as an Indian, text. I thus suggest that the hybridity of Kolatkar's style and imagery mitigates against what Jahan Ramazani has called the "culture of birth determinism" (2009: 35) of literary interpretations, arguing that the juxtaposition of the local and the non-local spheres provides a challenge to any attempt to read *Jejuri* according to one particular model. As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra notes in his recent introduction to Kolatkar's *Collected Poems in English*, the poet worked on "eschewing all isms and ideologies" (2010: 28)¹ in his writing, creating in *Jejuri* a startlingly original sequence with far reaching implications. By compelling readers to relinquish their own sense of exteriority to the text, and by continually involving them in the process of interpretation, Kolatkar fosters a deep sense of empathy for the places and people he represents. In the final section of this paper then, I examine the figure of the cultural outsider represented in *Jejuri*, considering how their presence in the text invites the reader to re-negotiate his or her attitude towards the other.

Critical reactions to *Jejuri*

Jejuri was published in 1976 and awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize the following year. Kolatkar's work was, and continues to be, particularly well received by other poets, who have reflected on the experimentalism and hybridity of his writing (Chaudhuri, 2005; Chitre, 1967; Mehrotra, 1992, 2010; Ramakrishnan, 1978). However, despite the public recognition afforded by the prize, Amit Chaudhuri calls the critical response to Kolatkar's sequence "unremarkable and intermittent" (2005: xvii), pointing out that most readings have concentrated on what the poems are about rather than on how they are expressed. On one level, *Jejuri* seems to invite literal analyses; it takes its name from a real town that remains an important site of pilgrimage for followers of the Maharashtran deity Khandobā, a folk deity who is worshipped as a form of Shiva. Günther-Dietz Sontheimer refers to the various associations of Khandobā in the title of his collection of

essays on the god, *King of Hunters, Warriors, and Shepherds*, noting that the Khaṇḍobā temple in Jejuri constitutes one of the most important sites of the deity's worship in the state (1997: 22). Despite the religious significance of the town, however, the narrator is largely uninvolved in the rituals and acts of worship he observes, and often draws attention to his difference from the other pilgrims. In "Makarand" (60), for instance, he responds to an invitation to perform *pooja* with an emphatic "No thanks. // Not me", emphasizing his separation from the scene using a conclusive double line break. Instead, he says, he will wait outside the temple, "out in the courtyard / where no one will mind / if I smoke".

The narrator's refusal to enter the temple in "Makarand", and his symbolic position "out in the courtyard" throughout the sequence, was interpreted as evidence of the poet's own ambivalence towards religion by early, hostile critics – particularly those already inclined to view English language usage as inauthentic (Nemade, 1985). As Arvind Mehrotra explains, Kolatkar's Marathi critics were especially liable to misinterpret the tone of *Jejuri*, "finding it to be cold, flippant, at best skeptical" (2010: 14). More recent analyses of the sequence have continued to conflate the narrator with the poet, interpreting the poems literally and often criticizing Kolatkar for what they deem to be his rejection of Hindu or Indian cultural values (Chindhade, 2001; Mathur, 2000). Even more nuanced and complimentary appraisals of *Jejuri*, such as those by Satyanarayana (1980), Prasad (1999) and Kalyani (2004), have continued to assume the sequence to reflect the poet's own views, reading the narrator's journey as a subversive and "ironic parody of pilgrimage" (Kalyani, 2004: 57).

There have been few analyses of *Jejuri* from postcolonial critics – owing perhaps to the relatively peripheral status of poetry in the field. Jahan Ramazani (2001), Ashok Bery (2007), Rajeev S. Patke (2009 [2006]), and Akshaya Kumar (2009) are among the most influential critics who have identified the poem to be an important site for the articulation of postcolonial concerns. In their work, the formal and linguistic hybridity of the poem is related to the political and historical changes in postcolonial societies; as they demonstrate, poetry may be "a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies" (Ramazani, 2001: 4) than other forms, but it is no less able to engage with these concerns.

Rajeev S. Patke is one of the few postcolonial critics to discuss *Jejuri* at length; he reads it as an indictment of the continuing forms of "internal colonization practiced on Indian society by Brahminical belief systems" (2009: 197), arguing that the poems offer a critical reproach to historically inscribed power relations. The narrator in *Jejuri* certainly does draw attention to the hierarchical structure of religious practices in the town, creating a particularly unforgiving portrait of the priest as he waits for the arrival of the pilgrims and "wonders" what offerings they will bring him: "Will there be a puran poli in his plate?" ("The Priest": 43). When the bus does arrive, it too seems complicit in exploiting the pilgrims, delivering them to the priest with "A catgrin on its face, / and a live, ready to eat pilgrim / held between its teeth". The priest's greed is contrasted with references elsewhere in the sequence to the poverty and disrepair of the area; from the "half burnt tongue" of the devotional singer ("The Blue Horse": 65), and the desperation of the elderly beggar ("An Old Woman": 49), to the rundown temple with its "doorway

cluttered with broken tiles” (“Heart of Ruin”: 44), the town and its inhabitants exist in a state of poverty and dependency. Like Jahan Ramazani, whose work on postcolonial poetics aimed to be “of some help in both internationalizing the field of contemporary poetry in English and strengthening the position of poetry within postcolonial studies” (2001: 19), Patke’s analysis of *Jejuri* therefore makes an incisive contribution to ongoing discussions about the political import of postcolonial poetry, demonstrating that the poem is capable of exposing and critiquing the ongoing exploitations of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

It seems to me that the various commentaries on the sequence – from the most hostile to more nuanced ones such as Patke’s – share an implicit assumption that the meaning of the poems can be located in the events of the sequence. Critics including Deepika Bahri (1997, 2003) have argued that postcolonial literary analyses are particularly prone to undertake potentially reductive thematic analyses of texts, adopting what she calls a “macrocosmic” (2003: 64) conception of the work to uncover its wider concerns, while neglecting its formal specificity. For Bahri, for example, the postcolonial text is “under pressure to perform in politically instrumental ways” (2003: 77), expected to engage primarily, if not exclusively, with the colonial encounter and its historical repercussions. She suggests that the literary work is positioned as a “documentary social text” (11) that is assumed to explain and clarify the intricacies of colonial history and postcolonial politics. Bahri’s theoretical criticism of those postcolonial methodologies that seek to explain and classify the literary text is echoed in the essays of Amit Chaudhuri (2008), which express the writer’s own disquiet about the dominant preconceptions of Indian writing in English. In what follows, I undertake an avowedly formalist approach to *Jejuri*, reading the poems closely in order to demonstrate how Kolatkar’s use of form and language compels the reader to re-negotiate his or her own position in relation to the text. In particular, I consider how the temporal and spatial composition of the sequence invites an active and involved response from the reader, denying the possibility of reading the poems as representative or allegorical in any way. The title of the sequence, I argue, is a strategic provocation, for instead of creating a representative portrait of Jejuri-the-place, Kolatkar has created an experience of being there that is at once highly context-specific and yet avowedly transnational in scope.

The time and space of *Jejuri*

The title of Arun Kolatkar’s sequence provides an immediate and highly suggestive indication that the poems will directly represent the actual town. Even for a reader unfamiliar with the religious and cultural significance of Jejuri as a place of worship, the site-based title encourages them to approach the text as a referential and objective expression of the place. In the original 1976 volume of the poems – designed by Kolatkar and published by Clearing House, the co-operative of which he was a founding member – the front cover further reinforces this sense of mimetic referentiality: the title page features a photograph of one of the metal plaques found in the town, which shows the god Khaṇḍobā and one of his wives.² By using an image of an artefact to frame the sequence, Kolatkar seems to suggest the alignment between his poems and

their worldly referent, configuring the sequence as a “documentary social text” (Bahri, 2003: 11) that will represent and explain the history and religious significance of the place. Indeed, etymologically and visually, *Jejuri* appears to be precisely that postcolonial “object freighted with the power of representation” (107) which Deepika Bahri criticizes.

However, as Robert Spencer has shown in his recent book *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature* (2011), postcolonial texts encourage readings that are attentive to the particularities of the work and the context in which it is written. Drawing particularly on Edward Said’s conception of worldliness, Spencer suggests that a literary text’s “production in a particular time and place restricts what can convincingly be said about it” (2011: 45). The situation of a text, and the various references it makes to what Said calls the “social density” (1983: 23) of its context, thus ensures the reader is unable to disassociate the work from specific historical, political, or social formations:

This means that a text has a specific situation, placing restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but rather because the situation exists at the same level of surface particularity as the textual object itself. (Said, 1983: 39)

The extent to which a text is embedded in its particular context is not just found at the level of its thematic concerns, therefore, but is demonstrated in its specific and contingent use of figurative language, and enacted at the aesthetic level of style, form, and imagery.

In the case of *Jejuri*, images of devotees and deities, as well as references to local stories and legends about the area, compel the reader to note the cultural and physical specificity of the text. “A Song for a Vaghya” (56), for instance, is told from the perspective of a single *vaghya*, or male devotee of Khaṇḍobā. In the accompanying notes to the sequence, Laetitia Zecchini details some of the notable visual and cultural markers associated with the *vaghyas* (2010: 364-5), and the poem reinforces the cultural particularity of its context by incorporating these references into the text; the “pouch” of turmeric powder the speaker carries, for example, or his strange musical instrument that “has one string. / And one godawful itch”, are both items linked to the *vaghyas*. Towards the end of the poem, he seems to criticize his position of relative powerlessness in the town, subverting the etymology of the word “God” in order to declare: “God is the word / and I know it backwards”. By juxtaposing “dog” and “God” in such a way, the speaker appears to suggest that there is nothing to differentiate the sacred from the secular, interrogating the sanctity of religious authority by drawing attention to the simultaneous presence of the ordinary within it. As Zecchini observes however, this community of disciples has “traditionally taken pride in being associated with dogs” (365), an animal with whom they have a mythical affiliation. The cultural specificity of this reference thus calls into question the seemingly irreverent tone of the poet’s inversion of God/dog, and unsettles any attempt to read the text as a straightforward reaction against religious hegemony.

At the same time, *Jejuri* incorporates a range of contemporary images and international, trans-historical styles, unsettling the idea that the sequence should only be read as a locally situated text. As commentators have noted, Arun Kolatkar's informal tone and style is reminiscent of both medieval *bhakti* saint poets like Tukaram, whose writings he translated, and contemporary American writers such as Allen Ginsberg, whose work he read and admired (Chaudhuri, 2005: xii-xvi; Chitre, 1967: 19-20; Mehrotra, 2010: 14-15, 29-30). Arvind Mehrotra discusses the influence of contemporary music on Kolatkar's writing too, noting that the poet's characteristic use of the three line stanza unit, and his informal, anachronistic style, has parallels with the American blues music he liked to listen to (Mehrotra, 2010: 30-1). The co-existence of ancient and contemporary references unsettles any preconceptions that the particularity of the text renders it emphatically or only local in scope. Instead, the trans-historical range of the images suggests the unsustainability of analysing the poems in terms of fixed regional or national literary models. In "Ajamil and the Tigers" (54), for instance, Kolatkar reproduces a story about the origins of the vaghya community, situating the text within a regional framework. Images in the poem, however, refer directly to contemporary global culture: when the tiger people are given "gifts of sheep, leather jackets, and balls of wool", the anachronistic reference to "leather jackets" demonstrates that the poem is not simply a re-telling of a single, ancient story, but is instead a peculiar space in which the local and global, the historical and the contemporary, can co-exist. The poem is replete too with colloquial terms, slang, and Americanisms, lending this traditional, oral narrative a contemporary, youthful tone: "I'm gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he'll never forget", the tiger king declares; "We'll outnumber the son of a bitch".

Jahan Ramazani has noted that "single-nation genealogies remain surprisingly entrenched" (2009: 23) in literary discourses, with poets often classified and grouped together by their national identity. He demonstrates that the pluralistic scope of the individual poem implicitly challenges this deterministic way of reading and classifying poetry: the poem will "switch codes between dialect and standard, cross between the oral and the literary, interanimate foreign and indigenous genres" (4) in such a way as to reject any nationally prescribed reading model. With its juxtaposition of ancient stories and street slang, and its simultaneous references to traditional gods and global culture, *Jejuri* is a sequence that is impossible to read according to one particular model. The proximity of divergent cultural references in the poems requires the reader to accept that the text is both inextricable from the circumstances in which it is set, and yet is also able to contest the notion that it is in any way determined by its immediate setting. The situation of the text thus extends to the imaginative situation of the poet, who is able to draw upon and bring together different images and styles, as well as divergent tones and perspectives. Indeed, Ramazani suggests that the poem constitutes a privileged and utopian space in this way, arguing that in the simultaneity of its references there is a "reconciliation" of divergent perspectives that may be "unavailable in the...lived experience" (18).

Hence in "A Scratch" (53), Kolatkar displays a simultaneous scepticism and inherent faith in the narratives and legends about Jejuri. Early in the poem, he makes what could be a critical statement about the commercialization of religion in the area: "there is no crop / other than god / and god is harvested here". The poem is, however, informed by the plural legends and stories associated with the area, using them to reinforce the

cultural and geographic specificity of the text. The reader is directed to the surroundings of the town, told unequivocally that “that hunk of rock / is Khaṇḍobā’s wife turned to stone”, while “the crack that runs across / is the scar from his broadsword”. This use of direct, demonstrative statements rather than comparative, metaphorical language suggests the proximity between the signifier and sign: the geographical surroundings are not likened to something else; rather “every other stone / is god or his cousin”.

“A Scratch” in many ways embodies the interpretive opportunities posed by the entire sequence, for, in questioning the separation between the place of Jejuri and its representation in poetic discourse, it also implicitly interrogates the distinctions made between subject and object, reader and text, which are all required for a representative or allegorical reading. As the poet suggests, to be in Jejuri, or to read about it, is to concede interpretive certainty over the text and accept the co-existence of different registers, stories, and perspectives:

what is god
and what is stone
the dividing line
if it exists
is very thin
at jejuri

These lines introduce the dualism between the objective and transcendental realms, between “what is god / and what is stone”, but then immediately call the existence of “the dividing line” into question: “*if it exists*” (my emphasis). By the closing couplet of the poem, Kolatkar has collapsed the “dividing line” separating the landscape from the stories about Khaṇḍobā entirely, demonstrating the impossibility of undertaking a monolithic reading of either the place or the poem: “scratch a rock / and a legend springs”.

Robert Spencer and Edward Said have both identified how a text’s production in its social, political, and historical context imposes limits on how a reader can interpret it. Their sensitivity to the particularity of a work suggests to me not only the worldliness of a text in relation to its external context; their emphasis on the particularity of the time and space of the text also invites critical reflection on the ways in which the temporal and spatial environment created *within* the text itself might foreclose on readings that would otherwise attempt to render it representative. Throughout *Jejuri*, the poet repeatedly references various tangible objects the narrator encounters, paying particular attention to the discarded, apparently inconsequential things found in the town: he is interested in the trajectory of “a conduit pipe” (“Water Supply”: 43), is drawn to a temple with its entrance “cluttered with broken tiles” (“Heart of Ruin”: 44), and is fascinated by a building that turns out to be “just a cowshed” (“Manohar”: 49). Amit Chaudhuri reads Kolatkar’s incorporation of these abandoned and overlooked items as characteristic of the poet’s subversive poetic gaze, observing that their central place within the sequence serves to “disturb and ironicize the logic and flow of capital” (2005: xxii). These tangible things, however, also serve to reinforce the sense of spatial specificity *Jejuri* embodies, for in detailing so carefully the appearance of objects and things, Kolatkar encourages a reader to take notice of the contingent aspects of the everyday.

Hence in “The Bus” (42), the narrator spends time not in describing his reasons for visiting Jejuri, but detailing the chance, material circumstances of his journey. There is a “cold wind”, which “keeps whipping / and slapping a corner of the tarpaulin”, and it is this felt experience that he focuses on. Similarly the doorway of a temple in “The Door” (46) is described in a highly specific way: it “hangs on one hinge alone” and its “grain stands out on the wood // as graphic in detail / as a flayed man of muscles”. By describing a door using such a physically invested, material image, Kolatkar reveals that his concern lies not in what the door signifies, but in the way it is encountered by the narrator in the specific space of the poem. In the poem’s final lines, the reader’s attention is directed to the narrator’s lasting impression of this doorway, to “that pair of shorts / left to dry upon its shoulders”. Like the tarpaulin inside the bus, “whipping / and slapping” against the narrator’s body, the lasting image of drying clothes confirms that this sequence is firmly situated in a particular landscape, full of objects, things, discarded clothes, and sudden sensations.

The short poem “The Doorstep” (45) represents the narrator’s encounter with the particular setting of the town in direct terms. As he wanders through Jejuri, he is presented with a surprising object, and stops to decide what it is:

That’s not a doorstep.
It’s a pillar on its side.

Yes.
That’s what it is.

Arvind Mehrotra has called the poems in *Jejuri* “acts of attention” (2010: 14), and in “The Doorstep”, Kolatkar confirms his ability to truly see the exact, ordinary, and highly tangible things that lend a place its particular character. The repetition of demonstrative pronouns – “That’s”; “It’s”; “That’s” – directs the reader’s attention to the material particularity of the pillar, recreating how the narrator encounters it: as a tangible, rather than as a symbolic, object. What is particularly striking here is the narrator’s complete acceptance of the materiality of his surroundings. As E.V Ramakrishnan notes, the poet does not include the “pillar” in order to reflect on what this item might signify; rather, the “test of poetic quality here is the poet’s ability to explore the externality of things around him and not the object’s ability to suggest a moral comment” (1978: 17). Conditioned to expect that an image will be included in a text in order that it might signify something else, readers are thus challenged by the emphasis on the objects in the here-and-now. They must accept, as the narrator does, that the meaning of this poem lies in the very presence of this “pillar on its side”, and not in what it might be suggestive of.

In its temporal construction too, *Jejuri* enacts a radical departure from pedagogical expectations as to the representational significance of the poems. *Jejuri* takes place over the course of a single day, opening early in the morning “in what little light spills out of the bus” (“The Bus”: 42), and concluding later the same day as the narrator waits for his departing train while “the setting sun / touches upon the horizon” (“The Railway Station”: 72). By setting the poems within such a clearly demarcated temporal moment, Kolatkar directs a reader’s attention to the singularity of the narrator’s experiences there.

Continually referencing the simultaneous passage of time in the poems and in the location in which they are set, Kolatkar invites a critical reflection on the unique, singular experience of visiting Jejuri. Hence in “The Bus”, the narrator notes how much time has passed even during his journey “all the way up to Jejuri”. Beginning in semi-darkness, he realizes part way through that “Outside, the sun has risen quietly”, and notices the particular way sunlight shines through the “eyelet” of the tarpaulin and “comes to rest / gently against the driver’s right temple”. This image is entirely contingent, depicting a scenario unlikely to ever be repeated in the same way; a sunbeam happens to have passed through a small hole in the tarpaulin, and again, happens to fall precisely on “the driver’s right temple”. This poem, like many of the others in the sequence, thus seems almost to defy its own cultural status as a fixed unit of language, capturing the provisional, contingent impressions of the narrator in a particular moment.

By writing predominantly in the present tense, Arun Kolatkar locates the narrator in the unfolding moment throughout the sequence. As a result, the poems dispense with the separation between the scenes being described in poetic discourse and the events that are experienced by the visiting subject, recreating the individual’s exploration of the town and its surroundings – replete with its chance encounters, surprises, and fleeting impressions. In “The Priest’s Son” (52), the narrator is shown to be in discussion with a young guide, and is in the process of disputing the validity of the local legends the boy has recounted; suddenly, the child “shrugs and looks away // and happens to notice / a quick wink of movement” out of the corner of his eye. In the final lines of the poem, he directs the narrator’s attention to what he has seen: “look / there’s a butterfly / there”. This instruction to “look” over “there” immediately precedes the following poem, and the movement between these two textual units reflects the way the narrator’s perspective shifts in order to notice what the young boy has seen. The directive language too – “look” over “there” – quite specifically locates the individual’s experience of a place in these provisional, contingent, and momentary encounters.

The following poem evokes the brief appearance and flight of “a little yellow butterfly” (“The Butterfly”: 52), although from its opening lines it is apparent it will be largely unconcerned with providing conventional contextual description: “There is no story behind it. / It is split like a second”. Other than its colour, the butterfly is not actually described at all. Instead, Kolatkar captures the narrator’s brief glimpse of it, encoding – via the formal breakdown of its final lines – its subsequent flight:

Just a pinch of yellow,
it opens before it closes
and closes before it o

where is it

These concluding lines dispense with certain formal properties a reader might expect. The final question mark is missing, and the word ‘opens’ is hinted at rather than written in full: it “closes before it o”. The poem is formally and visually incomplete, and despite its affirmative title, it is less a poem about a butterfly than a recreation of an individual’s brief perception of one in the here-and-now of the text.

Addressing the reader

Jejuri is a text that embodies Edward Said's notion of worldliness in interrelated ways: as a sequence written about a particular place, one that is imbued with highly particular stories, legends, and myths; as a text that simultaneously reflects global, transcultural influences; and as a work that recreates the precise temporal and spatial parameters of a single day. As both Said and Spencer note, however, the situatedness of a literary work extends to the reader too, whose own act of interpretation is always located in contingent social and historical environments. The cultural, temporal, and spatial specificity of a text does not therefore disavow different readings of the work. In fact, by requiring a reader, the literary text actually invites a range of critical responses to it: "opportunities for diverse interpretations are opened up again by the text's presentation of itself to a gallery of readers" (Spencer, 2011: 45).

And yet, as Edward Said identified, it is apparent that the literary critic is not always necessarily able to relate to the text with this degree of openness. Academic literary critics, he suggested, trained in particular ways of reading and analysing literary texts, and whose research may be directed by certain shared prerogatives, are "bound filiatively (by birth, nationality, profession)" (1983: 25), even as they deploy "a method or system acquired affiliatively (by social and political conviction, economics, and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation)" (25). Pre-empting in many ways the later criticism of Deepika Bahri, Said cautions against adopting what he terms "a functionalist attitude" (148) towards the literary text, arguing that to do so is to implicitly configure the text as a hermetic object: "the text becomes idealized, essentialized, instead of remaining as the specific kind of cultural object it really is" (148). The postcolonial reader therefore must acknowledge her own ideological stakes in interpreting a work of literature, and recognise that she approaches the text not as an unbiased or independent investigator, but as a reader firmly situated in a particular set of circumstances. Only then can the experience of reading become, as Robert Spencer describes, an opportunity for the reader to develop the "self-reflexiveness required to relativise and evaluate their own sometimes partial or even parochial outlook" (2011: 43).

The poems in *Jejuri* continually address readers directly, often referring to them using the second person "you" in such a way that compels them to recognise their own situation in the process of interpretation: "You look down the roaring road" ("The Bus": 42); "You lend a matchbox to the priest" ("A Low Temple": 47); "You leave the little temple town" ("Between Jejuri and the Railway Station": 67). By collapsing the distinction between the narrator and the reader, Arun Kolatkar invites his audience to experience the events directly related in the poems. Indeed, by writing the presence of the reader into the body of the text itself, the poet invites every reader to experience the scenes depicted in the text, and at the same time to recognise that this particular experience is entirely their own. As the narrator is shown inside the temple in "A Low Temple" (47), for instance, the narrator and reader both glimpse a statue of a goddess: "Who was that, you ask. / The eight arm goddess, the priest replies":

You can count.
But she has eighteen, you protest.
All the same, she is still an eight arm goddess to the priest.

These lines reveal the extent to which the priest has been conditioned to notice only certain things: he prefers to focus on what the statue of the goddess signifies to him, and despite visual evidence to the contrary, “she is still an eight arm goddess to the priest”. The priest here seems analogous to a culturally conditioned reader, who approaches the text with a certain set of critical preconceptions. The narrator on the other hand – and the ideal reader Kolatkar creates via his direct appeal – enters the temple without any such preconceived ideas about what he might find inside, and is thus able to describe how the statue actually appears.

Bruce King has argued that *Jejuri* is a sequence concerned particularly with the renovation of ordinary perception (2001: 168-70), commending Kolatkar’s ability to capture the “divine dynamism” (169) of his surroundings. The narrator and reader are not religious figures, but their appreciation of the statues that “come to light” for just “a moment the length of a matchstick” is a revelation of sorts, a meditation on the sudden and transient nature of ordinary experience. Later in “Between Jejuri and the Railway Station” (67), the narrator is depicted getting ready to leave Jejuri: he passes by the temples and cafés, his movements conflated with the reader’s who also prepares to leave the interpretive space of the poetic text: “You pass by the Gorakshanath Hair Cutting Saloon. / You pass by the Mhalsakant Café / and the flour mill”. The conflation of the narrator’s and the reader’s movements is accompanied by a conflation of their attitude as they prepare to leave, carrying nothing more than “a coconut in your hand. / a priest’s visiting card in your pocket / and a few questions knocking in your head”. Part way through the poem however, the narrator suddenly stops, “struck” by a surprising vision before him, of “a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar / in a kind of harvest dance. The craziest you’ve ever seen”. The following section of the poem consists of a typographically experimental recreation of the birds’ movements, with the words “up” “and” “down” arranged on the page in a seemingly random, jerky manner.

Just as the narrator is “struck” by this unexpected vision, the reader is also struck by such a visually arresting textual arrangement of the words on the page. Unsettling even the linearity of the reading process – from left to right – this experimental section of the poem is as much of a surprise for the reader as the appearance of dancing birds is for the visitor, making explicit the extent to which the poem requires a re-orientation on behalf of the reader as well as the narrator. In fact, the overt emphasis on the pronoun “you”, which appears more than once even in a single line towards the end of the poem, suggests that it is the reader’s surprise that is the focus of the text, and their reaction the poet is most concerned with: “What has stopped *you* in *your* tracks / and taken your breath away” (my emphasis); “And there you stand forgetting how silly you / must look”. If it was previously possible for the reader to maintain a sense of distance from the text, this is, by the end of the sequence, no longer an option, for he or she is positioned explicitly within the text and town, “with a priest on your left shoulder as it were / and a station master on your right”.

Empathy and understanding: The imperative of reading *Jejuri*

This involved, participatory experience of reading *Jejuri* significantly reconfigures the proximity of the reader to the figure of the cultural outsider too. In this respect, the

sequence not only compels the reader to abandon their preconceptions about the act of interpretation itself; more importantly, the involvement of readers invites them to reconsider their own sense of ontological security and cultural privilege. Robert Spencer considers reading to be a process that can result in “the critical examination of one’s position in relation to the dehumanising forces of the market and of the increasingly untrammelled power of states and corporations” (2011: 171), suggesting that the experience encourages the subject to develop a critical consciousness in a particular way. In this final section of the paper, I suggest that reading *Jejuri* is to undergo precisely this kind of self-interrogation, forcing readers to question not only their own sense of identity, but also to acknowledge the particular prejudices and assumptions they hold, and to recognise their own complicity in maintaining the power structures that make such assumptions possible.

Many of the poems in *Jejuri* are written about, or refer to, discarded and impoverished subjects and spaces. There is a butterfly, the “pariah puppies” (“Heart of Ruin”: 44), an old woman, a “temple rat” (“The Temple Rat”: 61), dancing hens – all of which are assigned a central place in the sequence. As I have suggested, these subjects and objects reinforce the spatial specificity of *Jejuri*, and confirm the poet’s interest in the way a place is experienced rather than in what it officially signifies. Moreover, the incorporation of so many overlooked subjects challenges readers in a particular way, making them acknowledge that the assignation of poetic value is not restricted to certain themes or subjects. As the poet observes in “The Railway Station” (69), poetic value and inspiration is found in the most unexpected of places: “the spirit of the place / lives inside the mangy body / of the station dog”.

In “An Old Woman” (49), the poet makes the reader confront the extent of his own prejudices and privilege. The poem opens as an old woman approaches the speaker and “grabs / hold of your sleeve”. The narrator is initially dismissive of her, and his conspiratorial tone co-opts the reader into sharing his attitude towards the beggar woman: “She won’t let you go. / You know how old women are”. At the beginning of the poem then, the separation between the woman and the narrator or reader, is emphatic, and she is presented as little more than a routine irritation for them both. Indeed, the phrase “You know how old women are” is suggestive of the extent to which the scene being described is unremarkable and routine for the narrator and reader, who are both desensitized to the appeal of a beggar.

However, when the narrator finally turns towards her, and is forced to look “Clear through the bullet holes / she has for her eyes”, these previously fixed subject positions are radically undermined:

And the hills crack.
And the temples crack.
And the sky falls

The cataclysmic dissolution of the fundamental physical and ideological referents of the world – evoked by the cracking of “hills” and “temples”, and the falling in of the “sky” – demonstrates the extent to which the narrator and reader are here forced to acknowledge

and abandon their own sense of ontological security in the world. By the final stanza of the poem, the power relations that were so fixed at the start of the text have completely shifted, and “you are reduced / to so much small change / in her hand”. It is the woman – poor, dispossessed, and anonymous – who is briefly and provocatively made visible in the poem’s final lines, while the narrator and reader are forced to revise their own assumptions of cultural authority and superiority. They are “reduced” by the final lines, and made to recognise their own complicity with the structures of power that have rendered the elderly woman so powerless.

Rajeev S. Patke has called *Jejuri* a “glass-poem: what you think you see through the glass is the place, what you really see is your own reflection trying to look through” (2003: 257-8). Patke’s comments suggest the extent to which the sequence interrupts and unsettles those normative reading practices that have sought to locate in texts a particular set of thematic concerns, and which have relied on a clear sense of separation between the reader and the work itself. To read *Jejuri*, from whatever disciplinary background, is to relinquish control over the meaning of the poems, and to accept that they cannot be read according to one particular paradigm. It is, moreover, to take an involved approach in relation to the text, to participate in the continuing production of the sequence in the specific time and place in which they are read.

The transformation undergone by the reader in “An Old Woman” reinforces the affective dimension of reading, confirming it as being what Edward Said referred to as “the indispensable act” (2004: 60). For Said, the very process of reading compels subjects to confront their own assumptions and prejudices, and invites them to question, interrogate, and think beyond the set of practices and ideologies in which they live. Robert Spencer too figures reading as fostering “a critical attentiveness” (2011: 41), noting that it prompts a vital “critique, discussion, and discovery” (42) about oneself and one’s place in the world. For Arun Kolatkar there was no intrinsically poetic subject for poetry, and in *Jejuri* his attentiveness to the overlooked people and spaces of a particular town compels readers to question the set of practices, methodologies, and expectations they work within, which are reliant on an impermeable “dividing line” between the poem and the world. By dispensing with the separation between the reader and narrator, and between the text and its context, Kolatkar thus allows the reader to question not only the academic assumptions they might hold, but also their moral and ethical ones as well. The final lines of the last poem provide a hopeful image that is suggestive of the lasting effect of the sequence. As the sun sinks, it “touches upon the horizon” (“The Railway Station”: 72):

at a point where the rails
like the parallels
of a prophecy
appear to meet

By concluding with an image of the future, and by encouraging a reader to look beyond at the “horizon”, Kolatkar seems to me to configure reading as an enterprise full of unknown opportunities for individual and collective transformation.

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Notes

1. Kolatkar, 2010: 42-72. All references to *Jejuri* are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
2. For examples of metal plaques from *Jejuri*, see Sontheimer, 1997: 126-7.

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