

Arun Kolatkar's *Yeshwant Rao*: A Stylistic View of the Mythical Text

Uddhav A. Ashturkar

This paper is a stylistic reading of a mythical text from Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*. It tries to show how the linguistic approach to the analysis of a text helps us in understanding a piece of literature. The theory of linguistic criticism holds that a text has got its own universe and the meaning lies in the same universe. Moreover, the linguistic theory claims to be comprehensive because it offers a complete account of the structure of language at all levels e.g. phonology, lexis, graphology, syntax, semantics etc. Moreover, the terminology of linguistics is systematic since language itself is a system of systems. The assumption here is that whatever a literary artist does, he/she does in language. Consequently, a linguistic analysis of a text can reveal what a writer 'does' through his language. Furthermore, a linguistic approach to the text tries to achieve considerable objectivity of analysis in comparison with the other methods where impressionistic judgements are passed about the text.

The poem *Yeshwant Rao*, which has been taken here as a text, is one of the notable representative mythical poems of Arun Kolatkar. The linguistic analysis of the same reveals that no criticism goes beyond its linguistics. The paper also tries to avoid over-reading of the text.

Yeshwant Rao

Are you looking for a god?
I know a good one.
His name is Yeshwant Rao
and he's one of the best.
Look him up
when you are in Jejuri next.

Of course he's only a second class god
and his place is just outside the main temple.
Outside even of the outer wall.
As if he belonged
among the tradesmen and the lepers.

I've known gods
 prettier faced
 or straighter laced.
 Gods who soak you for your gold.
 Gods who soak you for your soul.
 Gods who make you walk
 on a bed of burning coal.
 Gods who put a child inside your wife.
 Or a knife inside your enemy.
 Gods who tell you how to live your life,
 double your money
 or triple your land holdings.
 Gods who can barely suppress a smile
 as you crawl a mile for them.
 Gods who will see you drown
 if you won't buy them a new crown.
 And although I'm sure they're all to be praised,
 they're wither too symmetrical
 or too theatrical for my taste.

Yeshwat Rao,
 mass of basalt,
 bright as any post box,
 the shape of protoplasm
 or a king size lava pie
 thrown against the wall,
 without an arm, a leg
 or even a single head.

Yeshwant Rao.
 He's the god you've got to meet.
 If you're short of a limb,
 Yeshwant Rao will lend you a hand
 and get you back on your feet.
 Yeshwant Rao
 does nothing spectacular.
 He doesn't promise you the earth
 or book your seat on the next rocket to the heaven.
 But if any bones are broken,
 you know he'll mend them.

He'll make you whole in your body
 and hope your spirit will look after itself.
 He is merely a kind of bone setter.
 The only thing is,
 as he himself has no heads, hands and feet,
 he happens to understand you a little better.

General Interpretation:

This poem is one of the sections of 'Jejuri' and it expresses with cutting irony the protagonist's skepticism. Yeshwant Rao is a god of secondary importance which gets even more space than the chief god Malhari Martand. The narrator's tone is however aloof and creates an ambivalent attitude. The poem is perhaps the ironical piece in the anthology and in this poem the narrator assumes the tone of the tourist guide and involving the readers in his reaction, urges them to pay attention to Yeshwant Rao. The narrator sees this god outside the outer wall of the main temple.

The first stanza takes the reader into confidence and suggests that one should not forget to visit Yeshwant Rao at least on his next visit to Jejuri.

In the second stanza, Yeshwant Rao has been considered a second class god and that is why his place is just outside the main temple.

The third stanza tells about the various types of gods who perform many miracles in the life of the devotees.

The fourth stanza describes the outer appearance of Yeshwant Rao who is nothing but a mass of basalt which is the most common and basic form of rock in Maharashtra.

The fifth stanza tells about the miracles which are performed by Yeshwant Rao. One is required to meet such god because if one is short of a limb he will get a hand or feet from this god.

The last stanza tells that he does not do anything spectacular. Yeshwant Rao is a god of modest powers, he is a god of mundane matters rather than a god who will take care of your spiritual matters. As he himself suffers loss of limbs he can understand the similar loss in the devotee. Yeshwant Rao thus seems to be more humane and compassionate god than other gods on the hill.

Lexis:**Repetition:**

The poem is full of repetition of words. The chart makes it clear:

<u>Words</u>	<u>Lines</u>
Yeshwant Rao (five times)	3, 31, 39, 42, 44
god/s (eleven times)	1, 7, 12, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 24, 26, 40
outside (twice)	8, 9
wall (twice)	9, 36
hand/s (twice)	42, 54
head/s (twice)	38, 54
feet (twice)	43, 54
you (seventeen times)	1, 6, 15, 16, 17, 21, 25, 26, 27, 40, 41, 42, 43, 46, 49, 50, 55
your (ten times)	15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 43, 50, 51
he (ten times)	4, 7, 10, 40, 46, 49, 50, 52, 54, 55
his (twice)	3, 8
they (twice)	28, 29
I (thrice)	2, 12, 28
who (seven times)	15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 24, 26
inside (twice)	19, 20
know (twice)	2, 49
only (twice)	7, 53
bone/s (twice)	18, 52

Lexical groupings:

One path of semantic connection runs through the words Yeshwant Rao, god, Jejuri, temple, soul, crown, spirit, heaven. The second group consists of the words related to the area of modern science – basalt, post box, protoplasm, lava, symmetrical, rocket. The third group is related to the physical self of human beings – arm, leg, head, limb, hand, feet, bones, body. The fourth group suggests the commercial world – tradesmen, gold, money, land holdings, new crown, lend.

Semantico-syntactic deviations:

Are you looking for a god?

I know a good one.

His name is

in Jejuri next.

The poem begins with a 'yes/no-type' question as if the question is asked by a priest or a guide at the temple-town. But even before the beginning of the poem, something has been happening. Somebody is looking for a god and the question is an inquiry. The speaker wants to get confirmed whether that 'somebody' is interested in god. If it is so, he wants to show him the one he knows well. The god is not only god but one of the best. The speaker takes the reader into confidence and tells that he should not forget to visit Yeshwant Rao at least on his next visit to the temple-town. The adjectives in these lines attract our attention. There are two adjectives 'good' and 'best'. One is positive and the other is superlative. He immediately exaggerates the god as if the god is his closed friend. The conversational tone adds meaning to the lines. He is speaking as if of a friend rather than a god. Actually, a god is only god. There are no qualities or classes of gods. There is no 'good' god or the 'best' god and 'first class' god or a 'second class' god. But at Jejuri everybody looks for a 'first class' god. This type of god fulfils all the desires (good and evil, both. See: stanza 3) of the devotees. So the devotees at Jejuri always search for such gods. Hence, the speaker recommends to visit Yeshwant Rao.

*Of course he's only a second class god
and his place
..... tradesmen and the lepers.*

The first line of this stanza is foregrounded. The word 'second class' has a collocative clash with 'god'. There can be a second class hotel, a railway coach or a cinema ticket etc. but not a god. The line suggests an admission of the god's inferior status. He is placed outside the main temple – outside even the outer wall as if he is an untouchable god. The cutting irony in the line is notable. The tradesmen and the lepers are measured by the same parameter. Gods are commodities for sale, and the poet, a salesman. A customer can choose the one he likes. But the salesman has a preference for Yeshwant Rao. Cutting sarcasm on Indian multiplicity of gods.

*I've known gods
prettier faced
or straighter laced.
Gods who
..... for my taste.*

In this stanza, the speaker speaks about those gods he is well-conversant with. He changes his tone as he gives us the list of various kinds of gods. The commentary is full of sarcasm and goes near contemptuous attitude. There are god whose faces are not only pretty but prettier ones. Others are well-dressed gods. The expression 'straighter

laced' suggests that the idols are neatly dressed by the artists who make them. But Yeshwant Rao does not come under this type of gods. There are gods who extract gold from the devotees. Sometimes they extract even the soul. Here, the words 'gold' and 'soul' stand for the two worlds – material and the spiritual. The gods make the devotees prosperous neither materially nor spiritually. They are like exploiters. Actually, this comment is not on gods but on the priests and the rest of the paraphernalia who cheat pilgrims. These elements are responsible for the commercialization of religion.

There are gods who compel the sde your wife
Or a knife inside your enemy

suggests that the gods can be benign or malign.

Their sole interest seems to receive various kinds of offerings from the devotees. In these lines a benevolent is followed by an act that should shock moral sensibility of any decent human being. The moral indifference of the gods has been put in such a way as to create nausea about such gods in the mind of the readers.

Syntactically, these lines are a Zeugma in which a single word ('put') stands in the same grammatical relation to two or more other words, but with an obvious shift in its significance. There are also philosopher gods who preach something about how to live life. These gods are entirely money-minded since they double the money and triple the land holdings. Even the gods also amuse themselves by the way the devotees undertake a penance which includes physical torturer – crawl a mile. Line 24 is ambiguous. Another meaning of the line is that the speaker expresses his dislike for the gods who take delight in the suffering of the devotees. The same sense-unit has been extended in lines 26 and 27. The gods become angry if they are not offered a new golden or silver crown and further, they let the devotees drown into the deep waters. This description of gods reinforces the speaker's point of view that these gods at Jejuri are just haughty egoists who do not really love the devotees. In spite of this all of them are to be praised. They are either carefully made by expert artists or they are worshipped in their natural form in which case they are misshapen, often grotesque. Line 30 suggests that there is an air of unreality and exaggeration about their physical appearance.

The feature of this stanza is that it is full of parallel constructions like

1. God who soak you for your gold.
2. Gods who soak you for your soul.
3. Gods who make you walk on a bed of burning coal.

4. Gods who put a child inside you wife.
5. (Gods who put) a knife inside your enemy.
6. Gods who tell you how to live your life.
7. (Gods who) double your money.
8. (Gods who) triple land holdings.
9. Gods who can barely suppress a smile.
10. Gods who will see you drown.
11. they are all to be praised.
12. they are either too symmetrical.
13. (they are) too theatrical for my taste.

The overall rhythmic movement of the poem and particularly this stanza is an imitation of the traditional songs sung at Jejuri. The imitation has been modified by the speaker's own tone and idiom. If we remove the relative pronoun 'who' from all the above sentences, almost all of them would be active sentences in which the noun 'Gods' will be the actor there. But we have to see whether the speaker really wants to speak about the Gods or he wants to say about something else. All the abovementioned sentences are, in a way, foregrounded because literally, the 'Gods' do not soak our gold or soul. This stanza is irony on the commercialized religion. Not the gods but the priests and other concerned people exploit the devotees in every respect. The comments are passed on the men who make use of religion for their own benefit.

*Yeshwant Rao,
Mass of basalt,
Bright.....
.....a single head.*

Here, the speaker moves to the god Yeshwant Rao who is in front of him. Apart from this one, all the stanzas that follow, begin with the name of god 'Yeshwant Rao'. The thread imitating the traditional songs at Jejuri has been extended in these stanzas too. Yeshwant Rao is nothing but a mass of basalt. Basalt is the most common and basic form of rock in Maharashtra. In a way, Yeshwant Rao is a *swayambhu* (not made by any other hand) god and being a mass of basalt, he is a native god in the true sense of the word. The speaker finds similarity between the god and a post box because both are painted red. The image has emerged from his urbanized atmosphere where red post boxes are a common sight. Protoplasm is also called plasma which is a colourless substance like jelly from which old plants and animals have evolved. This word has been used here to suggest shapelessness of the god. The speaker is reminded of a lava pie. Lava is the hot liquid material flowing from a volcano. It formed a hard rock when it had cooled down. A large part of the deccan trap is made of such solidified lava. This god is a part of this rock formation.

This shapeless god who does not have even a single head or other anthropomorphic features is thrown against the wall. The idol is neglected because it is a mere rock. The expression in line 38 mocks at the gods and draws our attention to the multi-headed gods in India. This god is so poor that he does not have even a single head.

There is only one verb in this stanza. An idol of god is placed in temples by performing rituals and much respect is paid to the idol. But Yeshwant Rao did not enjoy this respect. He is simply 'thrown' against the wall and suffers from a deplorable condition. The first conjunction 'or' suggests the god's grotesqueness. The speaker cannot fix his opinion whether the god looks like a post box, or protoplasm, or a king size lava pie.

*Yeshwant Rao.
He's the god.....
.....on your feet.*

The speaker says whatever the god be, we have to meet him. Though a second class god, he is powerful enough to grant your wishes. The expression 'got to meet' indicates a compulsion of some sort. There is a witty use of the colloquial idioms like 'lends a hand', 'get you back on your feet' etc. being a really 'useful god', Yeshwant Rao carries a considerable value. The verb 'lend' suggests the commercialization of the place. Even in religion, 'give and take' policy works.

*Yeshwant Rao
Does.....
..... You a little better.*

Yeshwant Rao does nothing spectacular because no legend depicting miraculous prowess has been associated with this god as there are many legends with Khandoba, the chief god at Jejuri. Even Yeshwant Rao has a history behind him. In medieval times a man, whole in limb (normally from Matang community) was sacrificed (rather he offered himself to be buried alive) before the construction work of a fort, bridges or dams etc. It was believed that the success of such constructions was fully depended on such sacrifice. Yeshwant Rao is such a sacrificed man who was deified posthumously. Now he has been called 'Yeshwant Rao' – the giver of success. As he was flawless in physique he received miraculous powers of bone setting and making the broken limbs whole. The idea of booking a seat on the next rocket to heaven is a novel one. The speaker makes fun of the devotees' belief by converting the traditional promise of heaven into a jet age package tour. The god does not take care of metaphysical matters but he is totally concerned with all the physical or mundane matters. He is just like a

doctor of the body and not of the spirit. In line 53, the expression suggests that the speaker takes a more favourable view of the god than any other god on the hill of Jejuri.

This god is capable of understanding the devotees a little better because he himself suffers loss of limbs. The god, thus, is coloured by humane qualities.

Grammar:

There are six stanzas in the poem. All of them have different structure. There are fifty five lines which are uniquely divided into each stanza. Let us see the following chart:

<u>Stanzas</u>	<u>Lines</u>
1	6
2	5
3	19
4	8
5	5
6	12

The poem consists of twentyseven sentences. One of them is an interrogative. All other sentences end with full-stops and end with the end of the lines. No sentence ends half way through the lines. Apart from one question mark and twentysix full-stops, there are eleven commas and thirteen apostrophes. Most of the spostrophes are used for contractions in the ‘pronoun+auxiliary’ constructions like he’s, I’ve etc.

The amount of apostrophes gives the poem a direct narrative tone. Moreover, the overall structure of the poem is that of a song. This feature establishes its relation with the atmosphere at Jejuri.

The question in the first line is like a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is an inquiry made by a devotee, and on the other hand, it is a question asked by a sceptic who does not believe in the concept of god. Further, this attitude of the speaker has been continued with an ironical tone throughout the poem. Even though he tells that he knows ‘one good god’ and goes on describing him, his inner self is against the commercialized religion.

The poet has dispensed with the convention of beginning each new line with a capital letter. This can be considered an informal air.

All the lines are of unequal length. The minimum number of words in the lines is two and the maximum is ten. It is observed that the lines containing 5, 6 and 7 words occur dominantly. The indefinite article dominantly occurs in the poem.

There are many lines beginning with the coordinating conjunctions ‘or’ and ‘and’. This adds to the speed of the poem and its musical effect.

Pronouns:

There is a remarkable amount of pronouns in the poem (see: the repetition chart). Particularly, the second person pronoun ‘you’, its possessive form ‘your’, the third person singular pronoun ‘he’ and the relative pronoun ‘who’ occur dominantly in the poem. There is an indefinite use of pronouns ‘you’ which, sometimes, is used with indefinite generic reference to people. ‘You’ is the informal equivalent of ‘one’ e.g.

- a) One never knows what may happen.
- b) You never know what may happen.

In the indefinite use of ‘you’ the speaker also is included as the sharer of the experience. The same is the case with the speaker in the poem, too. For instance, when he says that ‘Yeshwant Rao does not ‘promise you the earth’, it means that Yeshwant Rao has not promised the earth to the speaker, too.

The Degree:

Notably, the adjectives with their degrees are found in the poem as follows:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
good (line 2)	better (line 55) outer (line 9) prettier (line 13) straighter (line 14)	best (line 4)

Tense:

The poet has made many experiments with the tense. In all, the poem is in the present tense, but there are other forms of the tenses as follows:

- a) Are you looking for a god? (present continuous)
- b) I’ve known gods (present perfect)
- c) Gods who will see you (simple future)

- d) Yeshwant Rao will lend you (simple future)
- e) he'll mend them (simple future)
- f) He'll make you (simple future)
- g) Spirit will look after (simple future)

Most of the simple future constructions have a conditional clause beginning with 'if'. So the selection restriction rule has compelled the simple future to exist.

The fourth stanza does not indicate any tense, but it can be included under the head of simple present. The ellipsis of the tense (is) has been created with the help of a comma after the name 'Yeshwant Rao'. The past participle 'thrown' functions more like an adjective than a verb.

The simple present is considered 'timeless' present. This form of the tense contributes to the unity of the poem.

Phonetics:

The nasals /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/ dominantly occur in the poem. Almost all the lines have at least one of the nasals. Only the following lines do not have any of the nasals:

Line Nos. 13, 14, 15, 16 and 21.

Some sounds are kept in proximity with each other as follows:

Voiced bilabial plosive /b/

bed of burning	line 18
basalt bright as any post box	lines 32-33
bones are broken	line 48

Voiceless velar plosive /k/

make you walk	line 17
---------------	---------

Lateral sound /l/

live your life	line 21
triple your land holding	line 23
barely suppress a smile	line 24
crawl a mile	line 25
symmetrical or too theatrical	lines 29-30
will lend you	line 42

The diphthong /au/

Outside even the outer	line 9
------------------------	--------

The last two lines have alliteration of the glottal fricative /h/

he himself had no heads, hands and feet,
he happens.....

As the poem has been written in free verse, there is no specially arranged rhyme scheme. However, some rhyming has been arranged to give the poem a musical effect. Let us see the rhyming words as follows:

<u>Words</u>	<u>Lines</u>
best – next	4, 6
faced – laced	13, 14
soul – coal	16, 18
wife – life	19, 21
enemy – money	20, 22
drown – crown	26, 27
meet – feet	40, 43

There is no perfect rhyming in the pairs like ‘best – next’ or ‘enemy – money’. Only their last sounds rhyme with each other. Apart from these, there are some internal rhymes which fall somewhere around the definition of the term. They are as follows:

<u>Words</u>	<u>Lines</u>
wife – knife	19, 20
smile – mile	24, 25
symmetrical – theatrical	29, 30

The following assonances are found in the poem:

<u>Vowel</u>	<u>Lines</u>	<u>Words</u>
/Yu/	15, 16	soak, gold, soak, soul
/ai/	19, 20, 21	child, inside, wife, knife, inside, life
/Ō/	54, 55	has, hand, and, happens, understand

Lines 15 and 16 are a notable pair for its syllables and musicality. A good reader of poetry will definitely stress the content words like Gods, soak, gold etc. Even the number of letters in both the lines is the same.

All the elements of language, thus, contribute to the meaning of the poem.

References:

- Ching, M.K.L., et al (1980) (eds.), Linguistic Perspectives on Literature, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul
 Fowler, R. (1986), Linguistic Criticism, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press

- Freeman, Donald C. (1981), (ed.), Essays in Modern Stylistics, London, Methuen
- Leech, G.N. (1965), This Bread I Break : Language and Interpretation, in Freeman (1970)
- Leech, G.N. (1969), A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry, London, Longman
- Kolatkari, Arun (1976), Jejuri, Bombay, Clearing House
- Short, M.H. (1985), Who is Stylistics? in 'Focus on English', July 1985, 1:3 (British Council)