

Text- “The Horseshoe Shrine” by Arun Kolatkar

That nick in the rock
is really a kick in the side of the hill.
It's where a hoof
struck

like a thunderbolt
when Khandoba
with the bride sidesaddle behind him on the blue
horse

jumped across the valley
and the three
went on from there like one
spark

fleeing from flint.
To a home that waited
on the other side of the hill like a hay
stack.

Critical Analysis of Arun Kolatkar's "The Horseshoe Shrine"

-Prepared by Dr. Tanimma Dutta

Introduction:

Arun Kolatkar's "The Horseshoe Shrine" is one of the thirty-one poems included in his acclaimed poetry collection *Jejuri* (1976), a work that earned him the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977. Based on the poet's visit to the pilgrimage town of Jejuri in Maharashtra, the collection explores the intersections of myth, religion, history, and everyday life. Throughout the volume, Kolatkar presents sacred spaces through the perspective of a detached observer who neither wholly embraces nor dismisses religious faith. "The Horseshoe Shrine" exemplifies this characteristic approach by transforming a seemingly insignificant mark on a rock into a symbol of divine intervention through the power of local folklore. The poem demonstrates how myths become inseparable from the physical landscape, allowing ordinary objects to acquire sacred significance.

Myth and the Transformation of Landscape

The central concern of the poem is the transformation of an ordinary natural object into a sacred relic through mythology. The poem opens with the observation:

*"That nick in the rock
is really a kick in the side of the hill."*

At first glance, the speaker notices only a small indentation in the rock. However, the adverb *"really"* immediately shifts the reader's perception from the material world to the mythical one. The mark is not interpreted as a natural geological formation but as the hoof-print left by the divine horse of Khandoba. In this way, Kolatkar illustrates how cultural memory and religious belief reshape the perception of physical reality. The landscape becomes a repository of stories, where hills, rocks, and valleys are understood through the legends associated with them rather than through scientific explanation.

The poem thus suggests that sacred geography is not created solely by natural features but by the narratives that communities preserve over generations. The physical environment becomes meaningful because it is continually interpreted through myth.

The Legend of Khandoba

The poem is rooted in the popular Maharashtrian legend of Khandoba, a regional manifestation of Lord Shiva, who is widely worshipped as the guardian deity of Jejuri. According to folklore, Khandoba eloped with his bride Banai, carrying her on his blue horse. While crossing the valley, the horse struck the hillside with its hoof, leaving behind the mark that later became an object of pilgrimage.

Rather than recounting the entire legend, Kolatkar condenses the narrative into a few carefully selected images:

*"when Khandoba
with the bride sidesaddle behind him on the blue
horse"*

This compression of narrative is one of the poem's greatest strengths. The poet captures only the decisive moment of the miraculous leap, allowing readers to reconstruct the larger myth from a few vivid details. The economy of expression reflects Kolatkar's modernist poetic technique, in which suggestion replaces elaborate narration.

Myth-Making and the Construction of Sacred Space

A significant aspect of the poem is its exploration of myth-making as a cultural process. The poem demonstrates how an insignificant feature of the landscape becomes invested with sacred meaning through collective belief. The "nick in the rock" is transformed into evidence of divine presence because generations of devotees have preserved and transmitted the legend associated with it.

Importantly, Kolatkar neither confirms nor denies the historical authenticity of the miracle. His narrator records the legend without overt devotion or scepticism. This balanced narrative stance allows the poem to explore the psychological and cultural power of myth rather than its factual accuracy. The poet invites readers to observe how belief itself creates sacred spaces by attaching extraordinary meanings to ordinary objects.

This characteristic detachment is one of the defining features of *Jejuri*. Throughout the collection, Kolatkar presents religious practices with quiet curiosity, allowing multiple interpretations to coexist without imposing a single authoritative perspective.

Imagery and the Representation of Movement

Although remarkably brief, the poem possesses extraordinary kinetic energy. Nearly every image conveys movement: the horse strikes the hill, leaps across the valley, carries the bride, and continues its journey without pause. This continuous motion creates a sense of dramatic immediacy.

The poem reaches its imaginative climax in the comparison:

*"like one spark
fleeing from flint."*

This simile is particularly significant because it compresses speed, brilliance, and energy into a single image. Just as a spark emerges suddenly from struck flint, Khandoba's leap appears instantaneous and miraculous. The image also evokes light, suggesting divine vitality and supernatural force.

The concluding comparison,

*"To a home that waited
on the other side of the hill like a hay
stack."*

introduces an unexpected contrast. After the dynamic movement of the leap, the poem concludes with an image of domestic stability and rural simplicity. The haystack symbolizes abundance, shelter, and peaceful rural life. Thus, the miraculous journey culminates not in spectacle but in the ordinary fulfilment of homecoming.

Symbolism

The symbolic richness of the poem contributes significantly to its thematic depth. The horseshoe mark symbolizes the intersection between material reality and spiritual imagination. It functions simultaneously as a physical object and as evidence of divine presence within local belief.

The blue horse symbolizes supernatural power, freedom, and divine agency. Its remarkable leap across the valley signifies the transcendence of natural limitations, while the valley itself symbolizes obstacles overcome through divine intervention.

The image of the spark symbolizes sudden revelation, vitality, and the fleeting nature of miraculous experience. In contrast, the haystack symbolizes permanence, domesticity, and fulfilment. Together these contrasting images balance movement and stillness, adventure and arrival, miracle and everyday life.

Language, Structure, and Style

One of Kolatkar's greatest achievements lies in his ability to employ simple language while conveying profound cultural meanings. The poem consists almost entirely of everyday words such as *nick*, *kick*, *hoof*, *hill*, *spark*, and *haystack*. The absence of elevated or highly Sanskritised diction reflects Kolatkar's commitment to modern conversational English.

The poem also makes effective use of enjambment. Sentences flow naturally across line breaks, creating a rhythm that mirrors the movement of the galloping horse. The short lines slow the reader's pace while simultaneously emphasizing individual images. This fragmented structure contributes to the visual quality of the poem, allowing each image to emerge with clarity and precision.

Kolatkar's style is notably cinematic. Rather than providing elaborate description, he presents a sequence of sharply focused visual moments. The reader witnesses the hoof striking the hill, the leap across the valley, the flash of the spark, and finally the waiting home. This economy of expression enhances the poem's imaginative impact.

Faith, Ambiguity, and Modern Sensibility

A distinguishing feature of *The Horseshoe Shrine* is its treatment of faith. Unlike traditional devotional poetry, Kolatkar neither glorifies the miracle nor dismisses it as superstition. Instead, he adopts the position of an observer who records the beliefs of the local community with sensitivity and restraint.

This ambiguity reflects the broader concerns of *Jejuri*, where sacred traditions are viewed through a modern consciousness. Kolatkar recognizes the imaginative and cultural value of religious myths without insisting upon their literal truth. The poem therefore occupies a space between belief and scepticism, inviting readers to appreciate mythology as a living cultural force.

By refusing to resolve this tension, Kolatkar allows the poem to remain open to multiple interpretations. A believer may read it as an affirmation of divine presence, while a sceptical

reader may interpret it as an illustration of humanity's tendency to transform ordinary objects into sacred symbols through storytelling.

Significance of the Title of “The Horseshoe Shrine”:

The title “The Horseshoe Shrine” is highly significant because it immediately introduces the central idea of the poem- the transformation of an ordinary object into a sacred symbol through myth and popular belief. A "horseshoe" is usually associated with a horse, while a "shrine" is a place of worship. By combining these two words, Arun Kolatkar draws attention to the process through which an ordinary hoof-mark becomes an object of religious reverence.

The title refers to the legendary hoof-print believed to have been left by the blue horse of Khandoba, the folk deity of Jejuri. According to local folklore, Khandoba, with his bride Banai riding sidesaddle behind him, leapt across a valley, and the horse's hoof struck the hillside, leaving a permanent mark on the rock. This mark later became a shrine where devotees offer prayers. Thus, the title reflects the close relationship between mythology, landscape, and religious faith.

The title also captures one of the major concerns of *Jejuri*-the coexistence of the sacred and the ordinary. What appears to be merely "a nick in the rock" is regarded by believers as evidence of divine intervention. Through the title, Kolatkar suggests that faith has the power to transform everyday objects into sacred relics. It symbolizes how human imagination and collective memory shape the meaning of places.

Moreover, the word "shrine" emphasizes the cultural importance of local traditions and oral legends. Kolatkar neither confirms nor denies the truth of the legend; instead, he presents it with detached curiosity, allowing readers to appreciate its symbolic and cultural significance.

Therefore, the title is not merely descriptive but deeply symbolic. It encapsulates the poem's exploration of myth, faith, folklore, and the sanctification of the natural landscape. By focusing on a simple horseshoe mark that has become a shrine, Kolatkar highlights the enduring power of belief to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Themes:

Several important themes emerge from the poem:

- The relationship between myth and reality.
- The transformation of ordinary landscapes into sacred spaces.
- The cultural power of folklore and oral tradition.
- The coexistence of faith and scepticism.
- The interaction between history, memory, and imagination.
- The sacred significance of ordinary objects.
- The continuity of regional cultural identity through myth.

Conclusion

The Horseshoe Shrine exemplifies Arun Kolatkar's distinctive poetic vision, in which myth, landscape, and everyday experience merge seamlessly. Through a deceptively simple description of a mark on a rock, the poem reveals how folklore transforms ordinary places into sacred sites and how collective memory shapes human perception of the physical world. Kolatkar's restrained narration, vivid imagery, symbolic richness, and conversational language demonstrate his mastery of modern poetic expression. Rather than endorsing or rejecting religious belief, the poem invites readers to contemplate the enduring power of myth to animate landscapes and preserve cultural identity. As a result, *The Horseshoe Shrine* stands as a significant example of Kolatkar's exploration of the complex relationship between faith, imagination, and reality in *Jejuri*.