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Religious Skepticism in Philip Larkin's *Church Going*, *Faith Healer*, and Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to compare, connect, and analyze the themes of religious skepticism in Philip Larkin's *Church Going* and Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*. By focusing on their respective portrayals of the loss of faith in modern times, the paper examines the modern skeptical personas present in both poets. The poets question the relevance of religion and religious practices in a world increasingly influenced by scientific progress. Through selected lines from both works, the paper critically analyzes the attitudes of both poets toward religious institutions and rituals, illustrating their shared skepticism and reflections on faith. Larkin's *Church Going* questions the future of the church, while Kolatkar's *Jejuri* offers a more radical critique of traditional pilgrimage. Despite their skepticism, both poets exhibit sympathy and sensitivity toward human experiences within these religious contexts.

Keywords: Philip Larkin, Arun Kolatkar, Religious Skepticism, *Church Going*, *Jejuri*, Modern Poetry, Loss of Faith, Religion, Pilgrimage.

Introduction

Philip Larkin (1922–1985), an influential figure in English postmodern poetry, is well-known for works such as *The Whitsun Weddings*, *High Windows*, and *Church Going*. His poetry often explores themes of faith, existential doubt, and the human experience in the modern world. Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004), an important Indian poet writing in English, is celebrated for his bilingual works. His poetry collection *Jejuri* (1974), which offers a critical yet empathetic view of the pilgrimage site Jejuri, won the Commonwealth Prize for Best Book of Verse in 1976. In *Jejuri*, Kolatkar presents a radical, skeptical view of religious practices and their place in contemporary society.

This paper explores the shared themes of religious skepticism in Larkin's *Church Going* and Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, examining how both poets react to the loss of faith in modern times and critique religious institutions and rituals. Through detailed textual analysis, this paper argues that, while skeptical, both poets offer a sympathetic and sensitive portrayal of human experiences connected to religion and spirituality.

Literature Review

Philip Larkin's poem *Church Going* and Arun Kolatkar's poetry collection *Jejuri* both explore the theme of religious skepticism. They question the role of religion, its institutions, and rituals in a world where faith seems to be fading. This review examines what scholars have said about these works, focusing on how both poets express doubt about religion while still showing a deep understanding of the human connection to faith. By examining their unique perspectives, we can see how these two poets, from very different cultures, address similar issues.

The Decline of Religious Faith:

One common idea in discussions about both Larkin and Kolatkar is how they explore the decline of faith in modern society. Larkin's *Church Going* reflects on how churches are becoming less relevant in post-war England. The speaker in the poem enters an empty church, not to worship but out of curiosity, and wonders what will happen to such spaces in the future. Scholars like King (2009) note that the church in Larkin's poem feels more like a relic or museum than a place of spiritual significance.

On the other hand, Kolatkar's *Jejuri* presents a sharper critique of religion in India. Set in the pilgrimage town of Jejuri, Kolatkar's poems focus on temples falling apart and rituals that feel hollow. Nikam (2008) argues that the ruins in *Jejuri* symbolize how faith is crumbling in a world that is becoming more practical and less spiritual. While Larkin reflects on fading tradition, Kolatkar actively questions the value of these traditions in a modern context.

Skepticism Toward Religious Institutions and Rituals:

Both poets focus on the physical spaces of religious churches and temples, but instead of seeing them as sacred, they describe them as ordinary or decaying. In *Church Going*, Larkin reduces the church to its basic elements:

*"Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books, sprawling's of flowers, cut.
For Sunday, brownish now."*

This description makes the church seem like just another building, empty of its spiritual meaning. Naik (1984) explains that Larkin's skepticism lies in his questioning of whether churches have any real purpose in a society that is losing faith.

Similarly, Kolatkar's *Jejuri* examines temples not as holy places but as ruins. In the poem "Heart of Ruin," he describes a broken temple where:

"The roof comes down on Maruti's head.

Nobody seems to mind."

Kolatkar points out how people have become indifferent to the state of these religious spaces, suggesting that their spiritual significance is fading. Jadhav (2021) notes that Kolatkar uses humor and sharp observations to highlight how religion is often treated more as a tradition or business than something deeply spiritual.

The Human Connection to Faith:

Even though both poets are skeptical about religion, they also show an understanding of why people turn to faith. Larkin, for example, acknowledges in *Church Going* that churches still hold meaning for people as places where they can reflect on life and its mysteries. He writes:

"A serious house on serious earth it is,

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet."

This line suggests that even if people don't believe in God, churches still serve as spaces where they can confront life's big questions. Scholars like King (2009) point out that Larkin's skepticism isn't dismissive; he respects the role that religion plays in people's lives, even as its influence fades.

In Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, there's a similar recognition of the human need for faith, even in the face of decay and doubt. For example, in the poem "The Mongrel Bitch," Kolatkar describes a stray dog taking shelter in a ruined temple. Scholars like Nikam (2008) see this as a metaphor for resilience:

even as religious structures fall apart, they still provide a kind of refuge. Kolatkar critiques religion, but he doesn't dismiss the emotional and cultural connections that people have to it.

Balancing Skepticism with Empathy:

What makes both Larkin and Kolatkar stand out is their ability to balance their doubt about religion with feelings of empathy for people. In Larkin's poem *Faith Healing*, for instance, he pokes fun at the idea of a faith healer but also shows pity for the women who come to him for comfort:

"Their eyes

Shrink to their final tears, their hearts remain.

Almost nothing."

Here, Larkin captures the vulnerability of those who turn to faith in moments of despair. He doesn't believe in the faith healer's powers, but he understands why people need hope.

Kolatkar's *Jejuri* has similar moments of empathy. In "Chaitanya," for example, Kolatkar reflects on the quiet strength of people who maintain their faith despite the flaws in religious practices. Patel (2021) argues that these moments demonstrate Kolatkar's sensitivity to the struggles of ordinary people who hold on to faith for comfort and meaning.

Comparing Two Perspectives:

Though Larkin and Kolatkar write from very different cultural backgrounds, their works share common themes. Larkin's church reflects the decline of Christianity in the West, while Kolatkar's temples reveal the tension between tradition and modernity in India. Scholars like Naik (1984) and Jadhav (2021) suggest that despite these differences, both poets are ultimately exploring how faith

is challenged in an increasingly skeptical world. They show us that while religion might be fading, the human need for meaning and connection remains.

The works of Philip Larkin and Arun Kolatkar offer thoughtful and critical perspectives on religion and faith in modern times. Both poets question the relevance of religious institutions and rituals, yet they also show empathy for the people who still find solace in them. Larkin's *Church Going* reflects a quiet contemplation of the church's fading role, while Kolatkar's *Jejuri* takes a more direct and critical approach to the decay of temples and traditions. Together, these works reveal the complexities of navigating faith in a world that is increasingly skeptical but still deeply human.

Religious Skepticism in Philip Larkin's *Church Going*, *Faith Healer*, and Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*:

1. The Role of Religious Institutions in Modern Society

Larkin's *Church Going* begins with a seemingly casual visit to a church, where the speaker reflects on the church's future role in society. In the opening lines:

*"Once I am sure nothing is going on,
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church, matting seats, and stone"*

These lines suggest that the speaker's visit is not motivated by faith but rather by curiosity, as if the church were just another building to explore. The speaker questions the utility of the church, pondering its future once religious activities have ceased. Similarly, Kolatkar's *Jejuri* begins with the poem "The Bus," where the protagonist, Manohar, arrives at Jejuri not as a devotee but as a tourist. Describing his arrival:

“The door was open.

Manohar thought

It was one more temple.

He looked inside.

Wondering

Which God he was going to find”

In both poems, the religious institutions (whether a church or a temple) lack holiness for the speakers. They are merely exploring, rather than worshipping, in these places of religious significance. Both poets, therefore, highlight the erosion of faith in contemporary society, leading to a more skeptical view of religious rituals and practices.

2. Skepticism and the Materialization of Religious Icons

Both poets, in their portrayal of religious settings, focus heavily on the material aspects—architecture, ruins, and statues—rather than the spiritual or divine nature of these places. In Larkin’s *Church Going*, the church is described as a “frowsty barn,” emphasizing its physical, architectural qualities:

“What this accoutered frowsty barn is worth”

Similarly, in *Jejuri*, Kolatkar examines the material aspect of religious icons with a critical eye. In the poem “Heart of Ruin,” Kolatkar describes the ruin of a temple:

“The roof comes down on Maruti’s head.

Nobody seems to mind.

Least of all, Maruti himself.

Maybe he likes the temple better this way.”

Here, Kolatkar portrays Maruti (a Hindu god) in a ruinous temple, emphasizing the degradation of holy spaces and the irrelevance of their divinity in the face of physical decay. Both Larkin and Kolatkar suggest that religious institutions and icons have lost their sacred significance for the modern skeptic, reduced instead to mere physical structures and objects.

3. The Question of Utility and the Human Connection to Religious Spaces

Larkin's *Church Going* raises the question of what will happen to the church when people no longer attend it for religious purposes. The speaker contemplates:

"For whom was built

This special shell? For, though, I've no idea.

What this accoutered frowsty barn is worth?"

This question echoes the broader theme of religious skepticism: What is the purpose of the church in a society that no longer finds spiritual meaning in it? Kolatkar, too, questions the utility of religious spaces in *Jejuri*. In "The Mongrel Bitch," he describes how a dog finds shelter in the ruins of a temple:

"The Mongrel bitch has found a place

For herself and her puppies

In the heart of the ruin."

Here, Kolatkar seems to suggest that the only real function of the temple now is to provide shelter, just as Larkin questions whether churches will continue to serve any real function once their religious purpose fades. Both poets highlight the disconnect between the original religious purpose and the contemporary experience of these spaces.

4. A Sympathetic View of Human Suffering

While both Larkin and Kolatkar express skepticism toward religion, they also display sensitivity and empathy for human suffering. In Larkin's *Faith Healing*, the speaker mocks the faith healer and his followers but also conveys a sense of pity for those seeking healing:

*“Slowly, the women file to where he stands
Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair,
Dark suit, white collar. Stewards tirelessly
Persuade them onwards to his voice and hands”*

Similarly, in *Jejuri*, when Manohar encounters a beggar woman, he feels pity for her situation and gives her more money than she asks for, here also, the aspect of humanism takes place. Kolatkar portrays the emotional vulnerability of individuals caught in the act of faith, offering a compassionate view of their circumstances despite the broader skepticism:

*“And the hills crack.
And the temples crack.
And the sky falls”*

Both poets, while critical of religious practices, are not indifferent to the human condition. Their sympathy for the individuals within these religious contexts shows a deeper understanding of the complexities of faith and human suffering.

Conclusion

Philip Larkin's *Church Going* and Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* offer much to consider when it comes to religion and faith in modern life. Both poets begin with skepticism, questioning whether religious

spaces, rituals, and traditions still matter in a world that is becoming increasingly secular and practical. Yet what makes their work so powerful is that they don't just critique religion; instead, they explore the deeper, more human side of why people hold faith in their lives even when the institutions seem to fail them.

In *Church Going*, Larkin takes us into a quiet, empty church that feels more like a museum than a place of worship. The speaker's curiosity is casual and almost disrespectful at first, but by the end of the poem, there is some realization that churches, even in their fading relevance, still hold a unique place in people's lives. Larkin doesn't come to any big conclusions about faith or God, but he acknowledges that these spaces give people a chance to reflect on life's big questions. As he writes, churches are "serious houses on serious earth." Even for someone who doesn't believe, they still mean something.

Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, on the other hand, takes us to a very different world—a pilgrimage town in India full of temples that are falling apart. His approach is sharper and more critical than Larkin's. He shows us temples where idols are falling and rituals feel hollow, and he isn't afraid to point out the contradictions in religious practices. Yet, even as Kolatkar questions the value of these traditions, he also shows moments of kindness. In a poem about a stray dog taking shelter in a ruined temple, we see how even a decayed space can still provide refuge—just as faith, for all its faults, can still give people comfort.

What ties both poets together is their ability to balance doubt with understanding. They're skeptical, yes, but not dismissive. Larkin, for example, reflects on how people turn to faith healers in moments of disappointment. He doesn't believe in the healer's powers, but he sympathizes with the emotional needs of those seeking help. Similarly, Kolatkar critiques the commercialization of religion but also honors the resilience of the people who maintain their faith despite the decay

around them. These moments remind us that faith isn't just about institutions or rituals—it's about the deep human need for meaning, connection, and hope.

When we look at the two poets' side by side, we see how their cultural contexts have shaped their perspectives. Larkin's church represents the decline of Christianity in the West, while Kolatkar's temples reflect the tension between tradition and modernity in India. But at their core, both works wrestle with the same universal questions: What happens to faith when the world around us changes? Their answers may be different, but they both agree that, even as religion fades or evolves, the human need for something to hold on to remains alive.

In the end, *Church Going* and *Jejuri* leave us with more questions than answers, and that is part of their beauty as works of art, like poetry. They challenge us to think critically about religion, but they also remind us to approach it with empathy. Whether we find meaning in churches, temples, or somewhere else entirely, these works show us that the search for meaning is a shared human experience—one that continues even in the face of doubt. The way these two poets make us think about how humanism will shape our lives and our faith in religion is profound. The doubt in their poems is framed as a message to wake up and have faith in a humanistic approach to religion.

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