

Summary of The Bus

'The Bus' by Arun Kolatkar is a poem about a visitor's travel experience to Jejuri. The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned-down as the journey taken by the visitor is during a rainy night. It is typical of Indian buses to have only tarpaulin flaps instead of glass-shutters during 1976. The tarpaulin flaps beating at one's elbow or even face refers to the exasperating experience the visitor had to undergo. "Your own divided face" talks of the imprisoned situation where one can see nothing but his own reflections. There is no description of the onward movement present in the poem, yet it felt through the reflection in the old man's glasses. The visitor embodies the modern skepticism of religious superstition, whereas the caste mark symbolizes the religious faith of the old generation.

The monotonous journey and the bumpy ride, come to an end by the streaks of sunlight shooting into the bus. His purpose of the visit has nothing to do with the old man traveled with him, so the speakers warn the visitor not to entertain a conversation or get his view of religion or about the place.

You can read the full poem of here.

Theme and Setting of The Bus

The main theme of the poem 'The Bus' is about the visitor's travel experience. Inside this simple theme, the poet has woven the themes of contrasting religious faith and opinion between old and young/modern generation. In the last line, "you don't step inside the old man's head" the poet talks of the inflexibility of the modern generation who has no patience to listen to the stories or experiences of the old people.

The setting of the poem is the bus itself. The whole poem is set on the bus along with various screenshots of images at different times of the journey. The speaker is addressing a visitor who is on his way to Jejuri along with fellow passengers. Whether the speaker is present the bus or not is uncertain. Still, He talks of what the visitor can expect in his journey. This could also be interpreted as advice to a person who is intending to go on a pilgrimage to Jejuri.

Form and Structure of The Bus

'The Bus' is a free verse of 25 lines carelessly arranged to form the poem. The poem has no specific rhyme scheme too. It is a simple descriptive poem about the journey to Jejuri. He has captured the scenes outside and inside in the well-depicted images. With his objective view and phrases like 'you look down', "your own divided face", "your elbow", "you get off the bus" take the readers on a journey to Jejuri. The poem's loosely set structure and his choice of simple language help to deal with his major theme, the journey in India. The poem is conversational in tone, for the poet keeps talking or giving guidance to the visitor about the experience of traveling on a bus to Jejuri.

Analysis of The Bus

Lines 1 to 5

The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned down

(. . .)

And slapping a corner of tarpaulin at your elbow.

The poem 'The Bus' opens with the poet's description of the bus which is on its way up to Jejuri. The poem was written in 1976, so the windows of the state transport bus is covered with tarpaulin flaps, instead of glass. As the bus keeps moving forward, the cold wind blows heavily on the tarpaulin and tries to move it. Its constant attempt is described as "whipping" and "slapping", especially of the human attributes of anger and displeasure. The wind blowing on the tarpaulin, 'at your elbow' presents the speaker/poet as an observer than the subject. And the use of verbs like 'slapping' and 'whipping' is used to give life to the wind and so it is the personification of wind.

Lines 6 and 10

You look down to the roaring road.

(. . .)

Is all the countryside you get to see.

As the journey moves forward, in the lines from six to ten the poet talks about the natural curiosity of a traveler to look outside. The tarpaulin is not see-through and tied to the window, so, everything the visitor could see is the “roaring road”. The poet further states, the visitor may vainly try to look for daybreak in the limited light spilling out from the bus, for they are traveling at night. Searching for the signs of daybreak indicates the restlessness of the fellow traveler for the journey to end sooner or the eagerness to be in “Jejuri”. However hard the traveler may try, all the scenes he gets to see is of the divided self of himself in the “pair of glasses on an oldman`s nose”.

The “divided face” is of a retrospective in nature, for the person has to deal with his divided self. In this context, the divided self depicts the poet’s religious beliefs and modern skepticism.

Lines 11 to 16

You seem to move continually forward.

(. . .)

And shoots at the oldman`s glasses.

Despite no description of moving forward, the poet in ‘The Bus’ says the traveler could know that he is moving forward towards the destination – to the ruins of Jejuri. As he was observing the divided face on the old man’s spectacles, he looks further at the “caste mark”, which depicts the religious belief. That symbolic representation of the caste mark indicates the difference between the old man’s religious faith and of the young traveler. By then, he notices the sun’s rays seeping through the eyelet in the tarpaulin and reflecting at the old man’s glasses. The verbs ‘shoots’ and ‘aims’ used in these lines personify the sun.

Lines 17 to 20

A sawed off sunbeam comes to rest gently against the driver`s right temple.

(. . .)

When you get off the bus.

Lines from 17 to 20 of the poem 'The Bus,' gives the picture of daybreak and its view inside the bus. Outside the bus, the sun has risen. As the bus changes direction, a "sawed off sunbeam" falls on the right temple of the driver. The "Sawed-off sunbeam" indicates the sharpness of the sun rays and serve as strong visual imagery. Since the poet is also an artist, bringing art into writing is never an issue for the poet. This is personified by the poet as if the sunbeam coming to rest gently on the temple of the driver, like a human being. Finally, they have reached their destination at the end of the bumpy ride. "With your own face on the either side" indicates the hard path one has to take to reach the destination.

Line 21

You dont step inside the old man`s head.

The single, last line of the poem 'The Bus,' indicates the poet's attitude towards going to Jejuri. The "old man's head" represents his belief. The poet does not want to have a conversation with the old for, as the young generation of his time, he is indifferent to the religious belief. He, also instruct the traveler not to "step inside the old man's head". The old man is used to symbolize the old generation and the traveler symbolizes the young generation in modern society. While the former visits the religious monuments like Jejuri with devotion, the later goes not with such belief.

About Arun Kolatkar

Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar is a Marathi poet, who wrote with ease in Marathi and English. He was born on 1st November 1932 and died on 25th September 2004. During his lifetime, he has influenced many Marathi poets by his works. He has received Sahitya Akademi Award in 2005 and Commonwealth writers' prize in 1977.