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# The Thematic and the Structural Semblances: A Study of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*

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### Abstract

T.S. Eliot, the world-famous modern poet, has written *The Waste Land* (1922), one of the seminal works in the history of English literature. In this poem, he has portrayed a horrible vision of chaos and disorder seen after the First World War in Europe. He finds the outcome is deadly and macabre. Society has lost its harmony and coherence. Along with the impact of war on the socio-psychological sphere, the poet is also concerned about the spiritual vacuity, making the situation far more pathetic. People have detached themselves from divinity. They become hopeless and helpless. Eliot recommends only faith in God can restore the situation from this severe damage. Arun Kolatkar, a much-known face in the sphere of Indian English Literature, has written *Jejuri*, a wonderful collection of poetry on the pilgrimage site of Khandoba in Pune. But this poem is not written in praise of the deity. Instead, this entire religious establishment is treated very sceptically. With farce and satire, the poet investigates varieties disputes and controversies, very much discernible in the divine domain of Jejuri. Spirituality is found absolutely deplorable. It is also one kind of crisis detected by Kolatkar. Thus, despite the geo-psychological and socio-political differences, *The Waste Land* and *Jejuri* are found to share a common idea. Both the poems deal with spiritual sterility, a matter of concern for the entire world.

Keywords: Spiritual Sterility, Doubt, Distrust, Skepticism, Disbelief, Denial.

## Introduction

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), a widely acclaimed Modernist poet, play writer and critic, was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. His *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, is a supreme example of the modern poem, having an exclusive novelty in structure, style and content. It has explored the depression and degradation of the post First World War era of the western civilisation. Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), a bilingual poet, writing both in English and Marathi, is a poet par excellence. He is one of the leading literary voices of his generation who has contributed immensely towards raising Indian English poetry to its present canonical status. He has received the distinguished Commonwealth Writer's Prize for his poem *Jejuri*. It is regarded as one of the great books of modern India. According to a critic, *Jejuri* is dealing with the images of "aridity and ugliness, decay and neglect, fossilisation and perversion". Both the texts are remarkable in their approach and appeal. They have made significant contributions to the literature of their respective countries. This paper tries to compare both the poems regarding their conceptual and constructional semblances.

A close analysis of both the poems reveals that they are basically a social and cultural scanning of the twentieth century's modern Europe and India. Of course, the background is different. *The Waste Land* contemplates the invalid and puerile human life in post-World War Europe. The outcome of the war-oriented devastation and destruction and its impact on the human mind are wonderfully pronounced by Eliot. At the same time, *Jejuri* examines the commercial world of India, where everything is going on in terms of cash and coin. In this poem, it is highlighted why religion cannot free itself from the vicious impact of money. But interestingly, *The Waste Land* of Eliot is not the saga of Europe only. It can be found anywhere in this modern world. Due to this easy connectivity, this poem is not strictly restricted to a particular domain. Instead, it becomes a mouthpiece of the world as a whole.

In *Jejuri*, the poet visits the holy place to know about its actual reality. He has scrutinised every aspect of this place so that truth becomes transparent. The result is heartbreaking. It shows how disastrously religious tradition and rituals are over-clouded by decay,

corruption and dilapidation. He is unhappy when he finds that everything comes under the control of materialism, commercialism, artificiality, hypocrisy and blind faith. He observes that it has completely deteriorated the old faith and beliefs. Scepticism has occupied the place of simple devotion. Doubt and denial cannot be prevented any more.

It is an experience of a place situated in India where the majority of the people are found as blind believers in God. They don't even know that they have shown their faith in a wrong place where only material gains matter. Their unconditional devotion has convinced them that everything is fine and absolutely alright. They fail to understand that they are not on the right path. The child-like simplicity of the devotees is taken for granted. Only ritual and superstition play a major role. Spirituality is poorly treated. A total mess has decomposed the entire system. The devotional activities seem artificial and fake.

This is not the picture of Jejuri only. It is found in many other temples in India. In these holy places, the actual meaning of religion is forgotten. Everybody is running after rules and rituals. The authorities of the temples cannot think beyond money. Commercial profit becomes their ultimate goal. The superstitious devotees don't raise any doubt and question. They have accepted everything as the blessings of God. Kolatkar tries to reveal this barrenness of the place and the spiritual hollowness of the people. He wishes to expose the meaningless practice of religion by the majority of his countrymen. According to him, the decay and the defect become so prominent that it needs immediate restoration. Otherwise, spirituality will suffer, and the devotees will be victimised. This weakness in the world of spirituality is seen not only in Jejuri but in many other places in India and abroad. It is a severe crisis faced by the entire world.

Religion, which is supposed to function as the great remedy of many social and cultural maladies, has lost its value and virtue very miserably. Consciously or unconsciously, the apathy to religion is encouraged by some people who are more interested in money rather than the blessings of Almighty God. This is reflected in both poems. Doubt and disbelief have totally shattered the concept of religion. Trust and commitment are conspicuous in their absence. Absolute

faithlessness has vitiated respect and regard. The situation is almost beyond the control. But, ultimately, in spite of so many objections, Eliot and Kolatkar have chosen religion and spirituality as the only refuge by which the sterility of the modern world can be confronted. According to them, it is the only option left for us that may arrange life in a much better way. So, it is the need of the hour to be attached to religion to survive in the present scenario. In *The Waste Land*, religion is shown to be overshadowed by libidinousness and lewdness, whereas in *Jejuri*, it is clouded over by power and pomp. Obviously, it has generated perversion and corruption. Spirituality is losing its meaning. People become more money-minded and mean-minded. The yearning to gain an unlimited profit and prestige does not care about religion. They don't bother about the sanctity of the divine domain. Honesty and purity become absent in the holy field. In the poem *The Priest (Jejuri)*, the man is more concerned about "will there be a puran poli in his plate" when the bus arrives packed with pilgrims. It is a matter of utter shamelessness, which is absolutely unexpected in the sphere of religion. Obviously, spirituality is on the verge of extinction. In "*The Burial of the Dead*", there is a character "the one-eyed merchant" who has totally deviated from the path of religion in accumulating wealth. Consequently, he becomes spiritually vacant and void as he denies the existence of God. In *Jejuri*, we experience that a society-imposed – hierarchy is present even among gods. "*Yeshwant Rao*" is designated as the "second class God" whose temple is built outside the main building. This kind of perception is absolutely disgraceful and ugly. It is ridiculous and funny also. Unfortunately, religion is under the control of a few selfish and self-centred devotees of God. It becomes their personal property. By the name of God, they don't hesitate to play with the religious belief of the common folk. Both Eliot and Kolatkar have exposed this superficiality and hypocrisy in the sphere of religion. Eliot has shown how the economy dominates each and every aspect of human life. Nothing can be accomplished without the influence of money. Kolatkar has pointed out how religious rites and rituals have been influenced by the money and market. Everything is regulated by its monstrous impact. Both the poets highlight how and why religious faith gradually becomes irrelevant to the common people. They apprehend that the situation becomes so worst that very soon,

religion may be obliterated from this earthly abode. It is really disappointing that people are more concerned about daily comfort and luxury. They are running after earthly pleasure with a craving for a better life. The immense influence of spirituality is simply neglected. That's why Eliot and Kolatkar are not very hopeful about the future of religion. In *Jejuri (The Pattern)*, religion is described as if it is like "smudges under the bare feet/and gets fainter all the time as/the children run." Similarly, Eliot also says that the faith in God will be drowned like Phlebas, the Phoenician sailor in "*Death by Water*" as he is engrossed with this world of "profit and loss".

Both Eliot and Kolatkar have portrayed a world where human being becomes hopeless and helpless because of frustration, confusion, loss and disbelief. Harmony and tranquility are not found in their life. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot advocates the need to avoid unethical sexual urges and cravings as it leads to inevitable calamity. By the word "waste" of *The Waste Land*, Eliot means chaos and disorder which are not confined only in the western civilisation. The oriental culture faces the same risk and insecurity, leading to disaster and disorder. It is found in the poem *Jejuri* also, where modern men are deviating from the path of religion. They are losing their faith and belief in God. Obviously, the balance and the stability appear inactive. In their absence, the people become confused and puzzled. They have gone far away from ancient beliefs, moral and ethical principles. Economic prosperity does not provide any relief to the dilemma and doubt of the modern folk. "The Railway Station" reveals the same scenario as is found in the world of *Jejuri*. Corruption and contamination are rampant. Ultimately, religion as a social institution is completely broken down. A similar thing is located in *The Waste Land*. Eliot has also shown how the lack of religious devotion can bring absolute degradation with the consequential arrival of various psychic disorders, criminal activity, and obnoxious attitude. People are found less conscious about the value of religion. They go on running after economic prosperity. Religion is considered obsolete and no longer required. They fail to realize that the present success is short-lived, not permanent. They rather need solid support that only religion can provide.

Despite all the allegations, religion cannot be overlooked negligently. Both the poets are found to be believers in God and his

eternal nemesis. They consider religion as the ultimate option, left for the entire universe. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot has found the solution from the oriental civilisation. He spreads the message of Upanishad's "Datta", "Damayata" and "Dayadhvam" as the only remedy to restore the wounded and injured human psyche. He concludes the poem with the words "Shantih Shantih Shantih". It is the quintessential truth of Hindu philosophy. Eliot believes these utterances can bring eternal peace to this disturbed and disordered universe. It can lead the human being to the path of sanity and sanctity. In this way, Eliot has prescribed how civilisation can be saved from the ongoing catastrophe. He feels religion will play a vital role in minimizing these hazards of human civilisation. It is the panacea waiting to be utilised.

In *Jejuri*, Kolatkar has tried to find the solution in his three "Chaitanya" poems and the three nature poems "Ajamil", "Butterfly", and "Between Jejuri and the Railway Station". "Chaitanya" means spiritual consciousness, which the present society badly lacks. Kolatkar feels it is the urgently needed option that can minimize the maladies of human civilisation. In "Chaitanya" poems, the poet speaks about the conflict between the modern and the ancient perceptions of religion. He says rites and rituals are not the real faces of religion. God can be worshipped by the minimum requirements like honesty, purity and devotion. But the writer finds that modern men do not have any attachment to divinity. They lack belief and faith in God. Religion has become a man-made commercial institution. Kolatkar thinks it is time to detach religion from this narrow and confined mode. He appeals to the devotees of God to apply their sagacity and wisdom while practicing religion. Otherwise, it becomes impossible to free this social institution from insanity and derangement. Kolatkar has also talked about energy, joy, enthusiasm, spontaneity and freedom, which are seen in the cock and the hen dance and in the world of butterfly. But *Jejuri* and the railway station are deprived of this positive power. Instead, they are very much artificial and mechanical. The natural flow is obstructed.

In finding the solution, both Eliot and Kolatkar have shown their faith in the concept of the life force, the essence of the very existence of mankind. Life force connotes something natural and normal. In the world of artificiality, it is an absent idea. In *The Waste Land*, the

disorder and the disturbances have been tried to be solved by the restorative rainwater, and the deficiencies present in *Jejuri* have been replaced by the powerful dance of the cock and the hen. The fish and the fisherman, the cock and the hen become the symbol of positive energy which can give relief to the individual from doubt and distrust.

Structurally, both poems have striking similarities. Their poetic style is mostly the same. They have several sections, but they are connected with each other very harmoniously. *The Waste Land* has five long sections, and *Jejuri* is a collection of thirty-six long and short poems. Each section deals with different things, but they have coherence and consistency presented with beautiful ease and comfort. They present a common vision through a thoughtful narration which is made recurrent and repetitive to highlight the main concept. Both the poets use striking images and symbols to explore the doubt and dilemma, disbelief and faithlessness, disbalance and dislocation of the so-called modern civilisation. In *The Waste Land*, there is no water. Similarly, in *Jejuri* also, “there isn’t a drop of water” in the reservoir. Some words like “crack”, “dry”, “desert”, “empty”, “heap of broken images”, “stony places”, “stone language” are found to be repeated in both the poems. They have wonderfully described the crisis of the civilisation. Their very presence connotes that something wrong is happening where the loss is irreparable. Some sounds, found in both the poems, like “shatter”, “clatter”, “kick”, “jug jug” are very much unpleasant and harsh. These bitter and blunt dictions hint that human civilisation gradually becomes dull and dry. Musical softness is no more to be found. In “*What the Thunder Said*”, the “empty Chapel” does not have windows and “the door swings”. Similarly, in “*The Door*” (*Jejuri*), the door is broken and is “half brought down”. Both Eliot and Kolatkar return to ancient myths and legends in order to restore the peace and stability that the present society urgently needs. Eliot narrates the quest for the Holy Grail, stories from the grail legend, Fisher King, fertility myths from the book “*From Ritual to Romance*” By Jessie Weston and Sir James Frazer’s “*Golden Bough*”. Kolatkar also refers to the messages of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the legend of the Horseshoe shrine and the story of Ajamil, who maintain stability and balance by following the principle of harmony in life. Both the writers refer to

many fables and parables. Reduction, exaggeration, distortion and juxtaposition are some of the stylistic features used by both of them. They have emphasised some unpleasant features like dilapidation, neglect and degeneration to portray the ugliness of modern civilisation. The poems present a wonderful graphic description of the socio-psychological features of the surroundings and the characters around them. Eliot and Kolatkar, with their superb observation power, have explored all the sensual and ugly details very realistically. The poems are splendid in respect of irony, satire and sarcasm.

### Conclusion

*Jejuri* was published fifty-five years after the publication of *The Waste Land*. But still, they have many common features. Particularly, *Jejuri* echoes many things from Eliot's poem. Both of them examine the causes why modern civilisation does not care about spirituality seriously. They are simultaneously concerned about the encroachment of science, industrial revolution and materialistic mentality into the personal and social lives of modern men. In both the poems, Eliot and Kolatkar reflect their own vision of "institutionalisation", "ritualisation" and "commercialisation" of spirituality. They openly attack the ongoing culture and custom practised by the fakes and frauds. With great social awareness, they dare to show why some changes are necessary in the present social structure. The poems appear as the journey of self-introspection. They both deal with traditional spiritual beliefs and modern urban scepticism. In these two poems, Tiresias and Manohar becomes the representative of Eliot and Kolatkar, who have experienced the bitterest struggle just to survive in the modern world. The poets are fearful that modern men do not have any solid support as they totally renounce the traditional spiritual force. They have felt that a vacuum is generated leading to a land of hollowness and faithlessness from where any return is not possible. They are also abundantly sure that this spiritual sterility has the full potential to collapse the entire human civilisation. *The Waste Land* and *Jejuri* are separated by culture, country and centuries. But Kolatkar echoes many things of Eliot like structural pattern, fundamental conflict and mood.



Mainly, regarding spiritual sterility, Kolatkar seems to recall the point of view of Eliot. The calamity and the catastrophe described in *The Waste Land* are found in *Jejuri* also. Like Eliot, Kolatkar is also apprehensive about the crisis of civilisation as religion, the premium social institution does no longer remain honest and pure. It is contaminated by a variety of meaningless rites and rituals. Respect and regards are no more found unconditional. All the time, it is driven by some intention and purpose. It has become more economical. It has transformed into a source of daily income in the name of God. Corruption is distinctly visible. Some people accept religion as the source of economic prosperity. This habit of accumulating wealth by means of religion is severely criticized by Kolatkar. Out of disgust, many start disbelieving in spirituality by showing absolute indifference and apathy. So, religion is now under some questions. Kolatkar's *Jejuri* deals with this socio-psychological aspect of religion. In *The Waste Land*, too, the same aspect is witnessed but with a note of the difference. Here also, religion is present with some fallacy. Faith is demolished in post-World War Europe. Under doubt and dilemma, people become less interested in religion. They don't want to share any attachments with it. After the bloody battle, everything becomes meaningless. Religion is found as a rejected and avoided social institution. But, to be safe and secure from this chaotic disorder, Eliot recommends restoring the belief and trust in religion, the only source from which peace and tranquillity can be derived. Kolatkar thinks about the same option as prescribed by Eliot. Despite denial and distrust, he, too, feels religion is something so needful that it cannot be ignored very casually. He suggests it is better to purify spirituality from the filthy-minded people and their dirty practices by which they occupy religion as their personal property.

Therefore, despite differences and diversities, *Jejuri* seems to deal with the spiritual crisis found in *The Waste Land* also. From this point of view, Kolatkar echoes the same risk and hazards by which Eliot is similarly distressed and tormented. Both cultures are poles apart. But the problems faced by both the society do not remain to be restricted to a particular place. Spiritual barrenness has become a universal issue. It does not have any specific location. It is common and general, talking about the pain and pathos of the entire world.

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