



Impact Factor: 4.081

# Research Guru

Online Journal of Multidisciplinary Subjects (ISSN : 2349-266X)

UGC Approved Journal No. 63726

Volume-12, Issue-3, December-2018 [www.researchguru.net](http://www.researchguru.net)

## Tradition vs. Modernity Robert Frost's *Mending Wall* and Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*: a Comparative Study

Foram H. Jakhria & Dr. Nandita Roy

Principal at Gurukul College of Commerce

Address: 803, Sursha Apt, Sarvodaya Nagar, Mulund (W), Mumbai- 400080.

Contact Details: [sweetforam8@yahoo.co.in](mailto:sweetforam8@yahoo.co.in) 9819282284

**Abstract:** The research paper focuses on the debate of tradition and modernity. For this, a comparative analysis of Robert Frost's *Mending Wall* is made along with few poems from Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*. The paper discusses the common theme that is present in both the poems and also brings light on the differences that are present due to the differences in individuals thinking. These differing ideologies make the argument on tradition and modernity intense. The paper also provides a way to conclude the clash between the two. Frost was an American poet and Kolatkar, an Indian. In spite of different background and culture, this comparative study was possible as the central idea of the poems is common.

### Keywords:

**Jejuri:** a holy place of pilgrimage situated in Maharashtra, India.

**Tradition:** a way of thinking or perceiving things blindly.

**Modernity:** a way of thinking and perceiving things based on logic.

**Wall:** a barrier raised physically or mentally between two people or areas.

**Arun Kolatkar:** an Indian poet

**Robert Frost:** an American poet

The clash between traditional and modern thinking has always existed in the past, continues in the present today and will be seen in the future as well. This dilemma of **Tradition and Modernity** is visible everywhere around: between two people of different age groups as well as between people belonging to same age group, at home, at workplace, among friends, siblings etc. In such a situation where two opposing ideologies exist side by side to have respect for the other i.e. a person who follows traditional rituals may not agree with imperative modern ways of dressing and thinking, but he/ she should respect the other person who abides by modern day outlook. Hurting or humiliating others should be avoided at all costs, since it serves no purpose. Tradition must accept Modernity and vice versa. Major clashes in this direction have been recorded in literature as well.

The research paper reflects on the various aspects of tradition as well as modernity with reference to the poem *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost and few selected poems from *Jejuri* by Arun Kolatkar. This comparative study of the selective poems will aim at finding a permanent solution to the ongoing problem. With the advent of newer ways, old things become tradition and modern things become a part of lifestyle.

Page | 335

*Mending Wall* by Frost is a single poem revolving around the theme of Tradition and Modernity; while Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is a series of poems, with the same theme, compiled into one collection. The points of commonality between the two poems are the ideas of tradition and modernity. But the differences between the two also make an interesting study. A constant debate is seen to run throughout in both the poems: in *Mending Wall*, the poem is about the perception of two different people over a particular thing whereas in *Jejuri*, the conflict is between religion and science.

In *North of Boston* by Robert Frost published in 1915, *Mending Wall* is the first poem. This poem can be considered as an autobiographical poem as it is based on Frost's own experiences and encounters with his neighbor Napoleon Guay when both lived beside each other in England. They both used to repair the wall that was built between their homes each year before the spring begins. The line "Good fences make good neighbours" has not been created by Frost; instead, those were the words said by Guay, his neighbor. The poem is written in a conversational tone without any stanzas or rhyming words. This communication takes place between the narrator and the neighbor. Here are few opening lines of the poem:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. (1-4)

The lines describe the need for reconstructing the wall as the wall is no longer there. There are also gaps described which have to be blocked. These lines also mention the emergence of spring season. The opening line of the poem itself states very clearly that the narrator, who doesn't like the wall between them. Frost has used hyphenated words like 'frozen-ground-swell' to add uniqueness to his work. The initials of each line begin in capital letters, which is a traditional pattern of writing poems.

But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again. (11-14)

It is the right time to build the wall just before spring. The description of how the neighbors construct the wall every year is also given in the poem. There is a need to repair the wall and for that purpose both neighbors have had to take a look on the gaps to fill in the areas that are damaged. The poem talks about the need to mend a wall. He writes in the form of blank verse, where there are no rhyming words, but with the words like 'let' 'set', Frost indirectly rhymes the words. Also, by Frost the word 'neighbour' is written in British English spelling.

Arun Kolatkar's style of writing poems differs from Frost. Kolatkar has written poems in American English. *Jejuri* is Kolatkar's well-known work in the Indian Literary field. It is a collection of thirty one poems based on a pilgrimage journey to a holy place Jejuri, located in Maharashtra. "His first major work was

*Jejuri* which first appeared in the *Opinion Literary Quaterly* (1974) and later as a Clearing House Publication in 1976. It was awarded the Common Wealth Poetry Prize in 1977". (Nanaware 55) *Jejuri* is his first book of English poetry. It is a holy place where the deity named Khandoba is worshipped by visitors. A temple is supposed to be a spiritual divine place of worship which has to be clean, quiet and peaceful for devotees. The journey to this pilgrimage is expressed with such a depth in the book that it gives a clear insight of the place and the trip.

The *Jejuri* sequence of poems, for instance, was written in 1964 just after Kolatkar visited the eponymous temple town close to Pune in Maharashtra. In 1966, they were given to a little magazine (*Dionysus*), whose editors lost the manuscript. That could have been the end of the story. But *Jejuri* was eventually rewritten by Kolatkar and brought out ten years later, in 1976, by the Clearing House collective, whose four editors were Adil Jussawalla, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel and Kolatkar himself. (Zecchini 11)

The trip starts by bus and ends on a railway station. Throughout the series, there is a constant debate on science vs. spirituality. The central character in the journey is Manohar who is a protagonist, who represents modernity. All the poems revolve around this scientific perspective questioning blind religious faith. It is an argumentative collection of poems which make its readers think on this existing crisis of tradition vs. modernity. It also postulates the fact that *Jejuri*, being a holy place has to be clean and well maintained. But the reality Kolatkar portrays clearly in this collection. *Jejuri* highlights the conditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Jejuri* focuses on the debate between religion and modernity. In other words, *Jejuri* presents a real and a modern picture of the existing conditions at a pilgrimage. The poems in the collection are written from a scientific point of view. Through different poems, Kolatkar highlights the extent of religious norms performed at such holy places without any idea of its essence and significance. Manohar, who is the central character in the poem, gives a critical yet a logical perspective about religious beliefs through his scientific thinking. The educated masses like Manohar will and do question the religious rituals and practices that are evidently just blindly followed. He tries to understand the reason for performing these rituals.

In *Jejuri*, the readers get to experience a variety of novel techniques used by Kolatkar to write each poem. None of the poems in the collection appear identical to one another in terms of the length, the stanzas, the content, etc. His poems have a rhythm but no rhyme scheme like Frost's *Mending Wall*. They are more like a free verse. In the poem, "A Low Temple" from the collection, Manohar narrates the reality that 'gods' at the temple are kept 'in the dark'. The priest takes the help of matchsticks to portray the 'gods', but the visitors do not get enough time to worship and see the image of god as it depends on 'the length of a matchstick'.

A low temple keeps its gods in the dark.  
You lend a matchbox to the priest.

One by one the gods come to light.  
Amused bronze. Smiling stone. Unsurprised.  
For a moment the length of a matchstick  
gesture after gesture revives and dies.  
Stance after lost stance is found  
and lost again. (1-8)

In the above lines, one can pay attention to the manner in which Kolatkar writes 'gods'. He does not prefer to write the initial in block letter. He has done this in most of the poems of *Jejuri*. Also, in this poem, the initial letters of many lines are capitalized though few are not. This is his unique style of writing poetry. Further few lines of the same poem explain clearly that the 'goddess' actually has eighteen arms but the priest says that it is 'eight-arm goddess'. The protagonist argues that as per the 'count', the 'goddess' has eighteen arms, but the priest is not ready to believe or see the truth.

Who was that, you ask.  
The eight-arm goddess, the priest replies.  
A sceptic match coughs.  
You can count.  
But she has eighteen, you protest.  
All the same she is still an eight-arm goddess to the priest. (9-14)

Kolatkar has written the poem using a conversational tone without punctuations like question mark, semi colon and even double apostrophe while writing a dialogue. The above quoted lines of the poem "A Low Temple" illustrates the reality of the temple condition where there is no electricity and also the issue of blind faith is exposed clearly. People in society follow superstitious beliefs and they believe what the priest tells them. There are also people like Manohar who question such blind faith. Therefore, the core idea in *Jejuri* is the same as the debate in *Mending Wall*.

In the *Mending Wall*, the protagonist believes that when nature herself has divided territories then there is no purpose of building a wall in between. He muses on the situation.

There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours." (23-27)

The narrator understands that there may be situations where the need for a boundary may arise. But he has only apple trees on his side and his neighbor has pine trees. The narrator knows that neither of the trees will cross their respective boundaries. He does not feel the necessity of a wall, but his neighbor does not agree to these ideas and justifies his point only by saying "Good fences make good neighbours." (27)

"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it

Where there are cows? But here there are no cows. (30-31)

The narrator certainly gets annoyed as he wishes to explain his neighbor that there is need of a wall only if they had cows. Since, there are no cows; there is no need of a wall in the middle. The narrator's vision is modern and he finds no logic in building a wall. His opinion is that the need of a boundary line is between two nations and not two neighbors. But his neighbor is subscribes to traditional beliefs. In the above lines, Frost makes use of punctuations like question marks, apostrophe wherever necessary unlike Kolatkar.

In *Jejuri* on the other hand, there is the character of Chaitanya who has unconditional love for God. One of the poems in the collection makes it clear and evident that his faith in and devotion to God is true. In total there are three poems on Chaitanya in the series, here is "Chaitanya".

Sweet as grapes  
are the stone of jejuri  
said chaitanya.

He popped a stone  
in his mouth  
and spat out gods (1-6)

Normally, it is seen that people worship the stone that has been colored red or orange, but as described in the above poem, Chaitanya believes that in each and every stone of Jejuri, he can feel the presence of God. He leaves superstitions behind. He has direct relation with God and so it does not matter to him whether a stone has a color or not. It can be seen in the above lines of the poem that Kolatkar has not used capital letters of the initials of the place 'jejuri' and the character 'chaitanya'. He prefers to keep them in small case. This is his technique to deviate from the other poets.

Another poem from *Jejuri* illustrates the debate on superstitions and logic. Through mythological incidents, superstitious beliefs are narrated as if they are true.

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 (1-8)

These are the lines from the poem "The Horseshoe Shrine" of *Jejuri*. A supposed incident involving Khandoba is presented as if it had really happened. But the protagonist understands that a cut in the rock is due to erosion and not by Khandoba's horse. Such stories are considered as reality by the devotees, who

worship God. They fail to see and accept a scientific logic that can also be present behind it. By believing such stories, they feel that they are following religion with complete faith. Actually they are practicing it blindly. Through this poem, Kolatkar tries to bring out the message that one should believe what one can see and understand, not just believe anything because it is said or meant to be believed.

Through these poems of *Jejuri*, Kolatkar is not going against any religion and its practices. In reality, he was also a religious person who had written a few poems on Tukaram. He is exposing the element of superstition and blind faith that has become quite strong. Through the character of Chaitanya, he finds his voice. The devotion should not be affected by a painted stone or an unpainted stone. Love and faith in God should not be superstitious; it should originate from the heart. Like Kolatkar, Frost also poses the problem in front of the readers and leaves the poem open ended. Both of them do not hint at any specific solution to the existing crisis. It is left up to the readers to arrive to the conclusion through their own interpretations. Apart from the theme, this is one major similarity in both the poems. The two poems deal with the contradictory ideas: in *Mending Wall*, the clash is between two individuals who have different viewpoints whereas in *Jejuri*, it is between religion and science through a journey. The issues raised by the poets are well associated with reality and so, there are no answers to the questions raised. As one can see in the poem *Mending Wall*, the narrator constantly tries to convince his neighbor to not build a wall; but the neighbor abides by his ideology till the end. The poet concludes by declaring his opposition to build walls.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence. (32-34)

Finally, the narrator realizes that there is no point arguing with his neighbor as he is not able to understand the narrator's point of view. The narrator constantly attempts to bridge the gap between his neighbor and himself by humorously appealing for friendship. But his neighbor strongly and adamantly continues to build the wall.

. . . I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. (38-40)

The narrator ultimately accepts the truth that his neighbor's thinking will not change, no matter how hard his efforts. The narrator observes that his neighbor is busy in his preparation to build the wall, confident that it is good to build walls.

He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours." (43-45)

In these lines, narrator pays respect to his neighbor's ideology. He understands that his neighbor would 'not go behind his father's saying' i.e. he would not change his mind and so, the narrator agrees to the fact his neighbor's thinking is different from



his. But Frost has not specified whether a wall was built or no later. He neither sides with anybody, nor does he suggest a compromise between the two by showing any mid way. He simply states the matter to the readers who also feel helpless towards the end, just like the narrator. Through the presence of dialogues in the middle, the poem flows in the form of a conversation. The readers look for a solution in the poem but they may not find it. The narrator stands for modernity as he raises his voice clearly, openly and freely while his neighbor represents the traditional notion as he remains tough, rigid and conservative. The speaker aims for brotherhood while his neighbor stays individualistic.

The idea of 'wall' presented by Frost in the poem can be considered as a Metaphor used to convey that there are people who raise walls as barriers between themselves and their neighbors. Also they firmly abide by those walls leaving no room for unity. In reality, there is a historical incident recorded in Germany in 1961, when the Berlin Wall was constructed to divide Eastern and Western parts of Berlin to restrict the masses migrating from east to west. In 1989, the government realized that the construction of wall has not changed the scenario in the city, however, the demolition began in 1990 and it was completed in 1992. If Robert Frost would have been there to see the breakdown of the wall, he would have appreciated this demolition.

Like Frost, Kolatkar also leaves the issue, discussed in his collection, open ended. He describes the end of his journey in the poem "Between Jejuri and the Railway Station". Kolatkar provides a detail account of 'sixty three priests inside their sixty three houses' (2), 'five hundred steps' (4) and he mentions about a saloon, a café, a mill, etc that the protagonist, Manohar passes by. And finally, he reaches a place in between where he sees 'Jejuri on one hand and the railway station on the other hand' (21), where Jejuri stands for religion and the railway station stands for science and progress. "Between Jejuri and the Railway Station" is the second last poem in the collection. It tries to connote that *Jejuri* is a traditional, religious and an old holy place; whereas a Railway Station stands for science, modernity and reasoning. The protagonist is standing in between the two like 'a needle in the trance' (23). He is stuck here as he's unable to decide what can be the outcome of this dilemma. The poem is divided into two parts: One part describes the clash between religion and modernity in words whereas, the other part presents a visual depiction of a harvest dance of hens and cocks (as seen in Figure 1) that the protagonist sees when he fails to decide whether religion wins over science or vice versa.

What has stopped you in your tracks  
and taken your breath away  
is the sight  
of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar  
in a kind of harvest dance. The craziest you've ever seen.  
Where seven jump straight up to at least four times their height  
as five come down with grain in their beaks.

up            a<sup>n</sup> d            do<sup>w</sup> n            a<sup>n</sup> d            u<sup>P</sup>            &            d  
&            w<sup>d</sup> o<sup>n</sup>            a<sup>n</sup>            p<sup>u</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            do<sup>w</sup> n            &            u<sup>p</sup>  
a<sup>n</sup> d<sup>n</sup>            u<sup>p</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            d            o<sup>w</sup> n            &            u<sup>p</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            d            o<sup>n</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            u<sup>p</sup>  
d<sup>o</sup> w<sup>n</sup>            &            u<sup>p</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            d<sup>o</sup> w<sup>n</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            u<sup>P</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            d<sup>o</sup> w<sup>n</sup>            &            &  
a<sup>n</sup> d            u<sup>P</sup>            d<sup>a</sup> n            u<sup>p</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            d<sup>o</sup> w<sup>n</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            a<sup>n</sup> d            u<sup>P</sup>

And there you stand forgetting how silly you must look  
with a priest on your left shoulder as it were  
and a station master on your right.

Figure 1: “Between Jejuri and the Railway Station”

The poem also portrays Kolatkar’s skill of merging art with literature. Through this visual presentation, he has deviated from the conventional ways of writing poems in English from left to right. This makes him a modern poet. In this part of the poem, he describes the dance in detail, expressing about the height and number of jumps performed by the hens and cocks. It seems that Kolatkar had observed the dance so keenly that he could not only narrate it precisely but also skillfully present it on paper. This harvest dance can be considered as the conclusion of the ongoing debate over traditional vs. scientific thinking.

On the way to the station, there is a field of jowar where a dozen cocks and hens are busy in harvest dance. Theirs is the real world : the world of struggle and efforts, the world of hope and some material attainment. It lies between the ritualistic world of Jejuri and the scientific world of the station. For the poet, it represents the principle of life force. (Nanaware 63)

While engrossed in deep thoughts about the two worlds, Manohar sees a harvest dance of hens and cocks doing ‘up and down’, ‘up and down’ and this conveys that science and religion will go on hand in hand. Traditional practices will be performed making ways for modern thinking. And just like the hens and cocks doing up and down, sometimes religious practices will dominate while sometimes scientific thinking will come into spotlight. By looking at the above poem, Kolatkar tried to capture that harvest dance on a piece of paper and through this poem he was successful in presenting it to his readers. This depicts his graphic knowledge in which he is well versed. And the dance connotes well the message that in life there are ups and downs. Also just like the harvest dance of hens and cocks which is uneven in reality, Kolatkar manages to depict that very well by playing with the letters “U p a n



d d o w n”. “The harvest dance of the cocks and hens becomes the dance of letters and ‘words at liberty’ in ‘Between Jejuri and the Railway Station’ ”. (Zecchini 107)

**Conclusion:** It is this visual part of the *Jejuri* series that adds to the charm of the collection and also gives a perfect conclusion or an answer to the never ending debate between Tradition and Modernity. This is how life goes on with the ups and downs moving simultaneously. Religious beliefs will neither win nor modern thinking loose. Whenever and wherever religious beliefs are practiced, scientific reasoning will counter attack them. This thought has been taken up by A. K. Ramanujan in his essay, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” 1990, the presence of traditional rituals along with the modern values have been described by taking instances from our daily lives. Though the main argument of the essay is associated with a context free society, in six different parts, the elements of tradition and modernity are very much part of the discussion.

Work Cited List:-

Primary Sources:

Baym, Nina et Robert S. Levine. “Mending Wall”. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature (1914- 1945) Volume D*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd, 2012. Print. 232.

Kolatkhar, Arun. ‘A Low Temple’, ‘The Horseshoe Shrine’, ‘Chaitanya’, ‘Between Jejuri and the Railway Station’. *Jejuri*. Bombay: Clearing House, 2001. Print. 21, 23, 27, 54-55.

Secondary Sources:

Nanaware, Vinayak S. “Imagery in the Poetry of Arun Kolatkhar”. *Imagery in Modern Indian Experimental Poetry in English*. Pune: Vidya-Vaibhav Prakashan, 2012. Print. 55, 63.

Zecchini, Laetitia. *Arun Kolatkhar and Literary Modernism in India*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014. Print. 11, 107.