Analyzing Cultural Memory through Visual Imagery in the Select Poems of Arun Kolatkar

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Abstract

Indian English poetry has increasingly engaged with questions of memory, identity, and cultural continuity, particularly through visual and spatial representations. Arun Kolatkar, one of the most influential modern Indian poets writing in English, adopted vivid visual imagery to evoke layers of cultural memory embedded in everyday life, religious spaces, urban landscapes, and marginalized voices. The paper analyzes how cultural memory is constructed, preserved, and questioned through visual imagery in select poems of Arun Kolatkar, with special reference to works such as Jejuri, Kala Ghoda Poems, and Sarpa Satra. The findings indicate that Kolatkar reconfigures cultural memory by presenting fragmented, ironic, and often ambiguous images that challenge idealized representations of Indian culture. Instead of nostalgic reconstruction, his poetry foregrounds a dynamic and contested cultural memory shaped by urbanization, social marginalization, and changing belief systems. The paper contributes to existing academic discourse by highlighting visual imagery as a central aesthetic and ideological strategy in Kolatkar's poetic engagement with cultural memory.

Keywords: Visual, Memory, Modernity, Social, Imagery, Culture.

Introduction

In the broken fragments of postcolonial India, the imperial remnants collide with the vernacular temples; the poetry of Arun Kolatkar appears as a watchful topographer of cultural memory (Dharwadker, 2014). His visual image that is ironic, stark and sparse builds up, maintains and challenges the stratified histories of the country, making ordinary landscapes a disputed archive (Across Generations, A. A., 2024). In some of her poems, Such as Jejuri

(1976), Kala Ghoda Poems (2004) and Sarpa Satra (2003), Kolatkar uses sight to cut through the rubble of temples, streets and myths that memory survives on (Deshpande, 2015). This paper explores the construction of cultural memory through glowing scenes of syncretism, which is stored through ironic writing, and debated by secular criticism, making Kolatkar a poet-archivist of the mnemonic flux in India (Chakraborty, 2023).

The theorist Jan Assmann, cultural memory is crystallized in figurations of the past which the communities maintain ritually (Assmann, 1995). Maurice Halbwachs also stresses that the collective memory cannot be discussed in the absence of the social structures; the past exists only as mediated through the communal interaction (Halbwachs, 1992). These theories are realized in the poetry by Kolatkar in the form of hyper-vivid visual imagery (Dwivedi, A. N., 2021). The clubfoot of deity and side effigies in The Bus by Jejuri establish a sense of tactile consistency between the past and present like the devotion in the pre-colonial time and mobility in the modern times (Bird, E. J., 2012). In Kala Ghoda Poems, the city in decay, pigeon-pecked statues, patient beggars under the table in the "Chor Bazaar" market are saving the subaltern experiences (Bird, E. J., 2017), an action that Pierre Nora sees this as the lieux de memoir where the memory crystallizes in concrete, tangible locations. However, at the same time, Kolatkar plays with memory: in A Low Temple, a fly-infested idol disrupts the sanctity of rituals, revealing the weakness of memory in the malicious presence of rationality (Chowdhury, M. B., 2022).

Following some of the secular readings of Laetitia Zecchini and relying on the picture theory of W.J.T. Mitchell, the serpentine imagery of Sarpa Satra proves the intersection of myth and modernity through the visual means. Snakes that are mythic twist around modern vignettes, keeping Vedic traditions alive, and expressing ecological and social fears (Dharwadker, 2014). The minimalistic, Beat-inspired style of Kolatkar makes these poems ecphrastic reproaches to nostalgic nationalism, where caste hierarchies, partition relics, and alienation in the city are recorded (Chakraborty, 2023). Visual representation in this case acts as memory aide and as critical commentary, shedding some light on the contradictions between continuity and discontinuity (Dwivedi, A. N., 2021).

The poems of Kolatkar are cultural memories, not as a fixed object, but as an active protest of contestation, as he writes in the look, draws in the drawing, break up in the gaze. His work prefigures the transformative power of visual images in the literary context, which can be used to view social, historical, and cultural complexity of India (Across Generations, A. A.,

2024). Combining the approaches of Assmann and Halbwachs, this paper puts the poetics of Kolatkar in a place between memory, visual culture, and social consciousness, which is the basis on which the poetic image may be interpreted as creating, preserving, and critiquing collective memory in the modern Indian society.

Problem Statement

A substantial body of criticism has developed around Arun Kolatkar's poetry, with much of it focusing primarily on the modernist qualities of his verse and its reflection of urban sensibilities, as well as on central themes such as alienation and the experiences of marginalized individuals. Relatively little consideration has been devoted to the precise function of visual imagery in fashioning and conveying cultural memory throughout his poetic œuvre. Kolatkar's poems are remarkably unobscurantist in their visuality, but the images themselves often tend to be treated either as objects of formal beauty or as more complicated carriers of historical and cultural meaning. This results in a crucial break in the understanding of how his visual imagery operates as a conduit through which collective memories of religion, myth, social transformation and everyday life are expressed. However the more profound cultural implications of his visual language have not yet been submitted to such an analysis. The present study tries to fill this gap by closely examining how visual imagery functions as a mode of cultural memory in some poems of Arun Kolatkar. This paper seeks to move beyond surface readings and demonstrates how vocabularies have consigned, villainized, and reconstituted cultural scripts. Along the way, it aims to propose a nuanced reading of Kolatkar's poetics, and what they mean for Indian English literary studies.

Significance of Study

Literature is an indispensable storehouse of shared memory, history and cultural identity, and poetry in particular is a record of the subtle interplay of individual experience with collective sensibility. The poetry of the celebrated modernist Indian poet Arun Kolatkar makes powerful use of image and draws out city life, as well traditional practices and cultural heritage, in a way that provides an excellent basis for examining how cultural memory is preserved and transmitted. This research gains importance by examining how Kolatkar's imagery resonates with common experience, ritual and historical memory underscore the function of poetry in the preservation of collective cultural memory which is passed on from generation to generation. Although he has been repeatedly read as a modernist literary author and innovator of urban themes, there are only few published university studies dealing with the complex

relations between visual images and cultural memory; the present volume fills this gap. Additionally, the investigation's integration of cultural and memory studies into literary analysis illuminates poetry's interdisciplinary and reveals how text and image communicate social values, identity, and tradition. The study highlights the significance of literature in conserving culture, generating rich reader engagement and providing snap shots of India's changing social and cultural background; making it a text relevant academically as well as socially.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how visual imagery in select poems of Arun Kolatkar constructs and communicates cultural memory.

2. To analyze the relationship between visual representation and themes of tradition, modernity, and social transformation in Kolatkar's poetry.

Methodology

The research is conducted by a text based, cultural studies and memory theory informed, qualitative approach on the visual representation in Arun Kolatkar's poetry in order to analyze how such visual imagery creates and communicates cultural memory. "The geometry of Jejuri and other poems" - texts like Jejuri, Kala Ghoda Poems and Sarpa Satra are analyzed to exemplify his complex images of iconic, urban, mythic. Comprised of close comparatives and thematic juxtapositions, the paper look at repeat cues in film asks where they come from (who creates them), why are they chosen, how often do they exist, and what these graphics patterns can tell us about shared memory, socialization processes, cultural freedom and unstated transitions. Analysis is inspired on theoretical considerations by Jan Assmann (cultural memory) and Maurice Halbwachs (collective memory), as these lines of research provide the analyst with tools to decode images as bearers of historical-sociological-mythological knowledge. The paper focuses on the interaction of image with themes of tradition, modernity and marginality and on how Kolatkar's poetic practices articulate, disfigure or commemorate cultural memories.

Result and Discussion

Visual Imagery and Cultural Memory in Kolatkar's Poetry

Arun Kolatkar uses visual imagery to question cultural memory in the postcolonial India in a masterful manner (Nerlekar, 2016). Kolatkar breaks down the religion, mythology, urban decay and social hierarchies in fragmented pieces through temples, streets, animals and

fragmented figures so that there is skepticism mixed with vivid realism, which show the preservation and erosion of collective heritage (Naik, 1982).

In Jejuri Kolatkar uses religious images to depict ruined temples such as the "Heart of Ruin" with fallen roofs sheltering puppies and butterflies among the myths of Khandoba, idealizing the sacred and the non-ideal (Pandit, 1993). The poetry of Kala Ghoda Poems is urban and mundane, exploring the streets of Mumbai through the lens of the pi-dogs on the traffic island, and heaps of rubbish (red combs, prawn shells, condoms), and scenes of the Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads brooding in the pavements traced on her sari (Kolatkar, 2005). Sarpa Satra mythological imagery refers to Mahabharata, snake sacrifice (Sarpa Satra yajna by Janamejaya, c. 300 BCE epic) and Khandav Van burning by Arjuna and Krishna, where the serpents, fire, and ash are a reference to the annihilation of subalterns (Mishra, 2019). Marginal imagery is present in: beggars, stray dogs, injured rats, and lepers in Jejuri and Kala Ghoda, making an aspect of the ignored humane (McDonald, 2012). The typology disaggregates whole myths of religious sanctity decays in city realism (Jejuri), mundane trash perverts Imperial pomp (Kala Ghoda), and myth persecution uncovers cattiest persecution (Sarpa Satra), which fits with postcolonial demythology (Katyal, 2024).

The Jejuri visuals indicate the religious memory through Khandoba pilgrims and hill temples, yet dead lands indicate historical erosion following the urbanization of the area in the 1960s. Kala Ghoda Poems reflects the history of the city, the body of pi-dog as map of the 17th century, the ghost of David Sassoon walked around the colonial buildings in the 19th century, the combination of Parsi, Jewish and subaltern stories with nativism of Shiv Sena times (1970s-2000s). Sarpa Satra appeals to mythological memory of Sarpa Satra (the bite of Parikshit by Mahabharata), of Khandav devastation, which is analogous to millennia of Dalit oppression and contemporary extremism. These pictures retain the communal memory, pilgrimage rituals, marketplace trade, and heroic revenge- but corrupt through the medium of irony: sacred places become dog beds; scraps on the street tell the story of globalization as trash; serpentous fire is an allegory of endless caste hatred without resolutions. More importantly, the pictures by Kolatkar play out memory as a field of struggle opposing the retellings of the hegemony (Kolatkar & Nerlekar, 2005).

Arun Kolatkar explores the landscapes of memory, history, and social consciousness using bold visual images so that his poetry becomes a platform to encode and question the cultural memory (Roy, 2015). His few books, Jejuri (1976), Kala Ghoda Poems (2004), and

Sarpa Satra (2003) place temples, streets, animals, and human beings as forms of collective experience, at the same time critiquing the traditional and modern versions of narratives (Ravinthiran, 2014). The tension of the preservation and reinterpretation of the culture is manifested in the visual poetics of Kolatkar, which helps to understand how cultural memory is created, passed, and challenged in postcolonial India (Ramazani, 2001).

At Jejuri, there are temples like the Heart of Ruin and headless gods, which exhibit the memory of devotion, but this represents the sign of decay where animals live in shrines instead of worship (Suleman, 2017). These pictures have a metonymic value of palimpsests of history: ruins maintain the past devoutness and reveal the corrosion of faith and authority (Zecchini, 2010). In Kala Ghoda Poems, streets, pavements, and objects in the city like the hipster queen, idli sighs, pinwheels, migrant labor, colonial residues like Flora Fountain, consumer detritus are coded revealing the connection between the pre-1947 bazaars in the city to the early 2000s development (Ramanujan, Mahapatra, & Das, 2017). Animals, such as pi-dogs, crows, and snails, represent subaltern solidarity; they follow a matrilineal lineage and undermine the patriarchal hierarchy; domesticated human characters in the novel, which include blind men, rat-poison sellers, pregnant tarts, etc., represent marginalized castes, and thus, safeguard oral histories in the face of eradication by the system (Ravinthiran, 2014).

Snakes and fire are used by Sarpa Satra to symbolize Nag-subjugation, with Brahminical yajnas (tools of hierarchy) being criticized (Zecchini, 2014). Kolatkar breaks unity through visual fragmentation: the butterfly on ruins of Jejuri is tearing the unity of the temple; the zig-zag paths of Kala Ghoda Bori Bunder to Danube are not ready to follow the linear urban memory (Roy, 2015). The edgy attitude is further enhanced with irony and realism: a dog pees on a Jejuri shrine putting divine and profane on a par, and Sarpa Satra places mythical fires within the grit of ash, allegorizing the lengths of violence in the 20th century (Ramazani, 2001). These methods conserve memory in the form of photographic snapshots, and distort it through ironic juxtaposition, as well as erode it through fragmentation, leaving gaps and nothingness (Suleman, 2017).

Kolatkar uses imagery to support and remake the tradition. Khandoba temples, pi-dogs, and mythic snakes are superficially used to preserve cultural discourses, but Jejuri reduces gods to no head, legs, Kala Ghoda transforms colonial statues to dog thrones, and Sarpa Satra turns heroic yajnas inside out and reveals genocidal desires (Zecchini, 2010). The effect of his imagery is one of ambivalence: an attention to detail is reverential, and the gaze is subverted

since it is not something fixed or ideal, but argued over, atomized and critically involved (Ravinthiran, 2014). Visual poetics, in such a manner, as developed by Kolatkar, forms, maintains, and questions cultural memory as an intermediary between social critique and continuity across time (Prasad, 1988).

Cultural Memory through the Visual Poetics of Arun Kolatkar: Assmann and Halbwachs Frameworks

Jan Assmann and Maurice Halbwachs offer a stringent theoretical framework in order to analyse how visual poetics of Arun Kolatkar serves to retrieve and challenge cultural memory (Patil, 2025). The cultural memory of Assmann focuses on the symbolic and ritualized elements of preserving the common experience, which is passed over generations through texts, pictures, and artistic representations, as such, allowing communities to have continuity with their past (Assmann, 1995). The collective memory theory by Halbwachs is a complement to this as it emphasizes the social aspect of memory: the memory is never isolated and individual perception cannot be perceived without the community structures (Halbwachs, 1992). Collectively, these structures explain how the poetry archives of Kolatkar explain, recreate, and criticize the mnemonic cloth of the Indian society (Chakraborty, 2023).

Visual imagery is a storehouse of cultural memory in the poetry of Kolatkar, especially in Jejuri (1976), Kala Ghoda Poems (2004) and Sarpa Satra (2003) (Kolatkar, 1976). The temples and shrines in Jejuri like the one known as the Heart of Ruin or headless gods have a devotional memory and are also a record of decay where animals inhabit the place of worship, and it is a continuity and erosion of faith (Dwivedi, 2021). The poetic fragmentation of these images such as a butterfly sitting on the ruins, wandering dogs urinating on the shrines, test blind faith, showing how religious sites serve as metonymic vessels of historical, social, and ritual awareness. These images appeal to Halbwachs claim that memory is not an individual phenomenon but a social one (McDonald, 2012); the experiences of pilgrims, priests, and observers only define and perpetuate collective memory.

Streets and market places, objects: the hipster queen, idli sighs, pinwheels, give a coded description of the life of migrant workers, colonial memories, consumer garbage in Kala Ghoda Poems (Kolatkar, 2004). Other sites such as Flora Fountain connect bazaars before 1947 to the 2000s urbanization to show how memory persists despite the change. Animals, like crows, snails and pi-dogs, symbolize subaltern resistance, following informal matrilineal lines, and marginalized human beings, including blind men, rat-poison sellers, pregnant tart, maintain

oral histories that have been subject to erase. All these vignettes represent the concept of symbolic storage that Assmann has described: visual tableaux are turned into a tool of collective memory and community identity.

Sarpa Satra is the continuation of this mnemonic practice in mythic and ethical criticism (Kolatkar, 2003). Snakes and fire make symbolic effort of the Nagas, and the Brahminical yajnas are problematic as hierarchical tools, which connect ancient mythology to the modern sociopolitical issues. The realism of Kolatkar combined with the ironic, fragmented images makes the traditional tales tremulous: the mythic is anchored in ashes, vengeance, and rotting, allegorizing the violence and disruption of the 20th century society (Ramazani, 2001). The visual discontinuity of the poet; zig-zag urban tracks, fragmented idols, denies the idea of linear memory, and generates ambiguity and self-criticism of the tradition, modernity and social change. In the two frames of Assmann and Halbwachs we understand that not only is it the case that Kolatkar creates visual poetics: he builds, maintains, and questions cultural memory. Temples, streets, animals, and human figures are living archives in which there is reverence and criticism. The Kolatkar verse of memory is dynamic, interactive and embedded in social framework and connects history and the present. His visuality brings out collective consciousness and the reader finds him/herself suffering the interaction of tradition, modernity and social change and how visual representation mediates the cultural knowledge, challenges the sanitized narratives and the development of postcolonial critical consciousness.

Visual Imagery, Tradition, and Social Change

The poems Jejuri by Arun Kolatkar, Kala Ghoda Poems and Sarpa Satra use the visual image as an effective tool of analysis of the contradictions in post-independence Indian society (Dharwadker, 2014). A fantastic particularity of his landscapes is filled with temples, streets, animals, ruined objects, and marginalized personages, as well as of which cultural memory is stored, contested, and re-created (Chakraborty, 2023). Kolatkar does not show culture as steady or harmonious but instead, makes it fragmented and disputed (Naik, 1982). The visual images used in these poems are an indication of the society that is in negotiation of the uncomfortable coexistence between tradition and modernity (Halbwachs, 1992). Sanctuaries are placed next to piles of degradation, commerce, and city disorder. With the help of these juxtapositions, Kolatkar illustrates how the shifting social realities confront inherited beliefs. In his poetry, he views cultural memory not as a static heritage but rather as an active process that evolves, bends and changes through the pressures of history (McDonald, 2012). His imagery thus is not

just description, but a tool of cultural critique, showing the contradictions inherent in day to day life (Nerlekar, 2016).

The pilgrimage to the hill shrines of Khandoba in Jejuri is given a perspective through the eyes of a cynical modern viewer (Pandit, 1993). Temples are ruined, idols are hacked and priests are involved in transactional activities. Butterflies flutter over debris rather than supernatural spirits indicating the loss of blind faith (Deshpande, 2015). Tradition is presented as being a persistent one, but diluted and commodified (Dwivedi, 2021). Kala Ghoda Poems place mythical and colonial monuments in a hectic urban environment (Kolatkar, 2005). Scavenging animals, garbage and human desperation surround statues and traffic islands. These images are used to highlight how the contemporary life has taken away the authority of the sacred and historical symbols (Chowdhury, 2022). Sarpa Satra reconfigures an ancient sacrificial ceremony into a blood and fire modern outlook, the mythical vengeance with the present day eruptions of social upheaval (Mishra, 2019). In these poems, Kolatkar imagines tradition not as a comfort system but as a straining system. Instead of being the source of renewal, modernity seems to be spiritually empty. The conflict between the two creates a field of irony in which there is no moral certainty in both tradition and contemporary living.

In the poetry collection Kala Ghoda Poems, urban landscapes take the central place in the poetry of Kolatkar (Kolatkar & Nerlekar, 2005). Streets, pavements, statues, and market places are stratified places of memory in which there are several histories present at the same time. The colonial architecture, the native mythology and the modern struggles collide making the city a palimpsest of experience (Bird, 2017). Kolatkar tends to document small urban observations like food garbage, shattered things as well as stray animals. These mere images substitute big historical accounts with the mundane facts. City is turned into a place in which memory is democratized, and monuments or official histories do not have the power to determine it but rather those matters that people occupy its periphery (Katyal, 2024). Simultaneously, these city images are the images of loss. The high pace of commercialization and space saturation are dismembering collective memory, dividing it into brief impressions. According to the poems, urbanization has changed cultural memory as a common heritage into fragmented and unstable pieces.

Kolatkar always preempts marginalized characters of beggars, lepers, street performers, prostitutes, and wandering animals (Prasad, 1988). Their bodies and movements are depicted in graphic visual terms making one focus on the lives that would be overlooked. These figures

are put on temple steps, alleyways and pavements, where one would expect to find something of holiness or pride.

Kolatkar puts the excluded subjects at the center of his visual field to disrupt mainstream cultural discourses that glorify harmony and spiritual plenty (Dwivedi, 2021). His imagery shows how the social exclusion is incorporated into the ordinary culture. In specific examples, specifically among animals, they serve as symbolic spectators. Stray dogs, rats and serpents are depicted as silent observers to human misery and corruption. In this strategy, Kolatkar creates a subaltern world view of cultural memory, which narrates history but not through the high places in society.

In his poetry, Kolatkar is opposed to the idealized depiction of the Indian culture. Gods are vandalized, temples are being abandoned and sacrifices have become simple gestures. These images destroy the ideas of the eternal, spiritually pristine civilization. City images also discredit romanticism. Dirt, corrosion and human excrements are present together with such monuments, revealing the disparity between perceived magnificence and the life experience. Even the epic stories are redefined in dark and bloody perspectives depriving them of heroic assurance. Kolatkar reveals through realist and ironic imagery the imperfect systems in tradition and the modern (Nerlekar, 2016). His poems are devoid of nostalgic gluttony and assume a vision of cultural complexity without mercy.

The visual imagery used by Kolatkar also charts social change in post independence India. The crumbling temples, congested cities, and troubled bodies are the signs of changes in the economic systems, ideologies, and social relationships. Rural sceneries are left desolate with migration, and cities are crowded with people in exile. The relationship between the visual image and cultural memory portrays a transitioning society. Memory ceases to be rooted in sacred texts and practices and the experience of life continuously reforms it. The instability is reflected in fragmented visual style of Kolatkar. The poetry of his portrays cultural memory as being dynamic and contentious. By using banal but uncomfortable images, Kolatkar puts into practice the awkward remembering and forgetting and redefining of the Indian society (McDonald, 2012).

Major Reflections of the Study

1. Kolatkar's verse shows us that visual imagery functions as the primary vehicle of cultural memory, rendering everyday objects and spaces and bodies into symbolic repositories of India's religious, mythological, social past.

2. The poems show a fragmented — as opposed to homogeneous and composite — cultural memory of post-independence India, formed more through decay, irony and contradiction rather than in any coherent or celebratory narratives.

3. The religious imagery in Jejuri speaks not of devotional certainty but rather of skeptical sight" - purveyed apathetically to convey conflict and inherited faith that is still present, but fossilized.

4. The urban cityscape in Kala Ghoda Poems is that of the city as palimpsest, layering histories which overlap with each other (colonial echo over native oration) and within themselves; colonial echo with indigenous traditions and current struggles.

5. The mythic images of Sarpa Satra strip an epic to look at how violence and social order are represented as cyclical and wonder whether cultural memory repeats injustice rather than rescues tradition.

6. The presence of marginalized figures and animals provides a subaltern perspective on memory, skirting the cultural authority of elite institutions into neglected lives and sites.

7. Kolatkar's visual technique never lets us stew in romantic visions of Indian culture; dirt, damage and disappointment are juxtaposed with the sacred.

8. The tradition passing through the movement of wily time-in-archaeology by modernity in the two poet's poems does not bring resolution but irony on both as bad places to go for moral or spiritual sattva.

9. That chasm between the visual and the all-too-easy-to-overlook detail is a muted but nonetheless poignant echo of grander divisions in society - urbanization, migration, economic re-jigging.

10. In Kolatkar's poetry cultural memory emerges as active, contesting and always re-constituted by experience rather than being a static for which allegiance is claimed.

Conclusion

Arun Kolatkar's poems demonstrate the potential of visual language to challenge, preserve and transform cultural memory in post-independence India. In Jejuri, Kala Ghoda Poems, and Sarpa Satra, he materializes temples, streets, animals and people who live on the fringe as symbolic sites of intersection between tradition/modernity and social transformation. Kolatkar does not represent culture as monolithic or unambiguous, his fractured and ironical vision uncovering the tensions, inconsistencies and blank outs registered in cultural memory. Religious, town and mythological imagery expose both the preservation and erosion of

heritage, whilst peripheral figures and ordinary objects democratize memory by contesting of elite narratives. His work also confronts idealized ideas of Indian culture and addresses the effects of urbanization, migration, and social class on existence. Kolatkar's poetry suggests that cultural memory is not a static or fixed phenomenon but rather is contested and perpetually reinvigorated through acts of seeing and representing. Through a critical exploration of these visual iconographies, the analysis demonstrates how literature has the potential to archive, query, and dream up history for readers and listeners alike at a time when postcolonial society had reached an impasse. Their emergence underscores the continuing power of Kolatkar's verse for literary studies, cultural criticism, and pedagogy—showing how poems come to shed light on the ways in which societies remember, forget, and restyle themselves.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Non-Clinical Statement

This study is purely theoretical and qualitative in nature and does not involve any clinical or human/animal experimentation.

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