

Modernity, Narrative and History in Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold*

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“The last thing I wanted to do was to write a book of historical veracity”¹

“...all storywriters are liars”²

(Kiran Nagarkar, Afterword, *Cuckold*)

“History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that

which is fulfilled by the here-and-now”³

“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” ”⁴.

(Walter Benjamin - *On the Concept of History*)

Benjamin believed that history need not be written the “way it really was”⁵. He positioned historical materialism in opposition to historicism – he wrote that the latter “gives the eternal image of the past”⁶, which puts “its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress”⁷, imagining events as a continuum spanning “homogeneous, empty time”⁸ whereas the former “supplies a unique experience with the past”⁹, in which past events are seized from the historical continuum. For Benjamin, the task of the historical materialist is to “brush history against the grain”¹⁰. Kiran Nagarkar, in his novel entitled *Cuckold*, does exactly that. He does not give himself to the “whorecalled “Once upon a time” ”, in Benjamin’s words. But, he “remains master of his powers: man enough, to explode

¹Nagarkra, Kiran. *Cuckold*. Harper Collins: New Delhi, 1997. Print. 604. (Henceforth, C)

²C, 606.

³<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

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the continuum of history”¹¹. For Nagarkar, history doesn't merely mean a recording of facts. In the novel, he does not offer us a mass of facts, in order to draw up the life-sketch of the Maharaj Kumar – Meera Bai's husband Bhojraj. Nagarkar rejects the historicist's position of seeing the past always from a set position.

Literary texts rewrite a historical situation and also articulate an intervention into this situation. Thus, texts are more than merely produced by, and productive of, history. Textuality has been associated with articulation. The text allows for a historically significant re-writing of the situation from which it emerges, of which it partakes, and to whose dynamic reinvention it contributes. As Fredric Jameson points out, the situation is “inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words...it can be approached only by way of prior re-textualisation”¹². This re-writing is the symbolic act which resolves a contradiction which cannot be resolved or articulated by other means. Analysing a text at the social, political and historical level undermines our conventional understanding of the way things are, thereby disclosing and uncovering an element of the political unconscious.

“It was fate that made me write *Cuckold*, for I had vowed that there were two things that I would not write about, Meera and Incest. But call it serendipity or what you may, I wanted to know, how we never know a thing about the husband of most popular woman in India,”¹³ Kiran Nagarkar says smilingly in an interview.

Nagarkar's *Cuckold* is the narrative of Maharaj Kumar, the son of Rana Sanga of the Rajput kingdom of Mewar and the husband of Meera Bai. About Bhojraj (Maharaj Kumar), “we know nothing but the fact that he was born, married and died”¹⁴. Since history gives us no more information about Maharaj Kumar, the novel stands as a counterpart to history. But Nagarkar says "I was writing a novel, not history. I was willing to invent geography and climate, start revolts and epidemics, improvise anecdotes and economic conditions and fiddle with dates. As luck would have it I didn't get a chance to play around too much except in the case of the main protagonist...”¹⁵

Also, history has portrayed Meera Bai as a saintly figure, but Nagarkar shows us the varying shades of this princess – she is scheming, crafty, imperfect, in short, not entirely saint-like, as she is commonly perceived to be. Set in the early sixteenth century, in the Rajput kingdom of Mewar which is in conflict with Delhi, Gujarat and Malwa, the novel portrays another conflict –the prince's rivalry with Lord Krishna, with whom his wife Meera (referred to as ‘Greeneyes’) is in love. The prince, on their

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¹²Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. NY: Cornell UP, 1981. Print. 45.

¹³ <http://www.dailypioneer.com/state-editions/chandigarh/its-fate-that-made-me-write-cuckold.html>

¹⁴C, 604.

¹⁵ <http://muserkim.blogspot.in/2010/03/book-review-cuckold.html>

wedding night, forces himself onto Meera, resulting in the breaking of his penis – a symbolic emasculation of one who fights against God, and a confirmation of the fact that Meera, since she is in love with the Divine Krishna, is also herself divine. She stops the flow of blood from the prince's member – thereby pointing to the fact that she is the enemy and also the healer. This further problematizes the 'historical' and the pure 'saintly' status of Meera Bai. Nagarkar offers Meera more as a human being rather than the stereotypical "Little Saint", which is the name given to her by the citizens of the kingdom.

Details of Maharaj Kumar's character may be absent from historical records, but Nagarkar (though without naming him as the historical figure Bhojraj) fully fleshes him out as an ambitious politician, strategist, statesman and a private individual. Nagarkar's efforts do not lead to a bridging of the gap left by the absence of the prince from historical descriptions and ensuring a continuum, rather, the figure of the prince, in the process of being fleshed out, disturbs and disrupts any continuity that might have been hoped for. Bhojraj comes across as an anachronistic figure – trapped in a time which is not his own. He is a modernist present in a world which seems pre-modern to him. This is exemplified by the reasons that Medini Rai gives for choosing him for assistance in the war – "...they tell me that you are an unreasonable man. That if it was possible, you would like to win a war without losing a single one of your soldiers...that you have no qualms in attacking an enemy from the rear and in the dark. They say you walk at all times with your tail between your legs and will retreat at the slightest pretext. They say that you are a liar and are not to be trusted by your enemies and if you had any friends, they would be wise to keep you at an arm's length. That is why I chose you, Maharaj Kumar"¹⁶. An avid reader of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the prince practises their teachings in warfare. Similarly, the prince's unnamed wife also upsets the historicist balance. Historically, one would locate and identify 'Greeneyes' as the Bhakti poet and saint – Meera Bai. The term Bhakti cannot be perfectly translated into English as a single term – its meaning is shared divinity, i.e. the disciple who worships God, shares in God's divinity. S.S. Mehta, in an attempt to define Bhakti, writes, "it means standing in the presence of God, serving Him, loving Him, talking to Him, seeing Him, hearing Him, and in fact enjoying the Deity"¹⁷.

It is also a "fundamental revolt against the caste system, challenging its underlying principles and holding up ideals of a different social order in which equality of castes and of women were crucial"¹⁸. Thus, the Bhakti Movement aimed at erasing hierarchy and espoused egalitarianism. Meera Bai's life has been quite well documented in Indian mythology (Nagarkar, in writing the *Cuckold*, has placed Meera Bai under the rubric of history, rather than myth – as was done by western Europe

¹⁶C, 424.

¹⁷Mehta, S.S. *A Monograph on Mirabai, the Saint of Mewad*. Bombay: Fort Press. 1920. Print. 32.

¹⁸Mehta, S.S. *A Monograph on Mirabai, the Saint of Mewad*. Bombay: Fort Press. 1920. Print. 35.

which has dominated the scene since the commencement of the construction of world history in the beginning of the nineteenth century). Her name is on “almost every Indian’s lips”¹⁹(609). It is interesting to note that the narratives about her life and after-life offer contesting insights into her character and personality. Yet, these ever-evolving, multiple, diverse and dynamic contestations add to the palimpsest of narratives about her. In these narratives, Mehta remarks, “no sharp division exists between the past and the present. The past is evoked and born anew and it returns to form a real part of the present”²⁰. Thus, homogeneous empty time is exploded. It has been observed that India’s modernity evolves through the paradigm of the national/modern – the “double discourse of the national and the modern”²¹ – points out art theorist GeetaKapur. The national and the modern are in constant dialogue. Nationalist art, for example, promoted the use of traditional or indigenous motifs. Kapur observes that modernism had constructed such a paradoxical view of such motifs – “sometimes rendering them as progressive signs, at other times subverting them as conservative and traditional”²². Yet, this marks India’s particular form of modernism: “Given India’s sustained struggle for independence and the precise mode of its decolonization, its cultural life is alternately conservative and progressive”²³. Further, she writes, “Modernity is that to which Indian writers apply that name... It is being produced in the course of its description and/or interrogation”²⁴. Modernity emerges from the rearticulation of historically available discursive material.

In *Cuckold*, Maharaj Kumar is engaged in the process of nation-building. Greeneyes, as the “Little Saint”, attracts followers and an alternative imagined community is formulated. The Maharaj Kumar (the eldest son of the King of Mewar) is the heir-apparent. Queen Karmavati, one of the Rana’s several wives (twenty-seven, as Nagarkar informs us), wants to secure the kingdom for her profligate son – Vikramaditya. In the absence of the Rana (as he is fighting a war), Maharaj Kumar shoulders the responsibility of the state. The words that Nagarkar makes the prince utter are those of a contemporary bureaucrat: “I shut myself up in my office. What was going on? This is daylight, nine seventeen in the morning”²⁵. The fact that he refers to time, precise to the number of minutes, lends him the air of a modern bureaucrat. Time in the middle ages was usually “reckoned according to natural occurrences, the diurnal progression of the sun through day and night, its position in the heavens, the phases of the moon, the passage of the seasons. What was absent was any numeral

¹⁹C, 609.

²⁰ Mehta, S.S. *A Monograph on Mirabai, the Saint of Mewad*. Bombay: Fort Press. 1920. Print. 17.

²¹Kapur, Geeta. *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2000. Print. 288. (Henceforth, WWM)

²²WWM, 293.

²³WWM, 341.

²⁴WWM, 277.

²⁵C, 50.

reckoning...²⁶. The introduction of the clock, points out Lewis Mumford in *Technics and Civilisation*, began to “define urban existence”²⁷. “The clouds that could paralyze the sundial, the freezing that could stop the water-clock on a winter night, were no longer obstacles to time-keeping: summer or winter, day and night, one was aware of the measured clank of the clock....[The clock] brought a new regularity...it almost defined existence”²⁸. The clock “dissociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences: the rational world of science”²⁹.

Nagarkar shows us the importance that time holds for the prince. But the prince’s conception of time is ambiguous – it is a mixture of his belief in rationality and in the miraculous: “The gods no longer materialize on earth, at least not in Kali-yuga....The only miracles in life are wrought by time”³⁰. The prince is, in this sense, modern. His approach to the past, to tradition is dynamic, not static. His ideal is Rana Kumbha, who was “a great respecter of tradition but he saw it as a river not as a dead pool of beliefs. Every spring, runnel and rivulet added to the richness and breadth of the river and so when he came across anything which caught his fancy, was beneficial to his people, or medicinal or just plain beautiful to behold, he appropriated it and incorporated it into the Mewar tradition”³¹. Vinda Karandikar, in his essay entitled “Tradition and Modernity” (originally written in Marathi with the title “Paramparaani Navta”), perceives a symbiotic relationship between tradition and modernity – “Modernity is what we perceive when tradition is in the making, and what remains after modernity has been assimilated is tradition”³². He also emphasises that conflict is of the essence as far as tradition and modernity are concerned, since modernity “by definition challenges and rejects....The compulsion to rebel, to revolt, seems to be built-in in the movement towards modernity. It is an impetus that can be continuous and unceasing.”³³.

In the text, Maharaj Kumar is quite preoccupied with the construction of a proper sewage system in the city of Chittor – the capital of Mewar. The Department of City Planning, headed by the civil engineer Sahasmal, is not quite willing to construct it because it is “an untouchable matter”³⁴, he looked “a little abashed and squeamish”³⁵. It is quite unlike the immense monuments which dot the Chittor skyline. Sahasmal wishes to build a “a new complex of marble temples”³⁶ or “a new Victory Tower

²⁶ Mumford, Lewis. *Technics and Civilisation*. Brace And Co.: New York, 1934. Print. 5. (Henceforth, TC)

²⁷ TC, 7.

²⁸ TC, 8.

²⁹ TC, 12.

³⁰ C, 394.

³¹ C, 339.

³² <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23337173>

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³⁴ C, 20.

³⁵ C, 20.

³⁶“

that would be twice as high as the one that the great Rana Kumbha had built”³⁷. The prince tells Sahasmal, in order to convince him, that they shall name the sewage system “Sahasmal’s Victory Tunnels”³⁸. This underground system of tunnels would also function as a route of escape for the population of the fort – especially women and children. This sewage system thus also has a strategic military twist to it. This rationalist military strategy is meant to remove the “stigma from the word ‘flight’ and then from the act itself”³⁹, says the prince. That his military stratagems are unorthodox is glimpsed at as early as in the second chapter of the novel when he asks Shafi Khan at the Institute of Advanced Military Tactics and Strategy if he “conducted any courses on the techniques and mechanics of retreat”⁴⁰. This query was thought “uproariously funny”⁴¹. There is a historical reason behind the laughter of the students – the prince himself knows the immense importance that war, protection of the Rajput state, loyalty to the nation hold for the citizens of Mewar – “The bed time stories of our children are about these larger-than life monarchs and warriors from the past. Our arteries and veins are clogged with them....The option of doubt and fear and retreat are unthinkable because these areas in our minds have been sealed off. In truth, they are no options at all. There is no discrimination or willingness in our valour. It is blind, headlong and unflinching because we don’t know any other way of reaching in a confrontation”⁴². The prince, different as he is from his tribe, questions, “Why did the Rajput code of honour and chivalry always devolve on the sacrifice of their own lives?”⁴³. He believed that if the art of retreat is taught and practised diligently on the battlefield, it would drastically reduce the number of lives lost in war and also make the warriors “live to fight another war”⁴⁴. The prince sees through the foolhardiness of the Rajputs’ age-old tradition of the do or die attitude. The prince endeavoured to remove the Hindu-Muslim divide from the army, so that the army could function efficiently as one united whole – “Since my return I have been pondering the Hindu-Muslim divide. If Mewar is to grow and expand, one of our major tasks will have to do with making Muslims feel secure in a Hindu kingdom. They must have as much at stake in Mewar’s future as Jains and Hindus. How, I keep wondering, do we ensure a dichotomy whereby God and faith remain at home and the state takes first priority in public life?”⁴⁵. He is aware that the army might “disintegrate imperceptibly like a sand wall”⁴⁶. In his ambition to base loyalty towards the state in citizenship rather than in religion, Nagarkar has given the prince a truly modern outlook. But the

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³⁹ C, 343.

⁴⁰ C, 17.

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⁴⁴ C, 25.

⁴⁵ C, 384.

⁴⁶ C, 213.

prince is aware that “It would take months, perhaps years, to forge our various forces into one great fighting machine whose actions were as cohesive and single-minded as its intentions”⁴⁷. The army and the nation, the two types of imagined communities, is what the prince is trying to consolidate and unite. These are “imagined communities” because, as Anderson remarks, “the members...will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them...but, they will conceive themselves a sharing a deep, horizontal comradeship”⁴⁸. The existing model of army in Mewar was the temporary ‘militia-type’ army – “visually and statistically intimidating”⁴⁹ but with a “low degree of cohesion”⁵⁰, as Anirudh Deshpande points out in his article entitled “Interpretive Possibilities of Historical Fiction: Study of Kiran Nagarkar’s *Cuckold*”. Due to lack of tactical coordination between the elephants, chariots, cavalry and infantry, battles were often lost. Eventhough this method was a failure, it was deployed for a very long time in battles fought in medieval India. For instance, in the *Cuckold*, this method of warfare is used at Panipat and Khanwa.

Interestingly, the Hindu-Muslim, or any other type of division – whether on the basis of caste, gender, creed or class – does not exist in the community formed by the followers of Meera Bai. All divisions are suspended and the citizenry of Mewar bows to touch Meera’s sacred feet. Her status is transformed from a whore, a *nautch*-girl, a *tawaif* to a pure, holy saint. Legend has it that it is Meera who is absorbed by Lord Krishna’s idol at the end, with a piece of the cloth she was wearing protruding from the idol’s lips. (But of course Indian mythology accords several other closures to Meera’s life – one story for instance, tells how when she is offered a poisoned drink by Bhojraj’s father, her body vanishes and all that is left are a few flowers etc.

Cuckold shows a very different relationship between the Maharana and Greeneyes – she proposes military strategies, plays chess with the king and so on). Nagarkar re-works the legend by making the idol of Lord Krishna absorb the prince instead (with the cloth of his turban protruding from the idol’s chest), and also providing a couple of other explanations for what happens after he has lost the war.

Nagarkar once stated in an interview: "...let me say that research is not fiction. Very often it is passed off as fiction, especially in this country. But there is an act of transformation and that is very important"⁵¹. Through the writing of *Cuckold*, the author has achieved a transformation in the history (or the lack of it) surrounding the prince of Mewar. The novel has a lot to say about the social, economic and political complexities of the lives of the Rajputs. Deshpande goes so far to say that this novel has changed the popular perception of history.

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⁴⁸ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983. Print. 49.

⁴⁹ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4412103>. Web. 3.

⁵⁰ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4412103>. Web. 3.

⁵¹ <http://www.hindu.com/lr/2006/03/05/stories/2006030500320100.htm>