

## Defamiliarization of the Myth of Meerabai in Kiran Nagarkar's

### Cuckold

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#### Abstract

Kiran Nagarkar's Sahitya Academy Award Winning novel Cuckold is a twisted tale of love and war set in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century during the era of Bhakti movement. It is based on the life of mystic saint Meerabai and her husband Bhoj Raj. Meerabai is considered to be the first woman saint of Bhakti movement in the Indian History and still remembered throughout the world for her utmost devotion towards Lord Krishna. There are several novels and movies based on her life and in most of them she has been celebrated and pedestalized as a saint. Nagarkar's Cuckold is an exception. A novel dealing with the life of saint Meerabai and her husband with such title makes it out of the ordinary. This paper aims to scrutinize the character of Meerabai in this novel.

Keywords; Myth, Saint Meera Bai, Lord Krishna, Cuckold, Bhakti Movement

#### Introduction:

The Legendary Meerabai Meera has been a well-known figure for us through the centuries. Her immense popularity transcends time and space. She is placed in the era of 1300 A.D. to 1650 A.D. known as the era of Bhakti movement. She was a Rajput Princess born in (Vikram Samvat 1555) 1498 A.D. in the village Kudaki, near Merta, a small state near

Marwad, Rajasthan. She was the daughter of Ratan Singh Rathod and granddaughter of Dudaji of Merta.

The rathods of Merta were Vaishnavas, devotee of Lord Krishna Which influenced Meerabai and moulded her life towards devotion for Lord Krishna. As an infant Meera became deeply enamored of an iconic idol of Krishna owned by a visiting holy man. She was inconsolable until she possessed it and probably kept it all her life. Some myths say that when she was 4 years of age, she watched a marriage procession. When she saw the bridegroom she asked her mother innocently who will be her bridegroom. At this her mother pointed towards the idol of Krishna and since then Meera started considering herself as spouse of Lord Krishna.

In 1516, Meerabai unhappily married Bhojraj, the crown prince of an influential neighboring Rajput Kingdom in Rajasthan, just to fulfill her family's wishes. Although Bhojraj respected her spiritual instinct, it was also expected that Meerabai would conform to the traditions of her new family. This did not happen. She denied to follow the traditions of her new family as well as to consummate her marriage with Bhojraj. She declared that she is betrothed to blue skinned cow-herder Krishna and there is no place for any other man in her life.

Meera was a devotee of the highest order. She was born as a princess but in search of religious deliverance she left all the pleasures of a palace and abandoned her worldly possessions. She left the palace abandoning her all the ornaments and started wandering in the streets reciting poems and dancing in a plain white saree with ektara in her hands. Her behavior can't be measured against our merely human standard. Her devotion to God has taken her out of the social realm, the realm of norm and custom. She is considered to be an epitome of devotion, love and dedication towards the supreme.

Her love for Krishna is epitomized by the popular belief about her final disappearance in the temple of Krishna in Dwarka. She is believed to have entered the sanctum of the temple in a state of singing ecstasy. The sanctum doors are believed to have closed automatically and when later opened the sari of Meerabai was seen enwrapped around the idol of Lord Krishna, symbolizing the culmination of her union with lord.

#### Kiran Nagarkar's Meera

Through Cuckold Nagarkar gives us a new insight and compels us to look at the legend of Meerabai from new and startling angle. Although she is not the central character in the novel but the protagonist can't be seen without her. Meerabai continues to be seen from the outside as a somewhat inexplicable character whose motivation seems contradictory. Nagarkar shows that Meera is directly or indirectly responsible for Maharaj Kumar's decline. He challenges the historical narrative of Meera's life and the legend embedded within Indian cultural discourse. She has never been referred with the name 'Meera' throughout the novel but the reference is easily identifiable to Indian readers. She has been given the name 'Greeneyes' by the Maharaj Kumar and 'Little Saint' by the populace.

The 'Little Saint' of the novel portrays a radically different Meera from the stereotyped we have known over centuries. Although she is named as saint but she had many such human traits which cannot be numbered as saintly. Cuckold offers a fresh vision of sainthood. The mythical Meera with the ektara in her hand and modesty in her eyes is replaced by a bold, bright-eyed Rajput woman who can ride a horse and kill a barahsingha with single bolt. She enjoys setting off her considerable beauty with carefully selected clothes and jewel which is so unlike to the stereotypical white sari clad, ektara strumming saintly Meera. She is also interested in the management of zenana and enjoys the hold of bunch of silver keys like a typical traditional daughter-in-law of an aristocratic family of India. We get a child like image of her when she cheats at chess or cards which are a far cry from the

mythical damsel of Meera lore. She shares a good bond with her father-in-law, the great Rana Sangha and sometime also could be seen active in political affairs. She also proposes military strategies which we can't imagine about stereotyped Meera. During their exile in Kumbalgarh her husband Bhoj Raj says-

In a few years' time father should hand over the command of our troops to my wife. She'll sing and dance and the people of Gujrat, Malwa, Vijayanagar and Delhi will catch the fever, disown their kings and follow her wherever she goes. (Nagarkar. 341)

In this new Meera we also see flickers of jealousy. Albeit on the very first day of her wedding she had revealed to her husband that she is betrothed to someone else and had surrendered her body and soul to him, suddenly she shows some signs of jealousy when she came to know about the pregnancy of Sugandha, Maharaj Kumar's second wife.

If we look at the songs sung by the princess in the novel, we find that these songs are not the traditional songs that had been sung by the legendary Meera. Meerabai has written near about one thousand three hundred songs .Mostly they are written in praise of the blue-God Krishna .They have been written mostly in the Rajasthan dialect of Hindi. Nagarkar has never intended to translate the original songs into English. He has deconstructed the traditionally attributed songs to Meera. He has presented a new set of poems which are specially written for the little saint of the novel and completely different from the original songs penned by Meera. These songs give her an added dimension and reveal her character a little more.

Get him on the double  
Tell him it's an emergency  
The doctors have given up  
I can't bear it  
I think I'm going to die

It's a slipped disc  
 A shooting pain up the spine  
 A fire in the brain  
 A comet bursting in the kidneys.  
 Is he here? (Nagarkar. 91-92)

Nagarkar's version of songs portrays a woman of blood and bones who is mischievous, dramatic and ardent.

In death and in life, I'm yours, yours alone  
 Take me. Do what you will with me.  
 As stone or stray dog, as roach or rose, as fish or fowl,  
 Whatever the shape of reincarnation, I'm yours, yours alone. (Nagarkar. 325)

In these songs she seems so passionate that the songs don't fit in the figure of stereotyped Meera. Her love towards Krishna seems very similar to intense human passion. People named her 'Little Saint' but it is not her saintliness that grabs the attention of the readers, but fervency of her poems does.

### Conclusion

The legendary Meera is a role model for the feminist movement because she refused to be bound by tradition and custom and made a breakthrough in Patriarchal society. Nagarkar puts her in a post-feminist framework. He shows her as a wife who refuses to perform her wifely duties towards her husband. Meera's reputation as a woman who is forced to marry against her wishes made her a martyr but in this story reader sees her from her husband's eye and they feel sympathy for him not for Meera. Nagarkar's Meera behaves contrary to her popular hagiographical image and this makes readers to know how every historical narrative has multiple facets. He encourages the readers to question their own assumptions about the history and the legends they have internalized. His depiction of Meera

as Greeneyes or the Little Saint frames a robust lively picture of a sharp witted, calculative, obstinate woman who is quite different from the Meera of tradition who has been sanctified beyond all credibility as a person.

### **References**

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