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Sahitya Akademi



India International Centre

meet the author

Kiran Nagarkar





One of the first reviews of *Cuckold* appeared in the *The Pioneer*. This is what Makarand Paranjape said: 'Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* is a most extraordinary novel. Alas, our book industry or culture of reading is just not equipped to recognize what a splendid achievement it is. *Cuckold* is so totally different from anything I have read in Indian English fiction that it deserves special notice and praise.' In a letter to Kiran Nagarkar, Gore Vidal wrote in his usual scathing and mischievous fashion: 'I'm reading with pleasure your novel (*Cuckold*)...By and large publishers don't want novels by anyone except serial murderers and of course, Mother Theresa.'

Prescient words from Paranjape and Vidal. It was only when the Sahitya Akademi awarded Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* the prize for the best novel in English for the year 2000 that *Cuckold* really came to public notice and got a second lease of life.

Novelist, playwright, screenplay writer, film, drama and social critic, Kiran Nagarkar is a bilingual writer in English and Marathi. In a former avatar, Nagarkar was a failed teacher, a magazine editor and a creative director in advertising.

Nagarkar's first novel *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (*Seven Sixes are Forty-three*) written in 1974, redefined Marathi literature both in its usage of language and the voice it gave to the modern Indian sensibility. *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* is partly autobiographical though much of it is also pure invention.

'I wrote *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* in Marathi', says Nagarkar. 'It is considered a landmark in post-independence Marathi fiction. I would like to take the credit for reinventing Marathi or for breaking new ground but I'm afraid I can't. If my language was a little unusual it was partly because I was coming to Marathi without the burden of years of academic study. Barring the first four years in a Marathi school, my education was in English. My parents were westernised liberals and conversation at home was mostly in English. Marathi is then my mother tongue because I was born in a Marathi family; but for better or worse English is my second mother tongue, or as people prefer to call it these days, my father tongue.'

Nagarkar's play *Bed Time Story* (1978), written in both Marathi and English, was extralegally banned because of the pressure from extremist political parties. Based on some of the

stories from the *Mahabharata*, the theme of *Bed Time Story* is responsibility; that you and I are responsible for whatever happens in our front and backyards as also in Iraq, Vietnam, Ireland, Palestine, Mozambique and Kashmir. It is a highly controversial and explosive play about which Dr. Harold Blodgett, editor of the Varorium edition of Walt Whitman, said: 'Such a relentless honest play I have never read in contemporary literature. For purpose and vision I can only think of the greatest parallels - *King Lear*, for instance.'

Bed Time Story was finally staged in Marathi in 1995. The English version was produced at Cambridge University in 2002 and will be staged at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2003.

Described as 'one of the wittiest, bawdiest, most perceptive books in contemporary Indian fiction', Nagarkar's second novel *Ravan and Eddie*

appeared in 1995. The larger-than-life eponymous heroes, one a Hindu and the other a Christian, live in the same *chawl* in Mumbai, but they may as well be living on different planets. The boys are too young to make far-reaching conscious choices but unlike the adults around them, Ravan and Eddie are willing to traverse the distance that separates them. They cross over, Ravan to taekwondo and to the English tongue and Eddie to Hindu mythology and Indian martial arts. The style is distinctly original, and most of all, it has a great sense of humour.

Nagarkar's third novel *Cuckold* published in 1997 is considered his magnum opus, and won the Sahitya Akademi award for 2000. About this novel of over 600 pages, Nagarkar says, 'I did not set out to write a big novel; it had a kinetic energy of its own.' According to Dr. Susan Daruvalla, 'No recent book has the strength and complexity of





Cuckold, and none offers such rewards. By choosing the husband of Mirabai as his protagonist, Nagarkar is able to fashion a dazzling narrative infused with multiple layers of philosophical, historical and spiritual meaning. ...Here is a writing so immediate and sensuous it leaves the reader with almost physical memories. This is not all, for the book explores in a deeply personal, introspective vein and with great subtlety and intelligence the place of love, hate, good and evil in human life. Nagarkar crowns his achievement with a stunning, illuminating ending which raises the novel to another plane and opens the reader to new possibilities. This is a very important book, one which is deeply relevant to the contemporary world and yet will undoubtedly stand the test of time.'

There may be historical reasons for the tension between English and the vernacular languages, but Nagarkar thinks that the time has come to bury the

controversy. Regional writers are generally dismissive of Indian writing in English because, according to them, it is exotic and not genuinely rooted in our culture. They feel that 'the emotional content is missing as is the real core of the Indian experience.' On the other hand, writers like Rushdie hold that Indo-Anglian literature represents 'perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books.'

What then does one do with bilingual authors like Arun Kolatkar, Jayanta Mahapatra and Nagarkar? 'Are we to understand,' Nagarkar asks, 'that when I write in Marathi, I write the real thing? That my voice in Marathi is authentic? But when I switch to English, I am a phony and a fraud and out of touch with my roots? Or is Arun Kolatkar's writing superior in English and less than pedestrian in Marathi?' For Nagarkar any language is as powerful as you make it.

Nagarkar has received several honours that include the Rockefeller Fellowship to work on multicultural communication at the Center for Psychosocial Sciences, Chicago, USA (1991) and the City of Munich Fellowship to work on his current novel *God's Little Soldier*.

He won the Dalmia Award for promoting communal harmony through writing in 1996. *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* received the H.N. Apte award for the best first novel of 1974, and *Cuckold* won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 2000.



A Select Bibliography

Saat Sakkam Trechalis. Mumbai: novel in Marathi published by Mauj-Prakashan, 1974

Seven Sixes are Forty-three, Australia: English translation of Marathi novel published by Queensland University Press, 1978

Bed Time Story, play in Marathi and English, partly based on the *Mahabharata*, 1978

The Highly Improbable Adventures of Ravan and Eddie, screenplay in English, 1981

Kabirache Kaya Karayache, play in Marathi about the Hindu-Muslim riots. (Staged in 1995), 1994

Ravan and Eddie, novel in English published by Penguin India, 1995

Cuckold, novel in English published by Harper Collins India, 1995

Ravan ani Eddie, Mumbai: translated into Marathi by Rekha Sabnis and published by Mauj-Prakashan, 1996

Ravan and Eddie, Portugal: translated into Portuguese, published by Campo Das Letras, 1996

'The Arsonist', a creative re-imagining of the life of the saint-poet, Kabir, part of a work in progress. Published by Manohar in an anthology, *Images of Kabir*, 2002

Krishnas Schatten, German translation of *Cuckold* published by Verlag, 2002

Screenplays

The Competition, 1991

The Perfect Circle, 1997

The G-Gang, 2001

Black Tulip, 2002

Chronology

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| 1942 | Born in Mumbai | 1981 | <i>Ravan and Eddie</i> , the screenplay, finished. The long dry white season begins |
| 1967 | Master's Degree in English Literature from Bombay University | 1991 | Started writing <i>Ravan and Eddie</i> , the novel, in English |
| | Taught at the English Department of SIES College where he had colleagues like poets Vinda Karandikar and R. Parthasarathy and fictionist Vilas Sarang | 1993 | Wrote play <i>Kabirache Kay Karaiche</i> |
| 1968 | Joined the magazine <i>Indian Writing Today</i> as assistant editor | | <i>Ravan and Eddie</i> published |
| 1969 | Joined MCM advertising. Teamed up with poet and creative director, Arun Kolatkar | 1995 | <i>Kabirache Kay Karaiche</i> staged commercially in Bombay with Vikram Gokhale and other well-known Marathi and Gujarati actors |
| | Became Copy Chief at MCM | | <i>Cuckold</i> published |
| 1971 | Appointed Creative Director at MCM | 1999 | Wrote <i>The Arsonist : Reimagining Kabir</i> |
| | Published Marathi novel <i>Saat Sakkam Trechalis</i> | 2000 | Awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for <i>Cuckold</i> |
| | Finished play <i>Bed Time Story</i> . Play ran into trouble with the Censor Board and extremist political parties. Dr. Lagoo tried to produce it but failed | 2000 | Wrote the screenplay, <i>The Black Tulip</i> |
| | | 2002 | <i>Cuckold</i> published in German as <i>Krishnas Schatten</i> |



Speaking at the Seminar on Indian Women's Writing at the Turn of the Century