

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE IN THE MULTICULTURAL LATTICE OF KIRAN NAGARKAR'S 'RAVAN AND EDDIE'

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the fundamental divergence of principles, life style, language, culture and living patterns of the two seemingly cohesive communities – the Catholic Christians and the Hindus – located in the kaleidoscopic world of the Bombay 'Chawl' in Kiran Nagarkar's fascinatingly complex novel 'Ravan and Eddie'. Kiran Nagarkar, with his incisive wit and black humour, brings out the plurality and hybrid nature of identities of the migrant population in the chawls of Bombay and delineates the politics of language, identity and difference in the multicultural setting of the chawls. The paper also briefly examines Nagarkar's innovative use of 'Digressions' as an effective narrative tool to reflect on the cultural, social and political realities posited by the novel's plot and story. The paper aims to focus on Nagarkar's authentic portrayal of the staggering social, religious and cultural differences that divide the Hindus and Goan Christians inhabiting the CWD (Central Works Department) Chawl No. 17 of Mazagaon district in Bombay and how the seemingly harmonious and homogenous world of the chawl gives way to gaping chasms of irreconcilable incompatibilities between the two communities. In this process, the paper attempts to empower the readers to perceive the negotiation of identity and difference in postcolonial, multicultural societies.

KEYWORDS: Language, Identity, Culture, Bombay Chawl, Digressions, Homogeneity & Plurality

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INTRODUCTION

Kiran Nagarkar (1942 – 2019) is one of the most distinguished novelists and playwrights of India and is reckoned as the most courageous and talented writers of modern Indian English fiction. His novel 'Cuckold' won the Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 2000. Nagarkar defied established norms and conventions in his writings and endeavoured to effect social change and the development of a holistic political thought and perspective in the country through the artistic medium of his work. His novels brilliantly conceive the tragedy and alienation of modern existence unleashed by the socio-historical conditions of India in the postcolonial era. Replete with a sense of ideological commitment and concern, all his writings constitute a searing critique of contemporary social realities. *Ravan and Eddie* is Nagarkar's second novel and the first book in the *Ravan and Eddie Trilogy* with the other two sequels, *The Extras: Starring Ravan and Eddie* and *Rest in Peace: Ravan and Eddie*, being published in 2012 and 2015 respectively.

The novel *Ravan and Eddie* (henceforth *R&E*) traces the lives of two boys, Ravan Rao Pawar, a Marathi Hindu, and Eddie Coutinho, a Goan Christian, in the Central Works Department chawls of Bombay, where their lives ran parallel. The novel, written in the form of a *Bildungsroman*, chronicles the picaresque adventures of the

two eponymous male protagonists – Ravan (Hindu) and Eddie (Christian) – whose ‘subjectivity and identity’ is formed in terms of their respective religious belief systems and values. The grim world of CWD chawls is viewed through the eyes of the young anti-heroes, who fumble and falter at every phase of their lives but never allow fiascos or setbacks to dampen their spirit en route the pursuit of their dreams to become Bollywood superstars. The CWD chawls in Bombay house people from different parts of the country and with varied cultural practices, norms and values. Throughout the novel, the readers are made to witness the underlying theme of the clash of cultures even as the author delves deep into the daily lives of the two disparate characters, Ravan Rao and Eddie Coutinho, who are incessantly and indefatigably farcical, bawdy and boisterous. However, Nagarkar delineates the novel’s central characters warts and all, and with every conceivable flaw and weakness. Mixed in identity, nationality, race and language, these characters signify the hybrid, cosmopolitan culture of one of the greatest metros in the world – Bombay. Throughout the novel, the author provides us with thought-provoking asides and meditations on a variety of issues – the relevance, significance and potency of the English language in postcolonial, post-independent India and its role in shaping the lives of people, the place of the moving image and cinema in contemporary society, the perennial problem of water scarcity – especially for the poor and the economically backward communities in modern cities, the history of the Afghan Snow cream, the plight of the rural dispossessed in India’s metropolises and the cultural differences between the Hindus and Christians.

Nagarkar’s ‘Digressions’ and authorial commentaries in the novel do not prevent or interrupt the flow of the novel’s narrative nor do they perform a didactic or moralizing function. They help the reader to develop deeper insights into the socio-economic realities of the urban subclass in India whose lives are caught in an incessant strife between the dichotomous paradigms of poverty and survival, hope and despair, reality and fantasy. The interludes do not alter or distort the fictive truth of the novel, rather deepen and intensify the reader’s empathy and fusion with the lives and impressions of the novel’s characters. (Dawson 145)

There are four authorial asides or interludes in the novel. The discursive essay entitled ‘A Meditation on Neighbors’ appears in the Chapter Twelve of the novel. In this aside, Nagarkar gives an exhaustive description of the “elemental or critical differences between the Catholics and Hindus in the CWD chawls” (R&E 171). The concept of social homogeneity of the chawls, cutting across caste, class, community and religious barriers, is an unfounded assertion that is often exaggerated to the extent of glossing over the fissures and fault lines that define the fundamentality of life in a chawl. It is exactly this notion of a shared uniformity, congruity and consistency that Nagarkar tends to subvert through his witty and hilarious rendition of the chawl’s world, silhouetted against the cosmopolitan setting of the city of Bombay, wherein he highlights the divisions and differences simmering deep within the Hindu and the Christian communities inhabiting the chawl. Nagarkar reveals that chawls are often places where petty squabbles over shared resources and common sanitary conveniences coupled with fractious community politics are a quotidian spectacle. Also, during times of major conflict, chawls prove to be the breeding grounds of murderous communal disharmony with the potential to disrupt the secular fabric of the city.

Decoding the concept of ‘difference’ which defines and demarcates collective and individual identities of people belonging to different groups and occupying a shared geographical space, noted literary and cultural theorists Peter Childs and Roger Fowler explain:

... [T]he concept of difference plays a pivotal role in the construction of our subjectivity. According to post-structuralist thought, the SUBJECT is, precisely, a construction and, most obviously, a construction of language (we are

born into a language system that pre-dates and shapes us). Moreover, each subject – like the linguistic sign – depends upon its relation to, and differences from, other subjects. Thus, we are all constituted through relations of both similarity and difference and our sense of what we depend, in part, on what we are not. Group identities are predicated on the same principles. To identify yourself as a member of a group is to claim certain similarities with its other members, but it is also, and equally, to differentiate yourself from other groups and their members. (Child and Fowler 56)

Building on Child and Fowler's analysis, Nitin Jarandikar examines the essentiality of 'difference' to explain the discrepancy and divergence between the communal and religious identities of the Hindus and Catholic Christians as projected by Nagarkar in the novel:

While depicting the earlier decades of post-Independence India, Nagarkar projects the undercurrents in the so-called homogenous society through chawl entity where the tensions between Hindu – Christian worlds and the tensions between so-called Hindu high-class and the untouchables are predominant. Considering the metaphorical implications of the chawl entity in the novel, *Ravan and Eddie* can be considered as a 'national allegory'.

The life in [a] chawl is not at all a matter of pride or celebration. Its heterogeneity does not reveal 'unity in diversity'. Rather divided by their class, caste, race or gender the cultural world of the chawl negates any possibility of homogenous identity of the people living in it (5).

The rigid separation of the different floors of the chawls in terms of their communal identity and religious affiliations is so glaringly obvious that it divided the Hindu and the Christian communities into two disjunct and isolated worlds marooned in space and time. As Nagarkar states, "[i]t was ...religion that was the source of all the differences between the two communities" (R&E 172). The social and cultural gaucheries of people from the two groups and their crass and complete insensitivity to each other's feelings and ways of life are revealed by the novelist in an ironically humorous albeit empathetic fashion. In one of the early incidents in the novel, Nagarkar describes the contretemps between the neighbours when their rites and rituals clash against each other in the most embarrassing and freakish of ways. Parvatibai arranges for a special thanks-giving ceremony to God for saving her child at exactly the same time when the Coutinhos were grieving over Victor's untimely death and arranging his funeral:

Suddenly all hell broke loose. The earth rocked and the heavens swayed. The people at the funeral looked shattered. Even Father Agnello D'Souza was speechless. Were these the voices from the Tower of Babel?

Loudspeakers placed in Parvatibai's windows were blasting the entire neighbourhood with the Satyanarayana rituals.... The Catholic mourners were pounded and assaulted by the indecipherable cacophony. How uncouth and vulgar it sounded. (R&E 8 – 9)

Nagarkar indirectly expresses his indignation at the way even grave and solemn situations like death or a funeral service are turned into public spectacles where people mobbed and watched the proceedings with indecent curiosity marked by a gross and blatant violation of individual privacy. The novelist observes:

The Hindu boys and girls and their parents from the neighbouring chawls gazed in wonder at the indescribable beauty of a Catholic funeral. Truly, even if you were born a Hindu, it was worthwhile dying a Catholic. How much pomp and glory and solemnity there was in Christian death. (R&E 8)

While the fifth floor of every chawl is exclusively occupied by the Christians, the four floors below are occupied

only by the Hindus. The Christians are the Roman Catholic Goans who still prided on their rich Portuguese colonial heritage of Goa. They “were born and bred in India but their umbilical cord stretched all the way to Lisbon” (R&E 16). While the children of the Catholics went to missionary schools run by priests and nuns, the Hindus went to municipal schools where Marathi was the first language and English, the second. The novelist comments sarcastically on the individual idiosyncrasies of people in both the communities while offering the reader interesting snippets of information about their lives and culture. Nagarkar writes:

Hardly any of the Hindu boys went to college. And when they did, they got into some el cheapo place. Catholics went straight to heaven or rather it's equivalent on earth, St. Xavier's College, even if they got barely 45 or 50 per cent marks in the higher secondary exams. (R&E 172)

The Hindus “were hyperconscious about personal cleanliness” (R&E 172) and bathed religiously every day. They performed ablutions with ritualistic zeal and consecrated the idols of their Gods and Goddesses by showering them with water. The Christians, however, never thought “salvation and bathing were causally related” (R&E 172). While the Catholics ate beef and pork, the Hindus – even the non-vegetarian ones – hardly ever touched such meat. The Hindu women wore saris and the Catholic women dresses. While the temples were the go-to places of worship for the Hindus, the Catholics attended mass at the St. Sebastian’s Church every Sunday without fail. The Hindus celebrated the Ganapati festival with much pomp and splendor, “with the image of the elephant-headed god installed in every lane and alley” (R&E 175) whereas the Catholics celebrated Christmas and prayed devoutly to the St. Francis Xavier in Panjim.

Konkani was the lingua franca of the Catholic Christians though the younger people of the community, when outside the home, conversed mostly in English. The Hindus spoke in Marathi. In this interlude, Nagarkar highlights how the CWD chawls are divided on the basis of language. He talks about the politics of language which moulds and shapes the contours of class, caste and religion of the two communities. He writes:

English was the thorn in the side of the Hindus. Its absence was their cross, their humiliation and the source of their life-long inferiority and inadequacy. It was a severely debilitating, if not fatal, lack that was not acknowledged, spoken of or articulated. It was the great leveller. (R&E 176)

Nagarkar points out how the Roman Catholic missionaries were informed of the power of English language and “took the English tongue almost as seriously as their faith” (R&E 176). With their missionary zeal, they established English-medium schools and colleges across the country. The Goan Catholics realized – long before their contemporaries did – the fact that “language is leverage” (R&E 177). The novelist allows his readers a peek into the minds of the Hindus who were unsettlingly conscious of their inferior English language skills and ready to do anything “to be able to speak like the people from the top floor” (R&E 176). In a rare instance of making a hortatory self-confession in the novel, Nagarkar speaks directly to his readers about the indispensability of both knowing and learning the English language in the modern world and classifies the society in terms of the economic leverage and empowerment the language imparts to its members.

... [T]here are only two kinds of people in the world. Those who have English and those who don't. Those who have English are the haves, and those who don't, are the have-nots.

English is a mantra, a maha-mantra. It is an ‘open sesame’ that doesn't open mere doors, it opens up new worlds and allows you to cross over from one universe to another. (R&E 176, 177)

The novelist makes a subtle insinuation that learning the Colonizer’s language will give the marginalized classes a

distinctive advantage to ameliorate their social standing and develop a sense of agency in life. In doing so, Nagarkar “inverts the conceptualization of English as the language of privilege” (Rochester 21).

The inter-cultural differences of faith between the two communities were so strong that even names of individuals could not escape their pervasive influence. Names were both symbols and carriers of one's cultural and ethnic identity. In one of the sub-plots of the novel that describes the Monteiros, Nagarkar draws our attention to this dynamic complex of paradigmatic correlations between the two groups. Paul Monteiro, “the one and only Catholic freedom fighter from the CWD chawls” (R&E 191), named his son after the Father of the nation, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. However, the Catholics living in the chawls who could not digest the vernacular naming of a Catholic child, called Monteiro's son Mohan as Paul and referred to him as Paul Junior.

Rochester makes a discerning observation about the problems of language and the barriers of communication that divide people in the chawls. Like religion, language too is a crucial marker of one's cultural identity. The novel (*R&E*) itself opens with an unmistakable instance of linguistic divide which disables Victor Coutinho from professing his love for Parvati Pawar. Nagarkar writes in the ‘Prologue’ to the novel:

Victor could have talked to Parvati for hours. But who was going to translate his Konkani or English into Marathi for her? Frankly, if he'd had the guts, he could have managed well enough in his broken Hindi. They could have discussed the two babies forever, comparing their sleeping habits, their temperaments and tantrums, the first word they uttered. (R&E 2)

While a common language works as a unifying factor and contributes to the solidarity and harmony among people from different communities, its absence drives people apart and alienates them. Though they lived in the same chawl, Violet and Parvatibai were antagonized and disaffected by linguistic differences. In the novel, the divisive effects of language discrepancy are highlighted by Nagarkar in the episode which involves the sudden death of Victor Coutinho. Violet raises the curse of Cain against Parvatibai's son Ram but her efforts to communicate the imprecatory condemnation are hampered by an inability to articulate her visceral emotions in a medium and expression comprehensible to Parvatibai. Nagarkar writes:

Her finger pointed at Parvati's son.

‘Murderer. Murderer’, Violet said in a hoarse voice. Parvati was quick to grasp that the woman was saying something damaging about her son in a foreign tongue.

‘Kya, kya, what, what?’ The only language they had in common was Bombay Hindi.

‘Yes, Yes’, Victor's wife hissed.

Parvati put her son down next to Pieta.

‘What's this yes yes? Say what you want to clearly. In a language I can understand.’

Violet either would not or could not forsake English. (R&E 6)

In the next episode which deals with the problems of language and its incomprehension, Nagarkar turns the issue on its head and locates it within the Hindu community in the chawl to the effect that the result remains unchanged, only the ludicrousness of the situation escalates dramatically. This time around, the novelist draws our attention to the proceedings

at Parvatibai's house where she had arranged for a ritual to thank God for saving his son Ram from a near-death situation. The priest's religious incantation baffles even the Hindu neighbours who were hard put to figure out what exactly the priest was trying to convey even though the recital was made in their mother tongue. As a result, they feel disconnected with the ritual and estranged from the proceedings. Nagarkar writes:

Even the Hindu neighbours had no way of figuring out what the priest recited, though it was in their mother tongue, Marathi. He didn't give a damn about the meaning of the words, the feeling behind them, the poetry of the language or the complex manoeuvres of the plotline. He had no thought for metaphysical implications nor time to translate them in terms of everyday life. He was telescoping words, sentences, paragraphs, hurtling through chapter after chapter. He was vomiting all over the place, choking on his own breathlessness. (R&E 7)

As Rachel Rochester aptly observes, "the people who should have been most comfortable with Marathi had become estranged from the language, unable to relate to it as anything other than a cacophonous, ambiguous recitation" (6-7), indicating the diminishing importance of the language and the consequent decay of the cultural signification the language embodied.

Thus, the paper analyzes the politics of language, identity and difference in the multicultural milieu of Kiran Nagarkar's novel *Ravan and Eddie*. Through the medium of the digressive disquisition, Nagarkar effectively demystifies the myth of homogeneity in the multi-cultural milieu of the CWD chawls and exposes the dichotomy within the complex social fabric of the Hindu-Christian communities living in the chawl.

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