JOURNAL OF POSTCOLONIAL WRITING, 2017
VOL. 53, NOS. 1–2, 43–51
https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1322169

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTERVIEW

"I knew that I was a hybrid": An interview with Kiran Nagarkar

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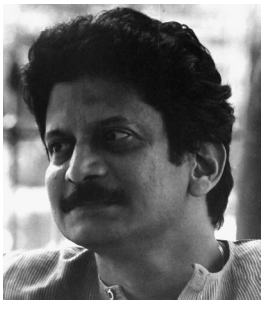
ABSTRACT

Kiran Nagarkar is a well-known bilingual novelist in Marathi and in English who has written several notable and award-winning novels as well as plays. In this interview conducted in August 2016, the novelist discusses his background and his beginnings in Marathi writing, and his years in advertising and working with Kersy Katrak. The novelist discusses the biographical connection to the chawls in Bombay and the role of excrement in his own work. Nagarkar also explains the early popular and literary influences on his work, the sense of his own hybridity across the writing in two languages, and his refusal to search for an originary past.

KEYWORDS

Fiction; chawls; hybridity; advertising; Kersy Katrak; *Cuckold*



Kiran Nagarkar (b. 1942) is known for his bilingual writing and innovation in both Marathi and English: his first novel, *Sat Sakkam Trechalis* (Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three; Nagarkar 1974), is seen as one of the early experimental texts in modern Marathi writing; his third novel, *Cuckold* (1997), won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award. Amongst his most popular writing is the novel *Ravan and Eddie* (1994) to which Nagarkar has added the sequels *The Extras* (2012) and *Rest in Peace: Ravan & Eddie* (2015a). It features the irrepressible duo of Ravan and Eddie who document, with tremendous humour as well as empathy, post-1960 Bombay through to the current 21st-century Mumbai. Nagarkar is also a playwright: his play *A Bedtime Story* (2015b) is a trenchant critique of the dictatorial tendencies of the Emergency era in Indian history. In his selective return to Indian pasts, and his espousal of the everyday idiom, Kiran Nagarkar's philosophy in fiction complements that of the Bombay poets with whom he was closely associated in the early years.

Besides his own significant contributions to Marathi and English literature in India, Kiran Nagarkar has had a remarkable partnership with Arun Kolatkar, the bilingual poet from Bombay. With his experience in the advertising world and his publications in both Marathi and English, he has a unique window into the period and space of *sathottari* (post-1960) Bombay.

I met Kiran Nagarkar at his home in Mumbai in June 2015 and then continued the conversation on the phone in August 2016.

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Anjali Nerlekar (AN): You started as a Marathi writer with the novel *Sat SakkamTrechalis* (Seven Sixes are Forty-Three) and then moved into English writing later. Can you talk about your own background in the two languages, Marathi and English, since your later writing features both?

Kiran Nagarkar (KN): I studied in a Marathi school in Mumbai till the fourth grade. My father was a clerk in the railways which meant that we were fairly poor to start off with but my serious health problems accentuated our penury considerably. To this day I am unable to fathom his decision to send my mother, my older brother and me to Pune because of my bad health. That was the end of my education in Marathi. My father had taken a decision which would have far-reaching consequences in my adult life. For a year he sent me to learn English with a Miss Fonseca, who lived in the Camp area with her family in Pune. It is thanks to my father that I can now talk and write in two languages.

You know, the last time I was in Germany I met people there from Finland and other places who spoke four languages routinely. When I look at the nativist stance in Maharashtra, I am amazed that they rate our people so lowly that they promote the notion that our children and adults can handle at best their mother tongue alone. This in a country that has the rare good fortune to have 24 major languages. We Marathis are such fluent hypocrites. We and our leaders talk a lot about how much we love Marathi and then send our kids to English-medium schools. I have no problem with that but can we not have simultaneously an all-encompassing love of our own languages too? My greatest regret is that I do not speak Kannada, or Tamil, and so many other languages as well. I am at a loss to understand why we want to make our youngsters poverty-stricken and deny them the wealth of these languages?

AN: Do tell me about your early years of writing. What were some of the first pieces you wrote in the 1960s? And how did your career as a writer begin?

KN: I was looking for a job when I came back to Bombay after finishing my BA degree in Fergusson College [Pune] in1964. I had begun to write short stories then. I guess I instinctively felt that advertising was the only profession that might accept me. I had written a play at that time about a job interview, but I have lost that now. Then in 1966 or 1967, I wrote a story in English called "The Undertaker" and Kamaltai [Kamal Desai][1] translated it into Marathi. I have forgotten what she called it. I have no idea as to how I came to know Dilip [Chitre];[2] perhaps it was because of his father who had published the "The Undertaker" in *Abhiruchi*. Then I wrote another story while I was in Delhi. It was called "The Moon Had to Be Mended" and had an interesting storyline.

AN: These stories were in Marathi?

KN: No, they were written in English. They were translated into Marathi. It was Dilip [Chitre] who translated the second one. I wrote my first short story in Marathi, and it's a typical Kiran Nagarkar story, because, you know, it starts with a sentence, "To agdi ha hota" (He was really a bit too much). Or what you would call "a pain in the arse". He gets on everybody's nerves and the people around try every which way to do away with him. They drop him in a well, they hang him, they dig a deep hole in the earth and bury him, but he always pops back to life. Finally, they go to God himself who looks and dresses like the Air India mascot, the turbaned maharaja. He is short and his feet don't touch the floor, not even the footstool. After the people complain about this man, God says that there's

room for everybody in this world, the ordinary folk as well as the misfits and the rebels, and proceeds to lay him down at his feet. Well that's the first time in aeons that God's feet touch the ground. The day after I wrote this story, I started writing my first novel and that too in Marathi, a language from which I had completely cut myself off after primary school.

AN: Can you talk a little about your years in the advertising world. What was it like in Bombay at the time?

KN: When I came back to Bombay from Pune, I did my MA at Mumbai. Since I had done so badly in my finals, I got a disgraceful third class and the only job available to me was as a tutor at South Indian Education Society College (SIES College). I left SIES because I got an offer from Prabhakar Padhye to be a sub-editor on a magazine called *Indian Writing Today* which was published in Pune. That time at Pune was an unadulterated disaster since first of all my promised salary of Rs 350 was reduced to Rs 250 and then I reacted very badly to the "Congress grass" (Parthenium weed) and was asked to leave Pune permanently after hospitalization. I joined Dahanukar College (Bombay) next, and was thrown out from there because I did not pass all the students I was tutoring. Since I had to make a living, I applied to 14 advertising agencies and gave a copy-test at every one of them. The only one that got back to me was Clarion, an international advertising agency that had fantastic clients like Coca Cola, etc. I reported to work at 8.30 a.m. in a formal shirt and tie, and waited in the office and kept waiting. Finally at 11.00 a.m. I asked why I was being kept waiting outside. The copy-chief did not have the courtesy to tell me that there was a change in the tax policy that very day, and that is why my potential job had been axed. I had no option but to try my luck again. So I did a test for MCM (Mass Communication and Marketing), and this time I was lucky. From day one of that job, I started working with Arun Kolatkar in 1969. That partnership lasted for over 20 years.

AN: You and Arun Kolatkar worked with Kersy Katrak then. What was it like to be part of the fledgling advertising industry along with him?

KN: It has an air of glamour which is completely false, at least to me. I can't say what it was like in the division which handled the different clients' accounts but in the creative department it was nothing but very, very hard work. Arun and I were in an agency that was known mainly for its creative work. Kersy Katrak gave Arun the job of creative director despite his reputation as an alcoholic (Arun had just given up drinking but the memories of his alcoholism were still well-known). Arun went on a drunken binge one last time and came home to my place completely drunk. At the time, he and his wife-to-be stayed for months with me. Luckily, after this Arun never touched alcohol again.

At MCM, every time we went to the shitpot, we had to return with a brilliant idea. But even that was not the whole truth. They sent you again and again to the toilet on the same day. The audacity of MCM and Kersy is difficult to explain. For instance, even if some other company had been handling an account for ten years or more, MCM would pitch for that. There was no limit to our brazenness then. Arun and I, we were the crisis and the pitching team. We would pitch for anything and everything. At that time, Air India was with J. Walter Thomson. It was a Sunday morning and it was raining heavily and I was about to leave home to see my father. That's when I got a missive from Kersy saying "Kiran Dearest" (I quake even today at the thought of someone calling me "Kiran Dearest"), "we are pitching for Air India's new Boeing fleet tomorrow morning. So work out a new campaign today. Tomorrow

morning is the presentation." I sat all day and could think of nothing, much as I tried. I was sure I had lost the job but come the next morning, I was lucky and had got the main idea for a campaign. Later that week I heard that we had got the account. I am clueless about what kind of money had changed hands under the table in order for Air India to leave a well-established firm and come to us.

I also remember something extraordinary about Kersy. If you did your work and kept your deadlines, Kersy eschewed the bureaucratic notion of a 9 to 5 routine totally. The last two or three years in MCM were grim; the company was going down the tubes because of finagling and there was no money. When MCM closed shop, everybody in the agency barring Arun and I got jobs in other agencies or companies, this despite the fact that we had won every possible award.

One way to think of approaching an advertising campaign has always been to put the cart before the horse; that is to come up with an ad campaign before identifying the problem that needs to be solved. What I learnt from my advertising days was that one should never be long-winded, but say things in compact terms. The other thing was that if the product was complex, you went deep into the subject and studied it in great detail. We had a policy never to invent lies about the product.

AN: Somewhere this has a connection to advertising – all those years you spent in the industry making the language direct and straightforward?

KN: No question about it! And you should see some of the work Arun created then; it is marvellous. Arun initially went through a phase when his surrealist poetry was strong and difficult to understand. But his maturity and genius began to show in the transparency of the language. The common thread we shared between us was lucidity and clarity. There was no desire to sound convoluted, to write in an ornate or self-important way. That has been a principle that matters enormously to me and I suspect it did to Arun as well. Do you know that I went back to creating ads later for the protagonist's "Zero Orphans" campaign in *God's Little Soldier*?

AN: Your books feature Bombay through some unique spaces of the urban landscape. You feature the life of the chawls in *Ravan and Eddie* so closely. Is it based on real life experiences in your case?

KN: In Dadar [Bombay], we lived in a kind of place where you were out of your house before you entered it, it was so small. But the chawl experience for me is a weird one and connected to Pune. I lived in a *baithi* chawl when, thanks to my health problems, my father sent my mother, brother and me for a couple of years to Pune. We lived for one year in a place called Badshahi Lodge. My aunt used to stay behind that Lodge in a place called Tulpule Wadi, I think, and she and her husband were transferred to Chennai. So we moved into that chawl when they left. That was the year I came to know the chawl intimately. Everybody who lived there was poor and had many children. I have so many memories from there but two you might find interesting. I remember my mother doing what in Marathi we call *sarawane*. What this meant was that she had to layer the earthen floor with a solution of cow dung and water. I also learned that when you wanted to use the toilet, you had to wait in line outside for the three common toilets. I even remember that there used to be this faucet in there that one had to press down very hard in order to make it work.

AN: You mean like in the toilets on trains in the old days?

KN: Yes, you required an enormous amount of strength to get the damn thing going. In those early days, I used to wish the chawls would vanish. And my wish has now been coming true in the last couple of decades. The chawls are disappearing; the mill lands are being taken over, and I cannot tell you how dreadful I feel that I have betrayed the chawls by wishing that they would disappear. I wanted them to be replaced by sensible living quarters with light and air and play areas where the children could have a delightful time. In short I wanted the chawl-dwellers to be given their due of human dignity. Now you need those very poor people because the floor has to be swept and swabbed, the car has to be washed, someone has to cook, someone has to take care of your newborn baby. That's why all high rises come with attached hutments or slums. You know, Arun and I had done a campaign for Hotel Centaur (which is near the airport) and he had a terrific line for it: "A hotel with an airport attached". And now, what you see in newspapers is full-page ads on super-glossy paper which talk about the sixth most expensive apartment in the world in gated communities in Bombay. I need hardly say that the fancy ads don't mention the attached dwellings of the poor.

AN: Would you agree that this understanding also appears in your work in terms of the language you employ? For example, you have said that excrement is relevant, not merely in its signification of a roughness of language and life, but also in other ways.

KN: Shit is valuable in a different sense. It is a subject that most people don't like to think of or to confront. From the time that I was young, I could not understand how the finest architects did not grasp the simple fact that women require more toilet space than men.

In my novel *Rest in Peace* (Nagarkar 2015a) a former extra[3] called Asmaan has a brief monologue on toilets. She has an older brother, who does bugger all, and he is, of course, his mother's favourite. Asmaan has six sisters. Ravan, Eddie and Asmaan, thanks to one of the directors whom they have helped get back on track, are about to invest in apartments in a high-rise complex in Pali Hill. This must have been in the 1980s. All three of them have decided they are not going to tell their families about the new accommodation just yet. Ultimately they are about to move in when they find they cannot because they can't make the last payment. Fortunately the director helps them with the money and they move in. One day Asmaan comes over to Ravan's place and she's in a terrible humour – her entire family has moved in with her. This is what she says to Ravan: "I thought for once I will be in the toilet without people knocking on my door, not even allowing me to have a complete piss!" All her life she has dreamt of having a place of her own occasionally "checking out my boobs to see how much they hang". She talks candidly with him but she also knows in her heart that this is something that is never going to happen. Her mother and everybody moves in and one day she returns to her flat to find that everything from her room has been shifted out because her brother needs the space, for after all he is a man and anyway she will be getting married one of these days. Parents have no qualms exploiting their daughters. You see that happening in the "Third World" and you see that happening everywhere. So, when I talk about shit in my writing, it is in the context of the Dalits, who are still expected to clean up our excreta in many parts of the country and the fact that we do not give a damn about women except as cooks, suppliers of sex and breeding machines.

AN: What can you say about the writer as reader, and about the books you read as a young man? I am curious about your own reading habits in those days; what was available to you in the 1960s and after? Were there any writers who made an indelible impression on your mind then?

KN: I was at Fergusson College between 1961 and 1964. Since I went there from St Xavier's College in Bombay, I obviously thought of myself as a superior human being because I spoke English. It was not a conscious state of mind, but it was there, this feeling. So when I joined, my fellow students realized that I spoke English and decided they would teach me a lesson. None of them spoke to me for an entire year. It was a lesson I richly deserved but I was very lonely at the time. Every day I would go to the library after my lectures, pick up a book and come back home. Among the books that I brought home was Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. It must have made a lasting impression on me. Johnson was an incredible personality, but what stayed in my mind was that he and his friends frequented coffee houses. Sheridan, Goldsmith, Burke, Johnson and Garrick – all these people would sit and chat and have remarkable conversations on every subject under the sun. Think of the banality of conversations today on Facebook or Twitter. And we think we are the peak of civilization and have made colossal progress. Yet we never sit down with each other at coffee houses and exchange ideas like that. When I was in my first and second year in college, we did that, even though I cannot claim our conversation was lofty or anything. But we were doing exactly what they were doing. Johnson and company were not employing any "authentic" archaic idiom, nothing of the kind. They were merely conversing in their contemporary idiom. This insight was extremely important for me because later on when I joined MCM and spent time with Arun, he would also talk once in a while about Marathi *Sant* literature [bhakti literature] with me. And what would come through is that Dnyaneshwar, Sopandev and the other siblings would sit with Namdev and other people and chat away.[4] They would discuss philosophical ideas as well as the daily grind and problems in tones laced with humour. But unfortunately we're overwhelmed by the thought that these are great saints, that their conversation must have been full of high-sounding, erudite and metaphysically complex stuff. But we forget that the light in the heart of these great souls is that of bhakti and that bhakti is something that has an immediacy and appeal that speaks to all human beings.

Let me make just one point here in the context of my novel *Cuckold* (Nagarkar 1997). It was Johnson and the bhakti saints of yore who convinced me to use a contemporary colloquial English instead of an archaic language in *Cuckold*.

To return to Johnson, even today I find it hard to believe how great this man is and the range of Johnson's intelligence. His dictionary is a monumental work and what really struck me was one episode in Boswell's account. A woman met Johnson after the dictionary was published. She asked him, "You are such a great scholar, how then did you get the meaning of the word, 'pastern' wrong?" We like to think of ourselves as so highly educated and knowledgeable, but Johnson's reply was so downright and straightforward: "Ignorance, madam, sheer ignorance" (Boswell 1835, 2.47). It is matchless in its perceptiveness. Whenever I find myself getting too self-righteous or pompous, I remember that and it brings me back to the ground.

AN: In addition to Boswell's book on Johnson, what were the other books and journals that you were reading then?

KN: When I was young, we were quite poor, so at that time I must have been reading what my cousins would have read then. In Pune, when I was at St Vincent's High School, at that time my mother would buy me book like biographies of Agarkar, Tilak and Jyotiba Phule.[5] But it was when I went to Fergusson College that I began to read seriously for the first time. I read all of Eugene O'Neill, for instance. And I firmly believe that O'Neill was the very first to explore the tensions and antagonisms in modern families in a way that set the stage for Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee.

By the way, when I used to borrow a book from the Fergusson College library, and when I used to open the page, there were these names of people who had borrowed the book before me – Chiplunkar, Agarkar and so on, just mind-blowing names right there. I did most of my reading when I was doing my BA or my MA degree. I read Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, John Cheever, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Graham Greene and Curzio Malaparte.

And I also consider myself extremely lucky because of my days in advertising because I would buy books then. Arun and I used to go at least twice a day to the bookshops – Strand, Taraporewala, etc.

Some of the other authors who made an immense impression were the sociologist Oscar Lewis, the American novelist James Leo Herlihy, and the Latin Americans Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. I must confess to my shame that I am not an avid reader any more.

AN: Can you then talk about your conception of fiction, something that underlies much of what you write?

KN: My characters and the entire storyline, and their fate – that is what decides my writing style. What I mean is, it is not Kiran Nagarkar who will decide what the narrative style will be. For instance, in *Cuckold* I started out with a first-person narration. And without having decided this in advance, it transpired that it got written in contemporary English. The reasoning behind it being that, if I was going to be authentic to the Middle Ages, then I should be writing in 16th-century Mewari which would mean that even the Mewari people of today would not understand what I was talking about. This is an issue that had been troubling me right from the beginning but was resolved painlessly.

Right from the beginning, I just assumed that I was going to be always a half-breed. I was born in British times, so English was everywhere, and I was born with Marathi on my tongue, so I was not going to search for my roots. I know that's a terrible comment about myself, but I didn't feel the need then or now. I knew that I was a hybrid, and I think somewhere I took . . . not pride, but I thought, "This is where I come from. Why would I want to deny it and go looking for something else?"

AN: With the consistent refusal of nostalgia in your work, how do you reconcile going back to Meerabai? In fact, for many writers from your generation, the bhakti poets seem to dominate the imagination in different ways.

KN: If it is at all a search for authenticity then it is a search for artistic authenticity. You can't deny the riches of the treasure I seem to have inherited from the past. Let me recall the morning I woke up after finishing my novel *Cuckold*. I said to my companion, "Every

word I've written is true." Was I being facetious? Odd as it may sound, I was in earnest. Think of the Ekalavya episode in the *Mahabharata*. (OK, I tweaked it in a very different way in my own work) but the point is that *Mahabharata's* fidelity to the truth is amazing! Dronacharya does exactly what anybody today from the Hindus who believe in the caste system would do. He would say, "Yeah, give me your thumb." So the minute observation of the writers of the *Mahabharata* is amazing. Why would I want to lose out on anything like that? Anybody who's any good, I want him on my side.

Notes

1. Kamal Desai (1928–2011) was an influential progressive short fiction writer of the period.
2. Dilip Chitre (1938–2009) was a leading poet, editor, artist, scholar of the *sathottari* (post-1960) period in Bombay and a close associate of many of the writers of the time.
3. An actor who has a small non-speaking role in the background of a scene in a film, seen as insignificant or near invisible in the hierarchy of the people working on the film.
4. *Sant* literature is bhakti literature, the songs/*abhang* of the itinerant saint-poets all over India. In Maharashtra, one of the most famous is the 13th-century saint-poet, Dnyaneshwar. Nagarkar here references the siblings of Dnyaneshwar, seen as saints in their own rights (Sopandev, Muktabai) and also the older poet, Namdev, who is central to both Hinduism and Sikhism.
5. Jotiba Phule (1827–1890) was a social reformer and writer who organized activism against caste-based and gender-based inequalities. Gopal Agarkar (1856–1895) was a social reformer and an anti-colonial thinker. Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) was an anti-colonial nationalist and a social reformer.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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