

## Kiran Nagarkar's *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three*: A Montage of Metropolitan World

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### Abstract

Kiran Nagarkar (1942 – 2019) is an important Indian English novelist. Originally published in Marathi, *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* is Kiran Nagarkar's first novel. It has no story or plot in the traditional sense of term. It is a series of loosely connected incidents. It depicts the bizarre world through discrete incidents. With its complex narration, dark humour and linguistic experimentation, *Seven Sixes* raises questions about socio-political crisis, religious anxieties and above all the meaning of human existence. The apparent feature of *Seven Sixes* is its urban, rather metropolitan sensibility. The locale of the novel is essentially an urban center. The novel portrays the varied dimensions of the metropolitan world at social as well as the psychological level.

**Key Words:** Love, insecurity, loneliness, boredom, faceless society

Kiran Nagarkar (1942—2019) is an important Indian English novelist. Sahitya Akademi awardee Nagarkar's oeuvre includes novels such as *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* (1974), *Ravan and Eddie* (1994), *Cuckold* (1997), and *God's Little Soldier* (2006). A modern man who has been trapped between tradition and modernity has remained a major concern in Nagarkar's fictional world. *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* is Nagarkar's first novel. It was

originally published in Marathi, and is considered as a mile stone in the history of Marathi literature.

*Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three* has no story or plot in the traditional sense of term. It is a series of loosely connected incidents. The world of the novel revolves around Kushank Purandare, who is a narrator, protagonist and very often a commentator. It is through the discrete events, Kushank's retrospective life story is unfolded. By profession Kushank is a photographer but his is an unsuccessful career. He is grappled with the feelings of insecurity. Realizing that there is no escape from the insecurity till he dies or kills himself, Kushank leaves his secure job and starts to work on his "long dreamt-of-hospital project". But no one shows any interest in publishing Kushank's project. The menace of insecurity is coupled with a sense of failure, and frustration. Kushank's sense of failure and frustration is exposed through his relationships with three women, namely Aaroti, the unnamed 'You' and Chandani.

Aaroti is Kushank's first love. In Poona, when both of them are in college, the love for books brings them closer. Aaroti is a student of Physics. She is living in Poona with her guardian i. e. her brother and 'Bhabhiji'. One day, Aaroti's brother comes across her diary, where she has written a letter addressing to Kushank. The angered brother asks Aaroti to go back to Delhi. Thus, Aaroti returns to Delhi. But even then, the relationship between Kushank and Aaroti blooms through letters. And then the exchange of letters stops, when Aaroti tells Kushank that she is going to marry. After a long gap, Kushank re-enters in the life of Aaroti, though for a limited time span. Kushank stays there in Aaroti's house for nine days; observes in a very detached manner Aaroti's struggle on the domestic front, and again retires to his wayward life.

While working on his hospital project, Kushank meets the unnamed 'You'. Kushank doesn't mention her name anywhere. She is a punch card operator in the hospital. She offers him her help to Kushank to 'programme' the project. Kushank is drifted towards her, because he finds certain affinities with her living ways of life. Her favourite catechism "What difference does it make?" explains her attitude towards life. Like Aaroti, she is fierce enough to fight the battle of life single handedly. Kushank wants to marry her. She also gives her consensus. But this passionate love affair comes to an abrupt end. The unpredictable 'You'

writes a brief letter to Kushank, takes back all her letters and ends this affair. Once again Kushank is left alone.

Like her name, the exquisitely beautiful Chandani enters the life of Kushank during his stay at Poona. Both study together for three years. It is Chandani who proposes Kushank, assures him that her decision is not a romantic whim but an outcome of strong reason. But Chandani's father opposes their relationship. Chandani shifts to Indore, her hometown. Kushank visits Indore for a couple of times being obsessed by Chandani. But then comes a moment when Kushank experiences self-hatred and self-disgust and decides not to marry Chandani.

*Seven Sixes* depicts the bizarre world through discrete incidents. With its complex narration, dark humour and linguistic experimentation, *Seven Sixes* raises questions about socio-political crisis, religious anxieties and above all the meaning of human existence. That's why, perhaps, Yasmeen Lukmani opines, "*Seven Sixes* is a strange and powerful novel unlike anything written in India till that time, frankly even to date" (Introduction ix). While appreciating the novel Ranjit Hoskote argues:

Had Kiran Nagarkar, like Salman Rushdie, been a member of the Indian diaspora, Kushank Purandare might well have preceded Saleem Sinai in the critical lists. For his life, too, amplifies itself into a metaphor of the life of the body politic; it becomes a national allegory, drawing upon our miseries and brief respites of optimism as a turbulent people. (11)

The apparent feature of *Seven Sixes* is its urban, rather metropolitan sensibility. The locale of the novel is essentially an urban center. It moves across several urban centres, when Kushank goes to Delhi to meet Aaroti or Poona where the love story of Kushank and Chandani blooms. When Chandani returns to Indore, the setting also shifts to Indore. However, the major setting of the novel is the metropolis of Bombay. Hindoo colony (supposed to be the bastion of the middle class Maharashtrians), the Gateway of India, Marine Drive, Taraporewala, Aquarium, Cuffe Parade, Charni Road, its traffic signals, locals, flyovers and many such other places which are exclusively identifying marks of Bombay have been brought up on the canvass of *Seven Sixes*. Kushank Purandare and his family live in Hindoo colony. Kushank's love story with the unnamed 'You' develops across Marine

Drive, Cuffe Parade and Nariman Point. The metropolis of Bombay becomes the ‘fourth dimension’ (204) of Kushank’s consciousness. What Sadhan says about Benaras is true about each and every city: “It is the city that changes you” (100). And if the city is a metropolis like Bombay, then the changes are startling. It is the ethos of the metropolitan world that brings about such transformation. New ideologies and techno industrial advancement have laid to the emergence of metros in post-Independence India. In the West, in the early phases of industrial revolution with the emergence of metros, there was the celebration of individualism and its ultimate consequence was the end of community. This phenomenon enhanced “the alienation of individuals, first from the basic institution and later on from their own self identity” (Singh, Yogendra 222). The metro world in post-Independence India is no exception to this phenomenon. The homogenous society is transformed into a “faceless society”. It has become the world of “lonely men” moving in “lonely crowds”. Here, inhuman haste, feeling of insecurity and boredom are the lot of an individual. He is grappled with a sense of frustration and disappointment. Everyone is terrified with the sense of paranoia.

In this light, it can be said that *Seven Sixes* is not just confined to the metropolitan setting, but the metropolitan sensibility percolates throughout the novel.

Kushank is sick of the overcrowded city and finds no way from this overcrowdedness. That’s why Kushank wonders about the crowded train even at quarter to one in the morning. He thinks:

There is never a reason for crowds on the suburban trains in Bombay. If four million and sixty-seven thousand cobalt bombs were dropped on the earth, and if they killed off all of humanity, the local-trains of Bombay would still have people hanging on to people hanging out of doors and windows. (178)

Kushank believes, “every event, every memory is a dialogue between you and the place where you live” (204). Kushank’s memory holds a lot of Bombay, but any of its part is not soothing. Kushank detests the grim world of Bombay. For him it is the city of tetrapods, which “exists separately and has an independent life” (204). One goes on living in Bombay years after year, and finds that Bombay of tetrapods is infused in body, mind and the whole

life unknowingly. There is no escape from this world. The only alternative is to succumb to this city.

The mechanical life in Bombay brings boredom and monotony. According to Kushank, the life in Bombay is tied to the red and green light of the signal which “scream” at every crossing. When the green lights are on, you are not left with any other choice, whatever may happen with the world. But after half past nine in the night, the signal stops and all Bombay has “just one eye... orange”. However, the mechanical routine of the daytime has a deadening effect on the night. An individual loses his senses; he is in no position to perceive the orange light of the signal. So, for Kushank, the orange blip, blip is “the tick of the sad neurotic wreck” (205).

As a consequence of such metropolitan life style, here an individual is cut off from the society, feels lonely. The metropolitan ethos of gloominess pervades throughout the novel. Like the society, here, Nature also suffers from the same temperament. It is a city with the sea where the sun never rises (31), the sun is often dead (160), the sea is orphaned (19), the moon is pale (107). The metropolitan experience is reified in the novel at multiple levels. Most of the characters in the novel suffer from loneliness.

Kushank too suffers terribly from the pangs of loneliness. He tries hard to overcome his loneliness but confronts with the problem of communication. During one of the meetings with Aaroti, Kushank’s mind screams, “May I talk to you? I want to talk. Talk, and talk and talk” (54).

Kushank’s loneliness intensifies because of the problem of communication which makes Kushank introvert. Even in the company of Aaroti, Chandani or the unnamed ‘You’, Kushank remains silent. A day before his departure from Aaroti’s house, Kushank becomes silent, the reason for which is unknown to him. Aaroti reminds him that he is leaving tomorrow and asks him out of frustration, “Aren’t you going to talk... Are you planning to spend the rest of your time here without a word?”(73). But Kushank, shaking his head, prefers to remain silent. In his last meeting with Chandani, Chandani opens all the alternatives to save her love, but Kushank remains adamant to his view to break the relationship. He becomes silent and goes on shaking his head (156).

The element of decadence is a major theme of the novel. This decadence is an outcome partly of the metro world and partly of the modern world. “Feelings of factiousness, social disharmony and mutual alienation” are the marked features of post-Independence India (Singh, Yogendra 223). There is a serious onslaught to the basic institution, along with the rapid erosion of moral and civic values and the decline in the family solidarity because of the new ideologies and techno-industrial advancement. *Seven Sixes* projects this elemental decadence at multiple levels.

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