

In Conversation with Kiran Nagarkar

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Kiran Nagarkar perhaps needs no introduction to readers of Indian English fiction. A redoubtable force to reckon with, Nagarkar made his debut in Marathi with *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (Seven Sixes Are Forty Three, 1974) and then went on to write a series of critically acclaimed novels in English such as *Ravan and Eddie* (1994), *God's Little Soldier* (2006), *The Extras* (2012) and *Rest in Peace* (2015). He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2001 for his path breaking novel, *Cuckold* (1997), a fictional retelling of the life of Maharj Kumar, the spouse of Meera Bai. A vociferous critic of religious fundamentalism and noted for his ribald style, Nagarkar's iconoclastic and irreverent voice often mirrors the many contradictions that constitute modern India.

Excerpts from an interview with the noted writer -

1. What are your thoughts on Indian fiction in English?

A - I used to keep away from Indian fiction but now I've slowly begun to feel that things are changing. After Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children', many authors from India who started writing immediately after him, quite naturally and without actually realizing it, got heavily influenced by Rushdie. They all began to read and sound like him.

Therefore, I was resistant initially but I do understand that during your early stages, you may want to emulate the best in your field or at least it's a lingering influence in the subconscious may be. What becomes important is that you may discover your own voice in this process. I think we are still in the process of discovering our voice but I am hopeful. The younger lot is our only hope.

2. Who influenced your writing?

A - It is always a tough question to answer. I am really fond of Graham Greene and the French author *Louis-Ferdinand Céline*. I think they're brilliant writers. Yet, there is nothing in common between Graham Greene's writing and mine. But has he influenced me? Of course yes, you've got to be a stone or a rock to not get influenced by him.

For that matter, historical fiction in Marathi has also influenced me but in a negative way. It is so terrible that I did not want to write any historical fiction at all. It is just overtly sentimental. People talk about kings and there are wars to be fought and endless weeping! That's about it.

3. Who are the Indian fiction writers in English that you've read or want to read?

A - I have of course read Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things' and Amitav Ghosh' 'The Shadow Lines' is one of my favourite books from an Indian author. I would want to mention a young writer, Siddhartha Chowdhury who has written 'Day Scholar' and 'Patna Roughcut'. He does a particular kind of thing extremely well. Shovon Chowdhury's 'The Competent Authority' also makes for an absorbing read. So this is the process of discovery that I was talking about earlier. I think what we lacked was some kind of critical analysis.

4. What kind of critical analysis are you talking about?

A - I don't think that there are many countries in the world, in fact I don't think there are even two countries in the world, which in terms of analysis offers the kind of insights that Indians have come up with. And I'm talking about books like Panini's iconic work on Sanskrit Grammar where the analysis is stupendous. What about our Upanishads and the Vedas? You can't imagine what fine distinctions are made in those. Now coming to Kamasutra, we tend to think of it as a treatise on sex and of course we have never been squeamish about sex. But you must understand that Kamasutra is only 10% sex and the rest of it is about various stages of life. So there was nothing in life that we didn't want to accept and there was no guilt in us, but now we are only left with guilt and hypocrisy. So that is what has happened to us and it is a serious problem!

Coming back to the analytical bit, we have the finest traditions and yet when it comes to literary criticism, what are we doing? We are constantly seeking validation from the West to tell us whether something we have written is good or not. Most of the stuff the West approves is terrible. So when are we going to develop that kind of confidence again? It will come I guess, perhaps I am in too much of a hurry! It might come in the near future for all you know.

5. In several interviews, you have also critiqued novels that read like a well-researched thesis and lack imagination. So where and how do you draw a line between the two?

A - I am not trying to undermine any research. Research is important and interesting facts are revealed in the process. But, fiction writing demands a different acumen. If research overwhelms the fiction, then I think you have lost track.

Have you read Nickel and Dimed (2001) by Barbra Ehrenreich? She realized that the working poor in America were facing many difficulties in getting jobs. I think, for six months or a year, she did exactly what the poor are forced to do. She did several jobs, because you cannot even subsist on one. This is the kind of research she did and produced a very lively work of non-fiction. However, if you are attempting fiction, like in Cuckold, things have to be a little different. Yes, I did a lot of research, as there is a great emphasis on history in Cuckold, but I did not go beyond what I needed, because if it is fiction then you have to depend on your imagination. Even in God's Little Soldier, I did my research, but for God's sake I did not go meet terrorists because when you create your characters you need to gain insights more than just superficial observation and then build the narrative with your own imagination. As a matter of fact, I don't generally model my characters on real people at all. The Maharaj in Cuckold is completely different from the historical Rajput kings. He is in fact an antithesis to the Rajputs. I did not take real characters from history. In the book, as you would know, Meera is Greeneyes or Little Saint. I didn't even use her real name. There comes a lot of baggage when you incorporate real characters in your fiction. So I decided not to do it.

6. What comes first, the plot or the characters?

A - I am sure you have heard of Kazuo Ishiguro, author of "The Remains of a Day." He is a well-known author and people respect him enormously. He is a writer who obsessively plans and

plots his novel to the very last detail, so much so that when he writes he actually knows what is going to happen next in his story.

The inception of my novel “Cuckold” was very different from Ishiguro’s. When I sat down to write it, I did not even know what the first sentence would be or what it would deal with. The only thing that I knew was that at some point in the novel, my Maharaj Kumar would paint himself blue. So, I was literally improvising by the second.

7. But what about your other books like ‘Ravan and Eddie’?

A - With Ravan and Eddie, I plotted out much more and if you read the book, you will realize that in my introduction, I mention that it was supposed to be a screenplay for a movie. I don’t know if you are familiar with the Hindi films of that period, but most of them began with the separation of children from their parents who were shown as grown-ups after the introductory titles. What I did differently was that in my screenplay of Ravan and Eddie, I did not include their childhood at all.

However, when I sat down to write the book, I decided to deal with the childhood of both the characters. I began writing the book in Marathi but then decided to switch over to English. The sequel ‘Extras’ which I wrote seventeen years later is actually a part of the original screenplay of ‘Ravan and Eddie’. I also plotted ‘God’s Little Soldier’ but lost my way halfway through it and had to start all over again with the entire thing. It is one of the most difficult books of my life and whether Indians like it or not, there are some major issues raised in it.

8. And how did ‘Cuckold’ happen?

A- It was a very cold night in January and as a man born and brought up in Bombay, I did not have many warm clothes. I am a film fiend and I was on my way back from my sixth or seventh movie of the day from the Delhi Film Festival (IFFI was held in Delhi in those days). I was in the rickshaw with my translator and then suddenly, out of the blue, this thought occurred to me that Meera is perhaps the most famous woman in Indian history even more so than Indira Gandhi. What puzzled me was the fact that there was absolutely no information given about her husband. I didn’t even know his name! It was a black hole, a hiatus in history. That’s when I decided to write a book on Meera Bai’s husband and Maharaj Kumar became the main character of my novel. Historically, she is at the centre of the book but essentially, it is a memoir on Maharaj Kumar.

9. Publishing in India has undergone a significant change. What are the chances of a good work of literature being noticed and surviving on merit without resorting to publicity gimmicks?

A - I don’t think it is going to be very easy. There is no getting away from the fact that things have to be sold. I did advertising. But if you are very lucky like Arundhati Roy or Vikram Seth or Vikram Chandra, then you make a go of it. But ultimately, however good you are, if lady luck is not on your side, God help you! And I’ve been trying to seduce her for a long time and I promise you that I won’t stop but that doesn’t mean she is going to come to me. But don’t be afraid, as I said, for God’s sake realize that if it is true writing it will take the whole spectrum of life.

10. You have always written explicitly about sex. It is almost an inseparable part of your being as a writer. Your comments?

A - Why would I not? It's a part of my life, part of everybody's life. What do you want me to do? Lie?

Indian writing about sex is so self-conscious. It is pathetic. Why? And it is wonderful not to go there. It is difficult to be elliptical and yet suggest a few things. And you can choose what method you want. And in God's Little Soldier, there isn't any sex whatsoever. So, it's not you who decide, it's the subject who decides it. I mean that's the kind of author I am.

11. Do you have any advice for young writers?

A - If you want to write, do not worry about readers or readership as such. Shame be on me if I start worrying about my readers before writing something. In that sense, I know I can build only half a bridge, but the reader builds the other half, I know that! At the same time, if I spend my time figuring out what is it that the reader wants; it will be a complete waste of my time. How in the world will I know anyway what is on the reader's mind?

Also, if you are attempting to be a novelist, don't attempt laziness, it is completely unforgivable. It is just not worth it. What will happen is that you will have to work twice or thrice as hard and you will lose track.

I would also like the young authors to not follow the Frenchified deconstructionist methods but write in a simple language, a transparent language. One of my Professors used to say, '*If you don't know your subject, then you obfuscate.*' So if you know your subject, you are transparent. Depth follows transparency. Do you know that you can't see the bottom of absolutely clear water? And if you can't see the bottom and the water is absolutely clear, what does it mean? It means that you really can't go to the bottom at all. The depth of it is so remarkable.