

KIRAN NAGARKAR'S PROTAGONISTS IN '*SEVEN SIXES ARE FORTY THREE*': CHARACTER ANALYSIS THROUGH THEMES

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Abstract

Kiran Nagarkar's place in the Indian English novel is strongly carved by his careful analysis of writing. His English novels have become a lightning rod which is clearly written for a diverse Indian audience as well as for western readers. The readers can witness his novels as thought provoking, incendiary, and brilliant. His literary career is abundantly overshadowed by his linguistic choices and the politics of discourse. Needless to say, Nagarkar's writing style, subject matter, utilization of allusion and manipulation of diction is remarkable. While discussing the themes of *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three*, the paper studies character analysis as well. The researcher attempts to investigate the selected themes such as gender Violence and eroticism and adultery. Through these themes, he displays the glimpses of traits of the protagonists in an effective manner.

Keywords: Gender Violence, Cultural identification of women, exploitation, eroticism and adultery etc.

Kiran Nagarkar's debut novel, *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* (1980) is an explosive, a path breaking experimental and stream of conscious novel. It is considered as a landmark in post-independent Indian literature. It is a surrealistic and nightmarish artistic novel whose experimentalism remains hauntingly tangible. The novel has won a major place in the literature of the language. Nagarkar has set a new trend not only for Marathi but Indian literature as a whole. Yeshu Patil rightly comments, "The novel depicts about the messy life of Kushank. The

novel is unique in language, writing style and its character graphs. It is considered as avant-garde and post-modernist work. It renders the cluttered world of a youth trying to understand and cope with the delightful chaos around him in a hitherto unknown style.” Lukmani calls *Seven Sixes* ‘a strange and powerful novel. As Yasmeen Lukmani states, “Most people consider the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1981 as the date when contemporary Indian literature broke with the past and came into its own. But the first third of *Seven Sixes are Forty-Three* was published much earlier, in a literary magazine in Marathi, *Abhiruchi*, in 1967 and the full novel in 1974.” (Introduction to ‘The shifting worlds of Kiran Nagarkar’s fiction, ix) Nagarkar portrays the themes like cultural politics of caste, class, religion and gender marginalization, poverty, starvation, illness, pain and sufferings, death, eroticism, adultery, alienation, existentialism, identity crisis, humiliation, oppression of downtrodden, pessimism, untouchability, hopelessness, prostitution etc. through this novel. Kiran Nagarkar, a social realist, reflects a strong social concern for the oppressed and the marginalized people, their condition, sufferings, starvation, poverty etc. The readers can find varied aspects like the hopelessness of shanty-dwellers, the oppression of landless labourers, the position of women and the subjugation of untouchables in this novel. He has written ‘history from below’ in this novel. His central concerns in the text are the lives, experiences, beliefs, attitudes and practices of the people who are victims of illness, starvation, death and utter hopelessness. Characters in the novel undergo the experience of being broken down to the nothing and trapped in the extreme life circumstances. There is hardly any hope of redemption for them. It is shown that neither religion nor socio-political ideologies have answers to their problems of “illness, starvation, death, and hopelessness” (Masselos 1981: Foreword). Nagarkar is claimed as a writer of the people and for the people. He advocates his plea for the poor in the novel. He descends deep into the lowest strata of his society and lampoons the rich, the affluent and the powerful. Through this literary cultural exploration, Nagarkar has given a powerful representation to those who are the chief victims of structural violence. Author’s concern and commitment is towards those deprived sections of his society and people, who are obliged to die in the silence of history. The novel has a very moving and disturbing effect on its readers as it offers a vast panorama of poverty, alienation, desperation, injustice, violence and wretchedness of cross-sections of people and their distressing social surroundings.

Thematic Significance:

1. Gender Violence:

The opening scene of the novel, *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three*, focuses on various aspects such as gender inequality, male domination, discrimination, subjugation; oppression and violence against women. These aspects are obviously manifested throughout in the lower strata of the society. In a given social set up, patriarchal and masculine human ideologies are crucial markers. In a male dominated society, women have to face multiple cultural, economic and educational disabilities which prevent them to lead a meaningful and dignified life. Sexual domination is the most pervasive cultural ideology and ‘sexual politics in a process whereby a ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex’. (Moi 2001: 26). In this novel, we see gender violence in following incidences.

Cultural identification of women is reflected in Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). She asserts, “Cultural identification of women is treated as other and men as

a dominating object. They don't have any value in their own house. Their existence is completely ignored." Julia Kristeva speaks about the existence of women. She remarks, "Women as such do not exist". (Kristeva 1977: 16). It states that woman cannot be represented outside the patriarchal symbolic cultural order. She can only exist negatively and rendered as the marginal. The social structure assumes them as inferior. Therefore women's conditions transform from vulnerable to isolation, sexual and physical violence. Conventional and stereotypical gender roles create situations of inequality for women. It is often observed that women are physically assaulted and subjected to mental cruelties in their own homes. Besides physical torture, they also suffer from emotional abuse, intimidation and threats. Pratibha, Ajit's wife and Ajit's mother both are shown as 'other' in the novel. The author comments on the subordinate and marginalized position of these women. Here Pratibha and her mother in law experiences the violence and battering by Ajit physically as well as mentally. It is further argued that wife 'battering is a patterned process consisting of coercive and controlling behaviours including but not limited to those related to the body but also to the mind. Barker comments, "The performance of hyper masculinity encompasses the values of strength, power, stoicism, action, control, independence, self-sufficiency, male-camaraderie, mate ship and work, amongst others". (Barker 2010: 302). Kiran Nagarkar focuses on the oppressiveness of patriarchy and precarious existence of women. He reveals the tragic plight of the women characters. Almost all the women are subjected to violence and ill-treatment in the text. In the institutions of family and marriage, men are shown as privileged and women as inferior. They empower men to control their female counterparts and even entitle them to batter their wives, daughters and mothers. Nagarkar's text provides a fresh look of structural transformations of gender roles, ideologies, identities and relations, with a view to improve and better women's conditions. The novel opens with a very shocking act of humiliation and violence. "He came home drunk again. Like every other day, Pratibha shut the door quickly after him. Whatever happened, however angry, terrified hopeless she felt, she would always shut the neighbours out of it all. The same of it must be contained within these four walls, always. She cowered in a corner of the room while he swayed unsteadily in the centre, lurching out and slamming into her whenever he could make contact. At first it had been his mother. A stinging slap across her face. Pratibha had liked that. Then it was Pratibha's turn. He'd hit her whenever he flew into a rage, with whatever came to hand, wherever he could lay his blows." (11) This paragraph describes an arrogant nature of her husband, Ajit. He never misses a chance of humiliation and beating of his wife Pratibha, who is very homely and submissive. Ajit gives the similar treatment to his mother also. Both the women in this scenario remain mute spectators, robbed of their rights and dignity in their own home. They both are deeply entrenched into the historically and socially constructed artificial hierarchy of patriarchy. Ajit considers that it is his birth right to treat the women abusively and brutally. The house has turned into a confined space of cruelty and abuse instead of providing safety and security to women. Ajit do not treat his wife Pratibha as a dignified human being and a citizen with equal human rights. He is intoxicated with the attitude of macho masculinity, regards his wife as a 'subhuman domestic worker with a body to please him' (Barker 2010: 442). Pratibha is treated no more than as an object or a property by her husband: "Mounting her pulpy body after the thrashing would really thrill him. Spasm on spasm of dripping satisfaction. She, limply reluctant and tired, and he, worn out with all that effort. He felt like a king. Like the Lord of the whole world. His hands would itch; his ineffectual lower lip tremble and his eyes turn a glazed red."

(SSAFT, 11) Being fed up continuously with the violent treatment given out to her by Ajit, She raised her resisting voice, “You hit me once more and I’ll set fire to myself. I’m fed up. I have had enough. I don’t want to live any more”. Stung with her threat, Ajit burst out laughing and reacts quite hideously: “So who’s stopping you, you stupid bitch? Go on and do if you have the fucking guts. What are you waiting for?”. At her husband’s pressure, Pratibha poured kerosene over herself and lit the fire. Soon she was engulfed into red flames. “She began to scream. At the top of her voice. Scream and run from wall to wall. Round the room. And the flames went round and round too, like a whirlwind.” Later on, her body was very badly burnt. Nagarkar wants to explain the cruelty of human being in the form of Ajit. He was unmoved by seeing the pathetic condition of his wife. She tried to embrace him. But he rebuked her, “Get off me, you bitch. Don’t come near me. Well don’t touch me now. Keep your bloody flames to yourself.” (12) Later on, her body was very badly burnt. But it was too late before the wisdom dawned upon her and she realized her folly. “Before she lost consciousness. Before they took her to the hospital. Before the police arrived. She hung on to the doctor’s arm with all her strength. And asked him again and again. Over and over. The same questions. “I want to live. Doctor, I want to live. You will save me, won’t you? They need me – my children. And my husband. He needs me too. You don’t know, do you, that he’d lost his mind and I made him all right again? He said to himself. I’m going to live, aren’t I? I’m not going to die? I don’t want to die. Never, ever. Why do you keep nodding you head? Can’t you tell me I’m going to live? I’m going to live – all the time – mornings, evening, when Anil comes home from school, when Jyotsna wets her bed – I’ll be here. Always.” (13). Pratibha’s identity is deeply grounded in Indian attitude towards motherhood and marriage. She sees a woman’s value in looking after her children and her duty in adapting to her husband. That is why she even goes to the extent of forgiving her wrong doing husband, ignoring the fact that it is he who is responsible for her current miserable state of affairs. “Before she went into a comma” and eventually died, “she made a statement that she had tried to commit suicide because of an incurable illness” (15). Commenting on self-destruction of Indian woman, Prof. Veena Das, a professor in sociology, writes: “Rather than bearing a witness to the disorder they had been subjected to the metaphor they used was a woman drinking the poison and keeping it within her: just as a woman’s body is made so that she can hide the faults of her husband deep within her, so she can drink all the pain – take the stance of silence.” (Das, 1997: 85). This remark by Prof. Das is applicable in case of Pratibha. Mr. Kushank Purandare, the protagonist of the novel, is sent to fetch Ajit’s mother, who is staying with her brother away from her son. She is not aware of her daughter’s-in-law tragic fate. When Kushank tells her of Pratibha’s death, she expresses no sense of shock and grief. She rather thinks that it is Pratibha who created misunderstanding between her and her son Ajit. She even refuses to come home back to mourn Pratibha’s death. As far as Ajit’s mother’s mental make-up is concerned, she is completely unaware of her acculturation into the patriarchal ideology, which has turned her blind-folded to see any fault in her son. On the contrary, she nurtures a strong sense of hostility towards Pratibha and believes that Pratibha had a bad influence upon her son. Indian mothers routinely encourage their sons to fight every step of their way to dominant social positions and in the process turn them into aggressive oppressors. Aggressive behavior which is encouraged to be cultivated by all at home, including the women, will not be limited to men’s behavior outside home. It will eventually percolate through to their relations with their wives, daughters and even sons and other male dependents. Statistics are often cited to prove men as ‘domestic terrorists’

and to establish that women bear the brunt of their violence. (Mittapalli and Alterno 2009: VIII) It is noticed that Ajit's mother herself being deprived of all the cultural resources and riches, she has to depend on her brother for her survival if not on her son. Thus, on account of their gendered position in the society, they both Pratibha and her mother-in-law have come to acquire a marginalized status.

If the malfunctioning of patriarchal ideology renders wives and mothers as insignificant, it is equally incapacitating and constraining in the case of daughters as well. "Mr. Kathavate called 'Bhau' by his family members, lives in a Mumbai chawl in the neighbourhood of Mr. Kushank Purandare, the protagonist of the novel. Mr. Kathavate, on the second floor, always felt the itch to beat his daughters at night. After ten. When Mrs. Kathavate intervened and pleaded her husband to stop beating their daughters, she also "got her share" (26) Once, one of his daughters named Rekha fainted due to prolonged physical assault, Mr. Kathavate says that "she was shaming". Mr. Kathavate would be totally unmindful of the fact that "the yelling and screaming" resulting from his act of beating his daughters, might be disturbing his neighbours. Anna, a neighbourer being upset at Mr. Kathavate's routine battering of his daughters, would finally appear, "Kathavate, that's enough for now, Kathavate. Give it a rest, and let us all get some sleep. She is getting too old for this; she's a big girl now". Even Kushank is moved by the pitiable lot of Kathavate's daughters and their constant subjection to violence and cruelty. "I prayed for those girls to die. I still do" (27), so that they can escape Kathavate's slaps and kicks. Mr. Kathavate's sons received altogether different treatment from their father. Their privileged gendered position by virtue of being sons enabled them to raise their voice and protest against their father's overbearing and browbeating attitude. When Rekha was ten, Bhau stopped beating his sons. Only the girls were privileged from now on. The eldest son, Kishore, had warned his father, "You raise your hand against me and I'll smash you to a pulp. You won't be able to move for days. Bhau stopped beating him. (26) Thus he befits in the frame of Sigmund Freud: 'Anatomy is destiny' (Barker 2010: 294) In these two episodes, Mr. Kushank was the real witness of the said incidences. In the next episode of gender violence, Kushank is a full participant. This episode is about Kushank's love-affair as a college-student at Pune, with a girl named Chandani, who has come from Indore to study there. In Indian cultural milieu, falling in love and getting married is not exclusively personal and easy affair. So many hurdles such as caste, class, region, religion, language etc. come on the way of lovers, intending to marry. There are generations' old encoded cultural norms and traditions specifying whom to love and in what conditions. In such an environment, transgressing the patriarchal norms at times costs the life of lovers. Herein, through Kushank - Chandani episode, Nagarkar reflects on unfair social practice of oppressive and unforgiving patriarchy, hostile to young lovers, that eventually succeeds in breaking and braking the affair and giving a full stop to the prospects of their love marriage. In this episode, when Chandani's father gets to know about his daughter's love affair, he comes from Indore to Pune to see her and "to brain wash her". Finding his daughter's act quite irrational, he tells her "not to be foolish and impulsive". He tries to convince Chandani that her decision to marry Kushank is an immature one: "Chandani, this is puppy love. You'll soon outgrow it. Then it won't suffice and you'll leave him behind one day" (142). In his constant efforts to persuade Chandani, Chandani's father tells her that Kushank has not disclosed certain shady things about his family background. He even writes a letter to Kushank saying: "Shri. Kushank, My daughter does not wish to marry you. Even if she did, she would be helpless

against my opposition. I'd advise you not to try and see her. Have the intelligence and wisdom to realize what is good for you." (145) When her examination is over, Chandani goes back to Indore. After sometimes, Kushank also goes to Indore to see Chandani, considering that her father will not send Chandani back to Pune for her further studies. With a fear of being spied by her family members, Chandani secretly comes to see Kushank in a cinema hall and apprises him of the situations at her home. For days no one spoke to her. When they did, they called her a slut, whore, bitch. If she was near enough, they would grab her by the hair and beat her blue. (148) Chandani's family members kept her telling awful things about Kushank and his family for day and night. They also made Chandani write to Kushank that she would not marry him. Thus, they (Chandani's family members) finally succeeded in breaking her affair with Kushank, although, even Kushank's own economic conditions were completely unfavorable for him to enter into wedlock with Chandani. Through all the three episodes elaborated above, Nagarkar has portrayed patriarchal gender relations. Women in all the three different subject positions – as wife, mother and daughter – have suffered oppression. Their marginalized subject positions deprived them of their voice to be heard. They can exercise little powers within and outside the structures of family and domesticity. These women are considered to be guided by their emotions rather than reasons and believed that they have instinctive tendency befitting only for domesticity and motherhood. These patriarchal assumptions about women have legitimated the power relations of dominance and subordination. The moment women come to resist their subjection and try to change their lot by self assertion and by deciding to take their own independent decisions regarding their own matters; men tend to start feeling insecure and threatened. For example, when Chandani sheds oppressive mode of femininity based on patriarchy and refuses to be auctioned in a marriage without her consent and desires to marry a man of her choice, she is subjected to multiple cruelties including abuses, physical assault and emotional blackmailing by her patriarch father and other family members. Thus, it becomes quite clear that till men bring change in their attitude towards women and shed oppressive patriarchal attitude characterized by violence, authority and machismo, women cannot have satisfactory subject positions.

3.2.2 Eroticism and Adultery:

Khushwant Singh rightly comments about Kiran Nagarkar's instinct ability as a story teller. "Kiran Nagarkar is a born story teller with an unerring eye for detail, and an artist of the erotica". Nagarkar focuses on absurd and adulterous nature of his protagonist. Kushank, a jobless fellow, an absurd character, indulges in vague and meaningless activities. His empty mind compels him to commit adulterous activities. As *Seven Sixes are Forty-Three* opens, the narrator, Nagarkar describes Kushank's attempts to seduce a beautiful woman. He was fascinated by seeing her beauty. He just made up his mind to do a thing and go hell-bent after it. Nagarkar writes, "'You have beautiful hands.' I had to say it in English. I Couldn't bear to say it in Marathi. After all, it was my mother tongue. I opened and closed her hand. 'Really exquisite fingers. So delicate. Positively artistic,' I lied" (15-16). The reader is unable to discern which aspects of the text are true and which ring false through the analysis of code switching. As Nagarkar states at the conclusion of the "Afterward" to Cuckold, "...storytellers are liars. We all know that" (606). As French novelist Honore de Balzac stated, "Eroticism is dependent not just upon an individual's sexual morality, but also the culture and time in which an individual resides."

Kushank keeps himself busy in sexual enjoyment and works of adultery. He does these activities willingly or unwillingly. Sometimes he becomes the victim of sexual harassment. He tries to escape from this situation. Sometimes he behaves like a bastard hopeless. Once he met a beautiful lady in a restaurant. Regardless of women's age, he flirts her. She gripped his hand firmly. She cooed his name with love, breathed shallow sighs. She took his hand on a conducted tour of her body. Kushank says about this sensuous experience, "License my rowing hands, and let them go, Before, behind, between, above, below..." (19) Kushank prayed for release. She would not let him go. He could not resist the temptation and follow the lady, with a lamb ready for slaughter. "Let's do it" I would say finally and plunge in. (19). This erotic experience of Kushank surely reflects his adulterous nature. Kiran Nagarkar boldly asserts about Kushank's incapability to understand the motive of the well wishers like a Parsi woman who wish to help him in his authorial career. He reflects the filth and dirt in the mind of his protagonist and his failure in understanding his well wishers like a Parsi woman who encourages him to get success in his profession as a writer. (29). Kushank thought about her loneliness and wanted to commit sensuous deeds with the religious lady who always thinks of his best. She invited him to her flat. She wanted to make him understand about music. But Kushank's mind was concentrated at the sound of shower. In fact, he should be grateful to her but his lust towards her revealed through the listening the water running in the bathroom. His mind might be corrupted with erotic feelings. (31) Thus Nagarkar projects Kushank's corrupt and erotic nature. Nagarkar narrates the erotic experience of other characters like Rashid and his beautiful girl friend. He depicts their lovemaking in a natural manner. This couple does not feel sex as a sin, but take it granted as an enjoyable activity. Rashid shamelessly approaches the girl and does what he wants. "She is a slave to her own questions. So he shuts her mouth with his lips or his hands." We can say that Nagarkar has mastery over eroticism which boldly displays the personal romantic and sexual experiences of the characters. (19-20). Kushank sometimes pretends that he doesn't know the things. Once he asked Aaroti, "What is the word for a male whore? Gigolo? Aaroti replied, "Anyone who sleeps around indiscriminately is a whore." (20)

One of the characters Arvind had evil eye on Kushank's relative Ursula. He deliberately harasses her and asks Kushank, Hey, has Ankush sent his wife home from the States? Or is she yours? Belongs to both of us actually, we take turns." (33). Here Nagarkar projects the sexual and lustful thoughts of Arvind. Kushank shamelessly stays in the house of his girl friend Aaroti. As a member of the house, he witnesses each and everything of her family. He observes the conflict between Aaroti and her husband. This conflict is tactfully revealed by the author. "The trouser was not going to be found, not today, not tomorrow. And her choli would be lost too. One day her husband would probably go to work without his trousers and Aaroti would go without her choli." Kushank has love for Aaroti. He always has great concern for her. "All I want is for you to wear beautiful saris and look beautiful." (50) Nagarkar boldly asserts sexual experience of adults. Aaroti shares sexual experiences with her sister-in-law. "When you are married, you will sleep with your husband. The man you see as your brother during the day is a different man in bed at night. Absolutely different. When he wants something, there's no stopping him. The things he does, how he forces me, the tantrums he throws inside me." (63). Nagarkar boldly mentions that his female character Aaroti fearlessly convey her opinion frankly on sex to Kushank. Once Kushank was going to see a movie, Aaroti asks him, "I want to see that film too" (66) This incidence reveals Aaroti's modern approach towards life. Chandani's bhabhi keeps an

eye on each and every move of her as she knows about her love relation with Kushank. This episode Nagarkar describes in his own style. Chandani comments, “And now bhabhi searches me every morning—for hidden weapons! Blouse, petticoat, bra-everything. She never unbuttons my blouse, just thrusts her hand in and has a feel.” (68) Nagarkar depicts the love making between Raghu and Bhisander Singh’s daughter in a well. He describes them as inanimate objects locked in lovemaking. “Raghu raised himself on his elbow to kiss her breasts. She brought her hands up to hide her breasts and then quickly down between her thighs. Raghu hooted. “You aren’t the first naked woman he’s seen, you know.” (100). Kushank’s friends Sadhan and Ravindra followed a woman in field. Nagarkar describes the woman, “Wiping the sweat with the ends of their saris. No choli’s, just the sari hiding the body completely.” (113) In next episode, Sita Ranade’s brother Satish abuses and threatens to Kushank for chasing his sister. “You bastard, chasing my sister. If I see you near Sita again, I will break your bloody leg, you hear.” (131). Nagarkar reflects glimpses of Kushank - Chandani Love in an erotic manner. They both go to watch movie to a theatre. There Chandani comments Kushank, “You look so comic concentrating on the film without your glasses! And I forgot all my reservations, shame, embarrassment and drew her to me.” (151). All these incidences suggest Nagarkar’s superb style of presenting eroticism in flawless manner.

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