

**A CRITICAL ESTIMATE OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN KIRAN NAGARKAR'S "SEVEN SIXES ARE
FORTY THREE"**

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Abstract

Kiran Nagarkar is one of the most renowned novelists on the literary canon of Indian Writing in English. He has been emerged as courageous and creative novelist who has contributed Indian Fiction with his unique depiction of realities in Indian society. In his work one finds different themes like fanaticism, extremism, existentialism, quest for identity, violence etc.

The objective of this paper is to portray gender discrimination and domestic violence in Kiran Nagarkar's novel "Seven Sixes Are Forty Three. Nagarkar reveals the tragic situations of the ordinary people in general and women in particular. He shows the victimization of women on the account of their gender. The women in this novel are observed as the victims of domestic violence in male patriarchy. They are humiliated and exploited in the dominant power structure of the society.

Key words: Domestic violence, poverty, conflicts, depression, humiliation, sufferings and disappointments, patriarchy, self-immolation, ill-treatment, multiple cruelties etc.

Kiran Nagarkar's *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* (1978) is an autobiographical novel. This novel is the translated version of Kiran Nagarkar's one of the most controversial Marathi novels *Saakam Trechalis* (1974). It is a powerful and path breaking experimental work due to its rich cultural and idiomatic content of a language. Nagarkar's concern in this text is about the lives, experiences, beliefs, attitudes and practices of the people who are victims of starvation, death and utter hopelessness. They are always humiliated and exploited by the rich people in the society. There is hardly any hope of redemption for them.

As Adelman writes: *Women are given physical as well as mental torture. They can either tolerate any one of them. Especially physical tortures deal with the body such as isolation, sexual violence, physical violence and mental torture to the mind (such as emotional abuse, intimidation and threats)* (Adelman 2005: 194).

Women are subjugated and 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 has portrayed a gloomy presentation of reality of the downtrodden and underprivileged people and their crushing realities. He has described their plight and sufferings through this text. Especially he has exposed the gender discrimination and domestic violence in existing human society of lower strata. The term gender discrimination means a situation in which someone is treated less well because of their sex, usually when a woman is treated less well than a man. The term domestic violence and emotional abuse refers to behaviours used by one person in a relationship to control the other. Partners may be married or not married; homosexual, gay or lesbian; living together, separated or dating. Violence can be criminal and include physical assault- hitting, pushing, shoving, sexual abuse and stalking. We can say emotional, psychological and financial abuse can lead to criminal violence.

3. Nagarkar renders the theme of discrimination, subjugation and oppression of women on the account of gender. He shows how women become victim of domestic violence in this novel. Domestic violence is actually the result of male patriarchy. He visualizes the autocratic operation of patriarchal and masculine ideologies which creates the imbalance of power in a given social setup. In this male dominated society, women are the real sufferers who are denied to live a meaningful and dignified life. They are continuously tortured and dominated by males. Their voice is crushed down under the heavy burden of male patriarchy. Nagarkar draws special attention regarding gender discrimination and domestic violence through three major incidences of the prescribed novel. 1. Self-immolation of Pratibha 2. Mr. Kathwate's ill treatment with his daughters. 3. Chandani and Kushank Purandare: Victims of male dominated society

a. Self-immolation of Pratibha:

The word self immolation means the offering of oneself as a sacrifice, especially by burning; such suicidal action in the name of a cause or strongly held belief. Nagarkar focuses on the fact what causes Pratibha for self immolation. By weaving this thread, the novel opens with a shocking scene of violence and dominance. Ajit dominates his wife Pratibha in the novel. One day, he came home in drinking condition. As soon as he entered, Pratibha shut the door quickly after him so that inner matters should not reveal outside. At first, he started slapping and beating to his mother. He gives a slinging slap across her face. Later on, Ajit mercilessly beat his wife Pratibha. He'd hit her whenever he flew into a rage, with whatever came to hand, wherever he could lay his blows. (1)

While beating to his mother and wife, Ajay felt like a king. He behaves as if he is the lord of the whole world. Here we witness his rude and arrogant behaviour. Being a member of artificial hierarchy of patriarchy, Ajit considers that it is his birth right to treat the women abusively and brutally. In fact, Ajit has to take care of his family, provide them safety and security. Instead we find him torturing his family. He proves a nuisance for them. He is the master of cruelty and abuse. *Instead of treating Pratibha as a dignified human being and a*

citizen with equal human rights, Ajit regards his wife as a 'subhuman domestic worker with a body to please him' (Barker 2010: 442, with partial adaptations).

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.* (1)

Nagarkar focuses on patience and submissiveness of female characters. Despite of all torture, Pratibha is submissive to her husband. Even Ajit's mother is a symbol of mute. Whenever she opens her mouth, she gets merciless beating. Both these women act as mute spectators, robbed of their rights and inferior dignity in their own home.

However Pratibha's patience comes to an end. She is really fed up with this routinely inhumane treatment given by her husband. Finally, she raised her resisting voice. She furiously says to her husband, *"You hit me once more and I will set fire to myself. I'm fed up. I've had enough. I don't want to live any more. I don't care what you do. I just don't care anymore."* (2)

The utterance made by Pratibha was ignored by Ajit. He boasts about his right of patriarchy. He disdainfully teases his wife and wants to show his male dominion. He burst out,

"Why you whore! Are you trying to threaten me? So who's stopping you, you stupid bitch? Go on and do it if you have the fucking guts, What are you waiting for? Later on, Pratibha poured a bottle of kerosene over herself, muttering, "I will teach you a lesson, just wait, you'll be sorry"

(2)

Soon she was engulfed into red flames. She begins to scream and tries to embrace Ajit. She ran here and there for help. But nobody come for her help. Ajit was the real witness of the incidence. Being a husband, he should show favour for Pratibha. Instead he pushed her away and tried to escape from her and shouts, *'Get off me, you bitch. Don't come near me. You said you didn't care, right? I'm fed up. I've had enough. That's what you said. Well don't touch me now. Keep your bloody flames to yourself. Damn it, I don't want to bloody die.'* (2) Now her body was very badly burnt. But it was too late to repent. She hung on to the doctor's arm with all her strength. She kept on asking the doctor, *"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* (3) Three days later, Pratibha died. Her husband wept and shed tears for her.

Nagarkar highlights the victimization of Indian women despite their ill treatment by male dominated society. 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's why she even goes to the extent of forgiving her husband, ignoring the fact that Ajit is responsible for her doom. *"Before she went into a comma" (5) and eventually died, "she made a statement that she had tried to commit suicide because of an incurable illness" (5).*

Prof. Veena Das comments on self-destroying subjectivity of Indian woman, *"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).

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 says: *"My Ajit was such a sweet boy until she arrived. He was even scared of mice when he was a child. Still is.* (5)

The mother thinks that Pratibha's untimely and unnatural death is a God's revenge upon her as she (Pratibha) was a major source of her troubles and miseries. *"So be it. Tormenting an old woman, and what did she get out of it? It's like a judgment from heaven. God is always fair, that's what I say. You can't get away with it, not for ever. It comes to all of us".* (5)

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 about 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 has had a bad influence upon her son. Ajit could have become a civilized person if his mother would have kept a vigil on his psychological formation, so that such a worst incidence would not have been taken place.

It is however to be 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.

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)

ii. Mr. Kathwate's ill treatment to his daughters:

The malfunctioning of patriarchal ideology renders wives, mothers and daughters as insignificant and inferior. Mr. Kathavte, (Bhau) is the neighbour of Mr. Kushank Purandare, the protagonist of the novel. He lives in a Mumbai chawl on the second floor. He always felt the itch to beat his daughters at night. After ten. And he had lot of daughters. His youngest daughter was in the fifth standard. First he had three sons. Then he started on the daughters. He had white hair at forty and was sixty-two when his youngest daughter was born. A tough old man. Even now, when his married daughters come to visit, the bastard has beating sessions. To make them feel at home. At night. Only between ten and twelve. The youngest has quite a nice voice. The two middle ones have terrible voices. Rekha sounds like a vulture being dragged along the ground, and Meena is hoarse and scratchy. Her voice has stayed broken for twenty years. *She started wailing in a little boy's voice, and then it somersaulted and changed, flattened as though it had been through a sugarcane juice wringer. All of them were beaten quite impartially.* (25)

When Mrs. Kathavte 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. Kathavte says that “she was shaming” (27). Mr. Kathavte would be totally unconscious of the fact that “the yelling and screaming” (27) resulting from his act of beating his daughters, might be disturbing his neighbours. Bhau seemed to enjoy beating the girls more and more as they grew older. Little Meena screamed on god for help, “O lord,”. *Anna, save me, you are the only one who can help me now. Anna, how you no humanity, no compassion for me? Listen to the cries of a poor lonely girl, Anna.*” (26)

Anna Pradhan, a neighbourer being upset at Mr. Kathwate’s routine thrashing of his daughters, finally raised his voice, “Kathavte, that’s enough for now, Kathavte. Give it a rest, and let us all get some sleep. She is getting too old for this; she’s a big girl now”. (27)

Even Kushank is moved by the pitiable condition of Kathwate’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 Kathwate’s slaps and kicks.”

On the contrary, Mr. Kathwate’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 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)

iii. Chandani and Kushank Purandare: Victims of male dominated society

Chandani and Kushank are the victims of male dominated Indian society. Though they love each other truly, their relationship is not accepted by Chandani’s father. Chandani’s father, a male patriarch in the novel does not want to marry her daughter with Kushank. He does not believe in love. He advises his daughter saying, “*Chandani, this is puppy love. You’ll soon outgrow it. Then it won’t suffice and you’ll leave him behind one day*” (142).

According to him, Kushank is an outcaste. It shows the attitude of in Indian society. Falling in love and getting married is not personal and easy affair in Indian culture. The obstacles like caste, class, region, religion, language etc. come in the way of lovers, who wish to marry. Nagarkar want to highlight the patriarchal and cultural norms which are mandatory to follow for new generation. Through Kushank-Chandani episode, Nagarkar reflects on unfair social practice of oppressive and unforgiving patriarchy, hostile to young lovers, that eventually succeeds in breaking the affair and giving a full stop to the prospects of their love marriage. Her dream to marry with a man to whom she loves remains unfulfilled on the ground of narrow confinements of social norms. Chandani’s father rejects the proposal as he knows that Kushank is not from a respectable family and is a fatherless child who lives with his aunt to whom he considers a prostitute.

The issue of her marriage with Kushank takes a bad toll on her and she is isolated even in her own house. Her attempt to intimate her situation to Kushank is spoiled and she is condemned by the family members for her act. As the novelist writes, “*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)

Through all the three episodes, Nagarkar has portrayed patriarchal gender relations. Women in all the three different 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. 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 justified 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 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 men should change their attitude towards women and treat them as human.

To sum up, Kiran Nagarkar successfully represents the marginalized and oppressed sections of the post independent Indian society. He narrates the struggle for existence and survival of women who deals with poverty, degradation, crime, violence hopelessness and distorted human relations. Kiran Nagarkar in his writings and especially in this novel has done a great social service by championing the cause of humanity, social justice and human welfare. The novel is linked to power, history, subjectivity and identity. The cultural categories of caste, class, gender and religion have deep effects on our subjectivities. Religion, class, caste and gender oppression operate in a social set-up as much through the institutions of culture- the family, educational and religious institutions and media, as through the repressive and violent forces of the police and other state agencies. This novel asserts that the protagonist Kushank and other characters of the text are deeply rooted and located in their historical contexts and they cannot escape the burden of their histories. It recognizes unjustness of exploitation and oppression.

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