

Diversity of India: Kiran Nagarkar's Ravan and Eddie

Dr. A. P. Sovani, Asso. Prof., English, C. P. & Berar College, Nagpur

Introduction

India is a country of great racial diversity, with a wide variety of different ethnic and linguistic groups. The population is primarily an admixture of the races like Indo-Aryans, Dravidians, and Mongoloids. The country is also home to several tribal groups, each with distinct cultures and traditions. India is a country with a rich and diverse cultural heritage, and it is no surprise that it is also home to a variety of people from different religions.

The Portuguese established a colony in Goa in 1510 and expanded the colony to its present boundaries during the 17th and 18th centuries. Goans is the demonym used to describe the people native to Goa, who form an ethno-linguistic group resulting from the assimilation of Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Indo-Portuguese, Austro-Asiatic ethnic and/or linguistic ancestries. Goan Catholics are Indian Christians from Goa. Several Goan Catholics immigrated for economic reasons to various Indian cities during the British Raj, thereby creating diaspora communities. They intermingled among the people of other religions.

Religious diversity is the fact that there are significant differences in religious belief and practice. Many Indian English writers described the diversity of India in their works; however, Kiran Nagarkar is one of the most significant writers of post-colonial India. He is an anomaly among Indian writers in that he has written acclaimed novels in more than one language. His novel, 'Ravan and Eddie' take us to the most enjoyable journey to witness the diversity of India in British Bombay.

Journey of Diversity in 'Ravan and Eddie'

'Ravan and Eddie' is one of the wittiest and bawdiest of books in contemporary Indian English Literature. Once upon a time, in the city of Bombay (now in Mumbai), there was a chawl. In it lived many people. They loved and hated, laughed and fought. But no one would have known them until a man called Kiran Nagarkar came along. He told their stories through 'Ravan and Eddie' in a way that we can never forget.

Diversity of attitudes found in India is made visible in this novel through various shapes and sizes. Nagarkar refers to the gulf yawning between man and woman, husband and wife, one religion and another, residents of ground floor and those of any subsequent floors. He has humorously described the heterogeneous nature in India through the characters and their conduct in the novel.

The story of the novel dwells on two teen-age boys born and brought up in utmost freedom and background of indiscipline. They have even no moral control of any sort in CWD (Central Works Department) Chawl No. 17, Byculla in Bombay. The novel is depiction of their un-heroic as well as deplorable deeds of not-well-bred boyhood. The novel accounts for their journey from childhood to their being adolescent, and it ends at that stage, perhaps to take its re-birth into Germany's Order of Merit Award winning describing the diversity of India.

The aforesaid teen-age boys are Ravan, a Hindu and Eddie, a Christian. Ravan is born to Parvati and Shankar-rao Pawar, Marathas while Eddie is born to Violet and Victor Coutinho, Roman Catholics, both families living in the same chawl. Coutinhos live in the fifth floor while Pawars live in the fourth floor, all due to cultural confrontations. All Christians were forced to live in the top most floors of all CWD chawls of Bombay while the Hindus occupied the lower chawls (fourth to second), and the lowest or the ground floor was reserved for the untouchables. This was the chawl-life to which the author seems to be a silent witness.

The story of the novel opens with Victor Coutinho, who, residing in the top most floor of chawl, is totally sunk in his salacious love for Parvati Pawar, residing at fourth floor of the same building over the years. She is beautiful from all angles and her 'appealingly' curvaceous physique always maddens him every time. He just keeps on gazing and gazing and doing nothing beyond this. One day, when he was returning in the evening from his duty, he noticed that his 'centre-of-attraction' Parvati was standing in the balcony with her thirteen-month old child, Ram, in her arms. A desire grew in his mind to approach her and try to talk to her through picking up 'baby talks.' Completely dipped in fascination towards her he raised his hand towards her baby, but there occurred a tragedy. The child, Ram, in his mother's arms playfully

sprang out and headed downward Victor. Here, Victor saved the child but in the course of doing so he breathed his last due to the heart attack. This tragic incident took place to the nostalgia of Violet Coutinho, her daughter Pieta, mother (Granna) and other Catholics of neighborhood. At the funeral of Victor; all boys and girls and their parents from neighbouring chawls gathered and they were wonder-struck to watch the indescribable beauty of a Catholic funeral. Nagarkar says, "Truly, even if you were born a Hindu, it was worthwhile dying a Catholic. How much pomp and glory and solemnity there was in Christian death." Every culture has its specific practices and rituals.

The entire novel runs along the parallel lives of Ravan and Eddie. Soon after the funeral of Victor, his pregnant wife Violet gives birth to a son, and he is named Eddie. Violet nurtures Eddie with hatred against Ravan, holding him responsible for her husband's death.

Parvati, finding that her child, Ram, is constantly cursed by Violet, and in her gratitude towards God for saving her son's life from an unexpected mishap, arranges the Satyanarayan puja in her belief to ward off all evils or to save him from all evil glances. Finally the child, 'Ram', was renamed as 'Ravan' the symbol of evil in Ramayan epic. It has been a custom in several parts of rural India that, due to fear of any evil impact or death, many parents give unlikeable names to their children.

In his flash-back narrative style, Nagarkar informs us how the Goan Christians or Roman Catholics came to settle down in CWD (Central Works Department) chawls of Bombay, which were constructed during the British rule. It is interesting to note that though India won Independence from the British in 1947, the tiny state of Goa remained to be a Portugese colony till 1961 and many Catholics continued to stay in CWD chawls. Though their children received education in English medium schools, they learnt Marathi and Konkani as well for local communication.

Nagarkar satirically says that the Pope and Rome were important to them, but they were most devout to kissing the toe of the miraculously undecaying body of Saint Francis which had rested in Bom Jesu Church in Panji, the capital of Goa. In addition to celebration of Christmas, they also actively participated at the famous Carnival of Goa. No doubt, the Goan Catholics were born and brought up in India, but their umbilical cord was tied to Lisbon. Similarly, all Hindus of the chawls spoke Marathi or a dialect of it, Hindi and English which was made second language of school curriculum. There was prohibition in the state of Bombay, but Goa was open for wine and booze, dirt cheap, and many other opportunities for fun and enjoyment.

It was a rigid Hindu wing like RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh) and its allies which forced the Christians to live at the top (fifth) floor of all CWD Chawls while the Hindus, the so called upper caste people, lived in the lower chawls (fourth to second), and the lowest (ground) floor was reserved for the untouchables. It is really surprising that the human mentality, as conditioned culturally, can never change.

While Ravan found difficulty in speaking English, Eddie was fluent in Marathi like a native. In the mixed culture, all festivals of Hindus and Christians were celebrated. Ravan, a Hindu boy, had inclination towards Christianity while Eddie, a Christian boy, had inclination for Hinduism. He knew more about Mahabharata and Shrimadbhagvadgeeta. A student of St Sebastian's School, Eddie succeeded in seeking admission to RSS fold and he became expert, scoring highest marks, in gymnastics, drill, physical exercises, martial arts, spiritual singing, lezhim and wielding lathi (wooden stick), as the RSS-fold's basic weapon of self-defence. For his outstanding performance in the cadre, he was adjudged as Abhimanyu, a warrior character in Mahabharata, who knew the secret of penetrating the complex military maze (Chakravyuha) which even the greatest warriors could not negotiate.

Eddie did not have any enmity with Ravan. Ravan too did not have any adverse feeling for Eddie. But he was always kept under confusion that he was responsible for the death of Eddie's father. Ravan too exhibited his behaviour of indiscipline and indecent frolicking. He was not at all a sinner of any sort, but he could not get rid of that stigma attached to him by Eddie's mother.

Ravan's elementary education was going on in Marathi medium school. But he could not seek entry to the fold of Sabha (RSS) because of the blot on him. However, he joined St Theresa's

School gym and learnt martial art under the guidance of Mr Billimoria. He had become so skilled in 'tae kwon do' that he was made deputy to Mr Billimoria. He also decided to learn English because it was the most prospective and bread-giving language, he was told. The novelist reveals the psychological upheaval in the mind of Ravan for English as it is usually experienced by every Marathi school going student.

The cultural diversity is described by Nagarkar become more interesting by introducing excessive humour, satire and various other literary devices like simile, metaphor, hyperbole, exaggeration, historical or epic details, non-literary devices like deviations or digressions and intermezzos in the entire narrative.

Nagarkar explains the plight of Parvati under the caption: 'A Harangue on Poverty' to highlight the efforts taken by women in order to run their families which are shadowed by poverty. Parvati had to work hard day in and day out to make both ends meet, because her husband stopped working, and preferred living idle on the pocket money of his sensible wife.

The second intermezzo is seen in Chapter Six, with the caption: 'The Great Water Wars' wherein the water crisis has been highlighted in respect of all chawl-dwellers. Nagarkar applies his unique sense of humour to explain the situation of water crisis in CWD chawls of Bombay. He says that the people in general have been known to kill others for religion, linguistic or national flag chauvinism or caste or colour of the skin and even while breaking the queue in public places.

In the same Chapter Six, Nagarkar uses another intermezzo: 'A Short Digression on Snow' in which he says, "To be fair is to be God's chosen. Fairness was more precious than immortality, nirvana or moksha. It was on a par with virginity. It was more desirable than all the treasures of the Mughal emperors and the inspiration of the poets." Beauty has been one of major causes for fighting several battles to which the World History is a silent witness. Beauty or fairness is the output of divinity. If the 'fairness' had not been a fascinating factor, Narcissus would not have fallen in love with his own reflection in a pool of water.

The next intermezzo 'A Meditation of Neighbours' in which Nagarkar apprises his readers of the habits and next some elementary but irreconcilable differences between the two communities, Catholics and Hindus. While the Hindus took bath in the morning, the Catholics took bath in the evening. With a tinge of humour, the novelist says that the Hindus took bath on religious ground and also forced their poor gods and goddesses to shower, whether installed at home or in temples. Christians, on the other hand, did not think that salvation and bathing were casually related. Hindus chewed paan and betel nut as well as tobacco and spat with abundant mouth-spray in the corners of the stairs, not thinking that spitting was a peeing through mouth. Catholics did not eat paan and could not be faulted for indecent public acts.

Hindus studied in municipal schools while Catholics joined their schools run by priests and nuns. The Hindu men wore striped underpants or pyjamas and moved about shamelessly with their rolled up vests almost to armpits like Ravan's father did and exposed their pot-bellies when relaxing at home. While Catholics were shy of exhibiting their midriffs, since they were banished from Paradise. And if they did, they did not wear any clothe on top. Hindus went to temples as and when they liked, Catholics had a disciplined gathering at Church on Sundays. Sunday always affords to Hindus a free time. Around 9.30 or 10 am, Hindus unshaven and unbathed, putting on striped pyjamas with matching striped underwear and a shirt to put on top of it, went to bazaar with tote-bag to buy mutton and fish. Bazaar was a macho prerogative for men while women did other shopping. Men always derived pleasure from picking arguments with fisherwomen, and with butchers because they were men. Then they had late bath and lunch by 2.30 pm and enjoyed siesta.

Catholics observed decency in the dress code on Sundays, with suits and ties and shining shoes. They were much concerned about their turn-out in the eyes of others including their relatives, seniors and bosses, etc. during their Sunday congregation. What this digression conveys is that the members of both the rival communities were conscious about the habits in terms of food, dress, religious attitude, moral code and use/misuse of freedom on holidays, etc.

The novelist makes his last intermezzo in Chapter Sixteen, entitled as 'In Praise of Audacities or The Shortest Survey Ever of the Portuguese Adventure in the Old World, an interesting

journey that throw the light on the social and religious diversity in India. Nagarkar portrays the Portuguese history beautifully. Every historical phase is loaded with struggle for survival, both on the part of the colonizer and on the part of the colonized. Though Goa got liberation from Portuguese control, the novelist has something good to talk about its advantage, as every bad thing has its good impact. We are informed that there were staunch freedom fighters, both from Catholic and Hindu, in the colonies of Goa, Diu and Daman, and they were eager to be united with their mother land, and often went to jail for it. It was 1961 when they succeeded in what they had fought for.

He emotionally remembers, “Whatever the injustices of colonial conquest and rule, fortunately one can still be beguiled and entranced by the beauty and lilt of an alien language and its culture. Who were these strange men-and they were almost all only men-with strange names who dared to cross unknown and unmapped seas, voyage for months over four thousand miles of dangerous and stormy oceans to come to India?”

It is due to masculine influence, exercised by Hindus and the RSS that the Catholics were forced to live in the fifth floor of all CWD chawls of Mazagaon and Byculla areas while the Hindus were living in the lower floors (fourth to second) of the chawls, and of course the ground floors were reserved for the untouchables---“One city, one chawl, two floors (those of Catholics and Hindus), two cultures (Hindu and Christianity), two languages (English and Marathi) and two religions.”

Heightening the impact of ‘manliness’ in his satire-laden style, Nagarkar realistically asserts, “Men are heroic inside the vagina, in wet dreams, quickies or in love.” Besides Victor (father of Eddie) and Shankar-rao Pawar (father of Ravan), the masculinity factor is bouncingly noticed in other characters, like, Mr Tamhane (a mean spirited neighbour), Mr Sarang (father of nine daughters, all marriageable), Mr Furtado (a suitor for Eddie’s widow mother, Violet), Chandrakant Dixit (a freedom fighter and patriot as well as die-hard Gandhian) and Paul Monterio (another freedom fighter and Gandhian).

Masculinity is not physical only but mental or psychic also. It becomes activated or charged only against the femininity or weaker sex, and finds its expression through jealousy or suspicious nature or one’s self-guilt of suffering from inferiority complex in some respect.

The Chawl life in the novel highlights violence on women, encouraged through society’s imposition of masculine gender roles, which is found to be misogynistic (hatred for women) in nature. The author in his novel attacks all sorts of dogmas and misconceptions operating under the patriarchal system which lays restraints on the autonomy of women in society and male tendency of exploiting them.

Masculinity giving birth to patriarchal system becomes a curse for domestic set up wherein one already married woman suffers her husband’s apathy due to his preference for the new arrival, second woman or a keep. Thus, the hard-working Parvati is saddled with her husband’s new mistress, Lalee, and Parvati and her son are confined to the kitchen of their one-roomed house. Parvati sweated and sweated doing chores of house and preparing tiffins to meet both ends meet. Fatherhood is another characteristic of masculinity, and it also applies to the imposed clerical celibacy on all Fathers in Christianity. The novelist highlights here the surrogate fatherhood as a masculine factor, but with its unsolved problems.

Masculinity factor also seems to be operative in the case of Ravan and Eddie in terms of their imitating the film-heroes of their choice, like Shammi Kapoor of Ravan and Bill Halley or Elvis Presley of Eddie. Both the young boys obtain recognition from their peers---Eddie follows in the footsteps of popular rock stars while Ravan follows in the footsteps of Shammi Kapoor or dreams of becoming a nightclub singer or drummer. Both of them adopt the ways of being masculine in acting, performing or exhibiting the masculinity of their role models.

Nagarkar provides more colour to the feminine masculinity of Parvati, representing stree-shakti (power of woman) and to that of Violet Coutinho who rejects her suitor Mr Furtado. Eddie spreads all sorts of rumour against her mother, Violet, in order to prevent her from her second marriage with Mr Furtado, and in that attempt he calls her mother a ‘fast woman’ of a loose character. When Mr Furtado reports Eddie’s evil attitude against her own mother to Violet, she says, “My son never lies, Mr Furtado. It does not reflect well upon the listener that he stood

and listened for a full thirty minutes to all manner of lies and stories.” The subject of Violet’s marriage was closed for good after that. Violet Coutinho was not a submissive woman by nature, and she would always talk to her husband Victor in commanding voice. She held Parvati’s son Ravan responsible for her husband’s death and labelled him as “Cain. Murderer.” Nagarkar’s writing is bestowed abundantly with instances of his exemplary sense of humour. Sometimes it is scornful, but at most times it gives you a hearty laugh. It may be said that without humour his novels cannot come out. His style of invoking humour, many a time very sensuous as well as sensual, makes him different other fiction-writers. It would not be wrong to say he talks humour, he thinks humour and he breathes humour.

Nagarkar has thrown light on diverse lines of thinking, feeling and doing adopted by the residents of one and the same locality. Husband and wife are shown as if they are not made for each other. While some are proud of Indian culture and traditions, others are keen on deriving benefits from Portuguese language and culture. He also talks about male masculinity and also female masculinity, thereby denoting two types of women – women who are docile and domesticated and women who are dominant and dashing like men.

Ravan and Eddie ends with uncompromising egoistic mentality of the mothers of the protagonists, who are far away from the concept of peaceful co-existence in a social set up, and casting aside the cultural confrontations. In the end of the novel when Ravan and Eddie are seen hugging each other; in fact it is Ravan who is mistakenly held responsible by Violet Coutinho for the death of her husband, Victor, saves Eddie from a fall or mishap at the staircase. But adamant Violet held her son Eddie by the hand and whisked him away from Ravan.

What we find in the novel is Nagarkar’s handling of two young boys amidst their maternal adamancy of disuniting both of them who may be considered as strong future generation of India. Both the adamant mothers are creating the problem of their identity crisis though they are the children of the same chawl, same city and same motherland. The author is however trying his best to reflect their wild innocence of adolescent years, and his attempt is to remove the stigma of cultural confrontation or communal hatred in terms of Hindus versus Christians in CWD chawls of Bombay.

Diversity in India is a reflection of the many different groups and cultures that coexist in the country. Looking into the history, it can be seen that with the passage of time many intruders entered in India in order to rule here and loot this prosperous country. Many of them stayed here permanently even after their people’s exit. Following the discovery of a sea route to India by the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in 1498, Western Christianity was established in the European colonies of Goa, Bombay, Madras and Pondicherry. Their main aims were to capitalize on the spice trade and promotion of Christian missions to convert indigenous peoples. We enjoy significant differences in religious belief and practice among the Hindus and the Christians. Nagarkar in ‘Ravan and Eddie’ takes us to the interesting and enjoyable journey which delineates the diversity of india in all the aspects.

References

1. On Line Interview: April 22, 2008. <http://www.arnabchakladar.co./Kn4.html>.
2. The Open Bible: The New King James Verson: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Madras, 1983.
3. http://proceeding.conferenceworld.in/MASHS-2018_Sattur-Conference/qtEs7uhgS695.pdf
4. <https://www.epitomejournals.com/VolumeArticles/FullTextPDF/119>