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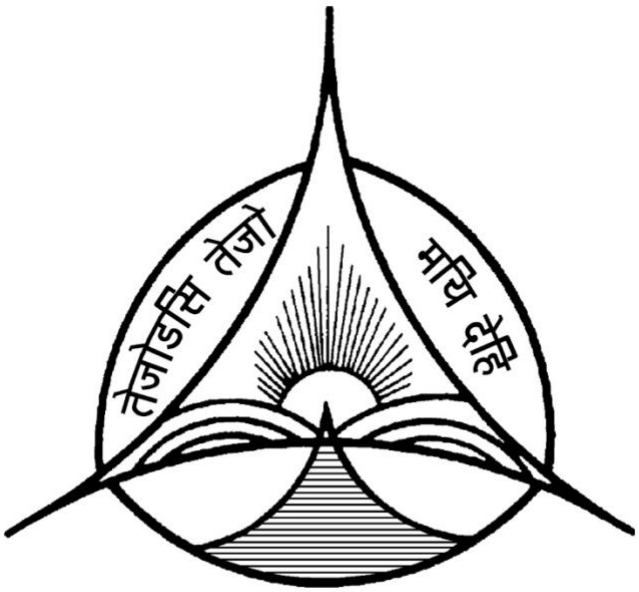

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Jasoda by Kiran Nagarkar, Fourth Estate, Noida, 2017, pp. 262, ₹599.00. ISBN 978-93-5277-100-4

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Jasoda began its journey, we are told by the author, over 20 years ago when he abandoned it 70 pages into a draft. It was finally completed and published in 2017 by HarperCollins India. It is the story of the eponymous heroine, Jasoda, and the epic journey she undertakes to the city to escape the meagre existence brought upon by a 10-year long drought and back to the village to return to her husband after seven years. Divided into four parts, the narrative alternates between the lives of Jasoda and Sangram Singh, her husband, each set in a different geographical location following Jasoda on her journey from Kantagiri to Mumbai to Sharana. While Sangram Singh does not journey out of Kantagiri, spending most of his life at the Royal Palace of Prince Parbat Singh, Jasoda's story takes on epic proportions, an aesthetic form that has hitherto been available only to men like Ulysses, Arjun, Ram or Hector. Nagarkar locates the epic in the quotidian, amidst the squalor of a dehumanising poverty and debilitating hunger. Unique to his storytelling, Nagarkar's novels often re-work narratives from Hindu mythology and folklore to re-present and challenge our reverence for mythological figures. In the *Bhagvata Purana*, Yashoda (Jasoda) interchanges her daughter Yogmaya with Vasudeva to protect Krishna from the wrath of Kansa, the king of Mathura. Nagarkar retells Yashoda's willingness to sacrifice her daughter for Krishna (a male child) through Jasoda's murdering of female infants born to enable the birth and survival of boys. Such an unprecedented perspective of Yashoda allows for the exploration of both the heroic and the contemptible in Jasoda.

In the very first scene, Nagarkar sets himself the task of telling a story about otherness. Like *Cuckold*, this tale is not about *Pandhar Peshe* (the *bhadralok* of Maharashtra), but about a Rajput household in the arid hinterlands that could be located anywhere in Kutch, Kathiawad or Rajasthan. The caste–patriarchy nexus in the feudal–agrarian economy of the 'Paar' region is delineated in the first few pages and Jasoda is firmly placed within this worldview; she kills the girl child she has given birth to in the middle of the unyielding land by crushing her between her thighs 'till the girl was still'. Scenes of murder and rape are written seamlessly into the narrative so that beyond the initial few grotesque imageries, the reader complacently accepts them as part of the everyday for women like Jasoda. The process of *othering* is complete when one closes the book with Jasoda murdering her husband in cold blood, even as Nagarkar makes one last attempt at universalising his anti-heroine as Everywoman. He writes, '…there is no dearth of Jasodas in slums of the major metropolises not just in India but all over the world. Again, she's not necessarily found in extreme poverty alone but also in middle-class homes and even affluent ones' (p. 263).

Nagarkar's literary modernism is irreverent, bawdy, subjective and violent in epic proportion, with a paradoxical desire to 'transform the individual into universal' (Deosthale 1990: 139). He began his literary career with the Marathi novel *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* in 1974, often acclaimed

as a fine example of avant-garde experimentation in Marathi literature. If bilingual creative production is a symptom of the postcolonial condition, as a bilingual Marathi writer, Nagarkar needs to be appreciated and read as (un)belonging to both the Indian writing in English tradition and the Marathi literary tradition, lest we reify the colonial legacy of English monolingualism. Consequently, Nagarkar must not only be read as supplementing stalwarts of Indian English writing like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy, but also Balachandra Nemade, Vilas Sarang, Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre of new Marathi writing. In *Jasoda*, Nagarkar examines the lives of his characters who live on the streets of Mumbai, on a railway platform, or in a royal palace without a hint of moral appraisement. It is here that Nagarkar displays the influence of Marathi literary tradition most strongly. The post-independence Marathi writers of the 1960s and 70s developed a 'new sensibility' born out of disillusionment with the socio-political milieu and alienation due to the loss of the hinterland on account of migration to the 'city'. The new writing, exclusively urban, led to the 'urbanisation of rural consciousness' that made return to the village as alienating as living in the city, and migration a state of being and existence for the writer and the protagonist alike (Deshpande 1997: 2888). Two recurring tropes, migration to the city and return to the village and the tension between the father and son in the family, are often employed to examine the anima of the modern man. Nagarkar employs both these tropes as the central driving force to his plot framed by the two murders committed by Jasoda. The rivalry between the father and the son along with the epic proportions of Jasoda's journey sets this up to be an ambitious project, of which Nagarkar tires midway, sketching out central characters hastily and abandoning characters indiscriminately.

Between disappearing Prince, fathers, husbands, mistresses, sons and wives, and disappearing characters (that enter and leave the narrative freely), is also the erasure of time and history to create an ahistorical and atemporal narrative that could have taken place anytime post-independence. The frequent movements in time and space leave the reader breathlessly following characters that appear ageless and aged at the same time. The landscape too disappears after the first part. The shifting sand of Jalta and the inflammable 'glistening black bile' that burbled up from the depths of Kantagiri are described in a rich evocative language (p. 55). The cityscapes of Mumbai and Sharana escape the notice of the writer's imagination. They disappear into the background and the focus instead is on the survival instinct and the enterprising spirit of Jasoda as she finds herself in a new position as the owner of restaurants and hotels. What remains is the niggling feeling of caste essentialism, that when a respectable upper caste woman like Jasoda finds herself fallen on bad times, she not only maintains her caste purity by rejecting a certain kind of work, but also rises in the world to restore her class position—unlike the 'untouchable' Dulare who finds himself at the bottom of the well, and Savitri, Dulare's wife and Sangram Singh's mistress, erased from the very fabric of the narrative.

If in *Cuckold* 'modernity is imposed on medievalism', in *Jasoda* pre-modern consciousness is imposed upon modern subjects (Paranjape 2009: 142). Through the length of the narrative of *Jasoda*, the interiority and private motivations of not a single character is made available to the reader. In fact, the characters seem to be merely archetypes created to fit the mould of their predestined story; Himmat (meaning courage), the eldest son, is the one with grit and perseverance who will rise above his circumstances to become one of the youngest professors at

Stanford University; Pawan (meaning wind), the second son, is like the wind, breezing in and out of the lives of his family and the narrative. Similarly, when Jasoda's husband returns, 'thousands of years of unspoken covenant took hold of her', telling her to not disobey him and accept him back into the life she had built for herself and her children. Nagarkar does not spare a single moment or word to develop the psychological underpinnings of these characters. None of the characters, then, including Jasoda, attain the selfhood and interiority of the subject of a novel. To conclude, *Jasoda* is far more redeemable as a work of *riti*, an aesthetic experiment with form and language, than a *kriti*, a novel with a thrust towards social realism, and should be read for its poignant language, quaint landscape, and its epic temporal and spatial sweep.