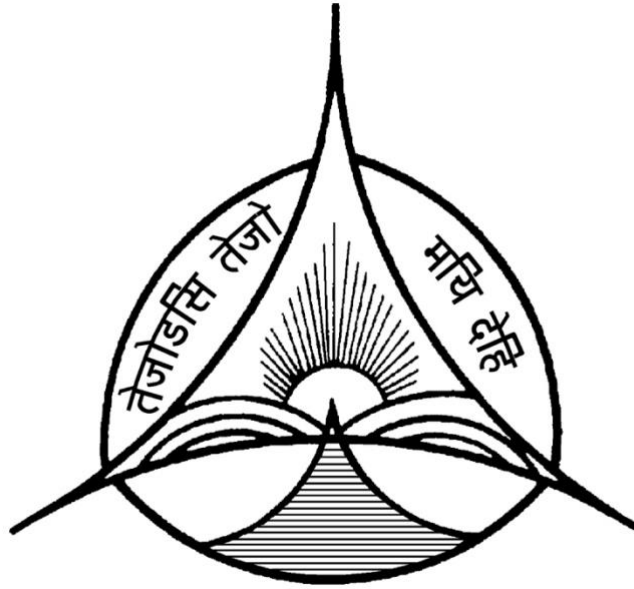


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THE ERASURE OF MEMORY, THE KNOCKING DOWN OF HISTORY: A
CONVERSATION WITH AUTHOR KIRAN NAGARKAR

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Introduction: Kiran Nagarkar is an Indian novelist, playwright, film and drama critic and screenwriter both in Marathi and English. Amongst his most known works are *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (*Seven Sixes Are Forty Three*) (1974), *Ravan and Eddie* (1994), and the epic novel, *Cuckold* (1997), which won the 2001 Sahitya Akademi Award. In 2017, he published *Jashoda*, a story of a quotidian heroine trapped by circumstance but crawling her way out by any means necessary.

Sandhya Devesan Nambiar (SDN): I am very glad to talk to you about your latest book *Jashoda*, published last year, in 2017. But I would like to go back a bit. Your first novel was published in 1974, *Saat Sakkam Trechalis*, and then the next novel came out 20 years later. You are known to take long periods of time between your works. Tell us a little about your process of writing.

Kiran Nagarkar (KN): Well let me just clarify one thing. After writing *Saat Sakkam Trechalis*, I followed it up with *Bedtime Stories* and then I took a break, *completely*, for 15 years. It was not because of laziness. I think, somewhere, I was foolish enough to be disheartened. So that period is not because I was lying fallow. Of course, the company that Arun (Kolatkar) and I worked for went bankrupt and everyone had got a job except Arun and me. So freelancing became a very difficult thing. Survival is selfish. What happened was that I got a fellowship in 1991. It had a very fancy name, the Rockefeller Fellowship. And it was given to me to teach me how to swab the floor, how to do your own cooking, how to do your own shopping two miles away. The money was quite scarce and it was a very hard time.

But I did go back to *Ravan and Eddie* and sometime around 1993, I think, I must have completed it. I was very lucky, despite the fact that the Maharashtrian critics had treated me so badly—barring my two gurus who thought that *Seven Sixes* was a landmark that was doing everything very differently and some others also; but I mostly was accused of all kinds of things. Then when I got the Fellowship, the medical insurance did not kick in for two months and when I did go to see the doctor, he took one look at me and said that I was suffering from acute depression ... I was depressed because I thought I was abandoning my mother tongue, and I had that horrendous guilt. I don't know how I got the notion that I was abandoning my mother tongue, because all those years before I started writing *Seven Sixes*, it was English which was my mother tongue.

SDN: But initially at least you did think of yourself mostly as a Marathi writer, writing in English?

KN: No, I wasn't *doing* anything, which is how I started writing in Marathi. Only because Dilip had mentioned that his father had asked him to edit a Marathi magazine they owned and that had fallen on very hard days. My response to that was to go home and write my first

short story in Marathi—a language that I had not dealt with in so long. And the next day, again without any thought, because any rational thinking and I would never have done what I did—which was to start writing my *novel* in Marathi. What is curious is that although the majority of Marathi critics had treated me so badly, even then I was willing to believe that I had betrayed my art. Anyway, as luck would have it, I started on *Ravan and Eddie* seriously.

SDN: What about *Jasoda*, which has been germinating for a long time?

KN: No, I finished the first 75 pages within the first two or three months, but I realised that it was going to be a very, very dark story. In summer there were two people who said to me, ‘hey, you don’t know this territory, why are you writing this book?’ I have never talked about this. And somewhere I took that accusation seriously, and that was very foolish of me.

SDN: Some of the other stories seem to have more stories to tell. The children especially, Samir, for instance, who goes missing.

KN: The point about Samir is that I’m sure Jasoda misses him all the time, many a time; it is unthinkable how many children go missing in Bombay. But I did not want to chase that story. I don’t think I will because it will just get truly horrific to be honest—what we do to our children. I think recently CNN has been doing a study and Al Jazeera has already covered what is going on in Libya and Syria and how they are selling children, so that part is terrifying. I do bring Samir back into Jasoda’s memory, but I didn’t want to keep harping on it. If I was to write about the lost children, I would not find any hope whatsoever. And whatever I have done is entirely my responsibility and I must pay for it, and that’s the grim fact.

SDN: How do you feel about so many of the generation losing touch with their mother tongues and with their language, especially in terms of *bhasha* literature and the vernacular? What does it do to their memory and history?

KN: I have very intense feelings about this. I don’t know if you remember, there was an India International Festival in 2002 sponsored by the government, and just before that *Outlook* asked many of the *bhasha* writers to talk about English writing. The uniform opinion of all of them was that English writing from India is inauthentic. So, first of all, that posed a problem for the likes of Dilip (Chitre), Arun (Kolatkar), Vilas (Sarang) and I. Because for the rest, when we argue in Marathi, we are authentic, and the moment we write in English, we are inauthentic! And of course, in those days, there was no Chetan Bhagat and no Amish Tripathi. So, I’m hard put then and hard put even today to understand this mindset—that because you write in a different language, like English, you do it for the money and you do it to sell the books. Curiously enough, in 2006, when I wrote *God’s Little Soldier*, it was a complete flop here and I was very lucky that it became a substantial hit in Germany.

When we came back, the Goethe Institute called the four authors—Ranjit Hoskote, Altaf Tyrewala, the one who wrote *No God in Sight*, Shobha De and me. Fortunately, I had the good sense to say that I had lost my voice. Initially I thought that they were speaking on normal topics, but suddenly they came up with this notion that *bhasha* writers have come for

a free ride, that they stay in five-star hotels and their work did not deserve it. Do they have any idea what they are saying?

I had written an article recently, where I wrote that the greatest gifts of god are ‘happy accidents’. It is a short paper about the discovery of my mother—as in my mother tongue—and along with it my humongous affection for every single language; and whether I know it or not is irrelevant. I have finally understood that a language is irreplaceable, it is such a treasure house. It has the whole history of its people. There’s a quote from somewhere that says, ‘every fifteen days a language dies’. Can you imagine the loss? We have so many languages, what are we fighting about! As it is, we don’t learn all the languages.

Some people are promoting the idea that children should only learn their mother tongue otherwise they will have problems later. A *child*, as recent research has shown, can handle five languages. So, in my discovery of my mother tongue and writing in it, I didn’t just discover *Marathi*—I discovered language and the glory of a language. I am old. If I had half a chance I would have learned at least three more languages. I won’t mind making language romantic at all, the notion of a language. All you have to do is tell those stories!

I don’t want to lose my K.L. Saigal, Pankaj Malik, and I don’t want to lose my S.D. Burman and R.D. Burman. Where did I pick up my third-rate Hindi from?! Why in god’s name would they ever talk about making Hindi the national language? I did not care for Hindi when I was in school. My father was in the railways. On my way back from Shimla, I entered the train, travelling in what those days was called the Interclass. Some students walked in and started talking in Hindi. They said, ‘*kya baat hai guru? Aap itne gupchup kyun hain?*’ And that was it, I just flipped for Hindi! I love Hindi, but I speak it very badly, I speak Marathi very badly. But how can you not love them? If you stretch your hand you will have to stretch it over 3,000 years. To have a language which still exists after all these years, don’t you feel marvellous about it?

SDN: How do you feel then about the legacy of Gandhi and Nehru and what has happened to it? Does Indian politics hold any remnant of it at all or has it completely changed beyond recognition?

KN: Almost completely. Did I tell you how I came to Gandhiji? I had told you that I got typhoid followed by smallpox. Initially I was very worried about being ugly and having pock marks. All this faded somewhat because of the book, *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, by Louis Fischer. Nehru, I was a fan of, not Gandhi then. I was reluctant to read it but I picked it up to pass the time during my convalescence, and it changed me. You don’t realise it, but some books don’t just stay inside you: they also grow inside you. That is certainly the case with Gandhiji and I have no problem repeating this story because he had a sense of humour. Do they know what an incredible quality humour is? You have to stand straight, look at yourself, and get a perspective of the world and simultaneously on yourself. Marathi has *sentimentalised* humour. Living in *chawls* is supposed to be marvellous because you become such good friends with everyone without ever admitting that ultimately there is nothing ennobling about poverty. The only thing to be done is to make everyone educated and give everyone a chance at having the kind of life they want, though not without humour.

SDN: The politics of today is absolutely humourless then?

KN: When I look at the top leaders of this country, I'm aghast at so much poison and where it's coming from. Why are they constantly cursing the Congress (party)? I have said for years now that the first Bharat Ratna that this party should have given was to Sonia Gandhi because without their corruption these people would have never come to power.

SDN: That's true, but you wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister last year. Do you want to elaborate on what made you write it?

KN: I so far have written two of them. There were many reasons for writing. I think one of them was because an 11-year-old died because she could not get food since she did not have an Aadhaar Card.

SDN: The reason I'm asking this is because there are very few writers who are writing against certain things that are happening in the country today; very few writers who are angry about the system and how it works. Should a writer and artist feel some responsibility to reach more people and try to change the discourse?

KN: That is putting it very mildly. We have all been slapped in the face because of demonetisation. These people have suffered the most because of the demonetisation, since almost 70 per cent live on daily wages. What kind of human beings does it take to declare demonetisation and then to lie continuously about its success? They constantly changed the goalpost, changing the bloody objective every half hour. We all make mistakes. But the moment you make a mistake you should go back to it. Instead, they kept at it. There is no discourse. Do they have any idea how they are ruining the next generation? Of course, they are recruiting 14-year-olds, not for this coming election, but for the future. Is there nothing beyond it? We have no interest in education. I can't understand this obsession with being a powerful country; why can't we be focused on being a good country? But there are far bigger issues, the planet will survive but we will not.

First of all, we are doing things which we know are entirely wrong. This is a disaster from the word go. There are simpler methods, which too we don't follow.. Bombay has a mandatory law about water harvesting. Barring about ten societies, nobody does it, then why do we call it mandatory? And what are we doing? We talk about saving the cow, and the only way to do this now is by feeding them plastic. What are you going to do with the waste from your nuclear plants? We are going to suffer from irretrievable droughts. Don't we want to find out how to grow future crops and how to feed the planet?

SDN: Speaking of drought, Jasoda comes from a desert of utter hopelessness. But to write her into this kind of strength of character and of absolute will, turns her story around. How do you see these people—the marginals, the outsiders, do they have a chance at all?

KN: They don't have a chance, but I see them as heroic. *Because* we don't give them a chance, and we aren't interested. We are interested in other things. I think that the 2002 riots have taught us something.

SDN: But each one of your books has been irreverent, and done things with form, genre and language. Do you think it's still possible to write books like *Cuckold*, to write *Ravan and Eddie*, and these characters today?

KN: *Cuckold* is out of the question. *Bedtime Stories*, at least at *that* time I did manage to write it. I remember when I started out writing—one of the things that I always wanted to do was to write the life of Subhash Chandra Bose and of Shivaji. But today this would be impossible really.

SDN: One last question. What would you hope for young people today?

KN: We have talked about this—the erasure of memory, the knocking down of history. I don't know how they will access history, but if this regime continues, then it is impossible for the younger generations. There is some responsibility, however, if you are going to buy into these lies without ever asking what it is that is being presented as truth and lies. How come these people have never mentioned Nehru? To ask, who was this guy, who was Abul Kalam Azad? I don't know how to sow these thoughts in their heads, and if it is that difficult to do so. It's hard, I agree, because people don't read at all now, but to be so bereft? Don't they want to explore their own histories and spread the word around? If they rejoice in being ignorant, then this country has no hope left.

If there is a past which is very guilty, it is Germany's past. And yet the German President in one of the most important speeches said that unless you look at the past and have the courage to own up to the terrible things that you did, *and* the wonderful things that you did, this country [Germany] and you are never going to have a *present*. This would apply very well to every country. Which country tells lies as well as America? But now we in India do it, and very well, and all the time. So I don't want to absolve the current generation. Martin Luther King said that one of the most common things today is maladjustment, and that is what psychologists are busy curing. But I think that it is important for the rest of us to be maladjusted, otherwise how are we going to find out what is wrong what our society?

SDN: Thank you Kiran Nagarkar for a very important interview.