

EXPLORATION OF VISION FOR POWER IN KIRAN NAGARKAR'S *CUCKOLD*

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Abstract

Kiran Nagarkar, an Indian novelist, playwright, film and drama critic and screenplay writer both in Marathi and English, is one of the most significant writers of the postcolonial India. Cuckold, one of the finest and much critically acclaimed novels written by him focuses on how the women characters fight for power - not for them but for the sake of the male characters, in spite of the social and sexual constraints they have in the society and in the royal family. Nagarkar portrays all the possible ways for Maharaj Kumar, the heir apparent to cherish his hierarchy in the kingdom. He analyses what position the women characters hold in the royal family they are offered to make the heir apparent, the hero of the novel Cuckold. This novel shows a variety of ways in which women characters try to come out of the social and sexual confines that are set on them. It is not that all the women are concerned with the political life of the time but with the impression they make in the life of Maharaj Kumar, the narrator and the heir apparent in the novel. It is obviously true in India that limits are set for women and they are restricted in the social and political activities. When it comes to a traditional or an orthodox family, a woman has to stay inside the houses to look after the household or she may be locked up in the houses or as in the novel she is demarcated within the zenena quarters. To encourage their sequestration, the patriarchal society opposes all kinds of divagations from the rules that are set in the society.

Keywords: *Cuckold, Nagarkar, zenena, Nautch Girl, Vikramaditya, Rajput*

In *Cuckold*, Greeneyes appears to Maharaj Kumar's wife as a "Nautch Girl" who cleverly uses all the preconceived public assumptions about feminine propriety as devices in getting the crown for her husband Maharaj Kumar. On the other hand, Queen Karmavati involves in a clever plan to get her son, Vikramaditya, to be crowned as the apparent heir as in the Ramayana, Kaikeyi who was desperate in getting the crown for her son Bharatha. Karmavati plays a vital role in turning the public opinion against Maharaj Kumar portraying his wife as a whore as she sings and dances in the public and also for coming out of the isolation from the zenena quarters. She uses the entire available harangue as her amenities of which constitutes masculinity and femininity. One who is unable to take control of his wife is considered as weak and unmanly in the so-called patriarchal society. The society does not give any of the Rajput men space to gratify or have soft corner towards any women. The so-called society has also set demarcations and boundaries to Rajput women that do not allow women to indulge in any social activities.

Queen Karmavati scoffs the rules of the patriarchal society and breaks the feminine behavioural ideals which one can consider as a mark of recreant. As a woman, she is unable

to rule the kingdom on her own; she wishes to rule it by proxy by making her son, the King of Mewar. Karmavati makes use of her position artfully leading the events that takes place to her advantage. Though she lives in the zenena quarters, she makes use of her excellent espionage system through which she gets all the information about everyone every time.

“Queen Karmavati had a complicated network of spies and the most tortuous but fail-safe way of checking whether the information she received was a hundred percent reliable. Add to that, her astounding arsenal of grilling techniques” (Pg. 8)

Karmavati appears to be an important minister to the King. She is not only ambitious in making her son the King of Mewar but also through her subtle coercion influences the King’s decisions which may include military activities. For example, the King’s decision to send Maharaj Kumar as a commander-in-chief of the Mewar forces against the Mussafar Shah, the Sultan of Gujarat appears to be result of, as Maharaj Kumar says in a typically ironic way: *“Why was Father abandoning one of his basic tenets? Did I owe the honour of becoming the commander-in-chief of the Mewar forces, to Mother Karmavati’s good offices?” (Pg. 161)*

The course of the story takes turn when the decision of the mother of Vikramdatiya and Maharaj Kumar decides to assign Vikramaditya as the apparent heir of the kingdom and to remove Maharaj Kumar, the existing apparent heir from his place. And soon after the disgraceful victory in the Gujarat war, the question of having Maharaj Kumar as the apparent heir arises. His mother’s appeal is not taken seriously. Father will have the matter as a spit for toasting meat. Maharaj Kumar’s mother may not know how to broach the subject of her eldest son.

“Father will look quizzically at her and point out she must be more watchful for she has just dropped a stitch in the nine hundred and seventy seventh sweater she is knitting for him.” (pg. 253)

Eventhough, Greeneyes seems to be the King’s favourite daughter-in-law, she is out of favour because she sings and dances. Atlast, Queen Karmavati is in the move of making her son, Vikramaditya, the ruler of Mewar. She makes all kinds of schemes to hatch in favour of her son and to make him the King’s favourite. She also makes the counter schemes to remove the present favourite and apparent heir from his special position. Such plans are put into immediate action so that the history of royal men often gives an impression that the decisions are their own and are not influenced by anyone else’s thoughts. This can be best proven when Greeneyes plays a subtle trick upon the King’s feelings. She sends Maharaj Kumar to lead Mewar’s army against Malwa where she utters, *“But as usual His Majesty had already made up his mind” (pg. 423)*. It is obvious that there is another women behind the King’s mind playing a role against Queen Karmavati’s plans. Maharaj Kumar’s opinion of Greeneyes is soon vanished and he realises that his wife knows much about his Father. *“It would not occur to her to stay in Father’s orbit, cultivate him*

and insinuate herself into his inner circle. Unfortunately, now, she herself needs something akin to a miracle to reinstate her in Father's good books" (pg.253).

As already mentioned *Cuckold* is a hagiography, the re-version of seeing historical and mythical figures as human beings; de-sanctifying them; bring them from their unapproachable position that has really shaped them. Like Indira Parthasarathy's *Nandan Kathai* which shows the saint Nandan not as a glorified figure but as a victim of his times or the film, *Joan of Arc* which shows sacred women as a confessor who says what she wanted to see in her visions was a very human fatal error. Nagarkar also portrays Meera as Greeneyes not as an eponymous saint but creates a credible woman out of Meera. He partly pays rich tribute to a highly individual woman who knows her own mind.

She is called "Greeneyes" or "Little Princess" or "Little Saint" but not "Meera" which itself depicts the difference in the way she has been portrayed in the novel. She has played no role in the development of Maharaj Kumar's wife from being put down as a nautch girl to receiving solution of glory as the little saint. She, loving Krishna very deep and delighted, scorns the strict rules and regulations of the palace. She is conscious of her role in the royal family and the power she has over others. Meanwhile, she is also portrayed as an obedient wife who does *Pativatra*, washes her husband's Maharaj Kumar's feet and puts them to her eyes even though he hits her. In the second half of the novel, when one is so much infused with the image of Greeneyes, one gets into a sensation of whether the legendary Meera can be as worldly as our earlier stories projected her to be. We have the strong feelings of the emotional opinions she has on her husband, Maharaj Kumar. She cherishes cleverly so that the power she has, never fades away into him. This difference in the portrayal of Meera is encouraged by the fact that Nagarkar never uses her name throughout the novel rather than Greeneyes or Little Princess or Little Saint.

Both the queens, be it Queen Karmavati or Greeneyes, use their sexual power over their husband. Queen Karmavati uses it for Vikramadiya, her son to cherish the crown and Greeneyes uses her sexual power just to enjoy it. The way in which Nagarkar picturizes Greeneyes is especially striking as she is shown as woman of extra-ordinary sexual power and of great sagaciousness. She is portrayed as a woman who cheats enthusiastically at cards, a woman who can debate with the King and assures that she would get back all the money that she has lost in cards. She is a woman who simply cannot be contained within the extra-ordinary round of conventions. The King understands her well and is able to see many sides of her, including her more earthly aspects, which she reveals when she says, "*She's no saint, this woman. She has a money-lender's heart, mind and soul" (pg.423)*

All the women in the novel, including Greeneyes, are portrayed as belonging to their times. Greeneyes is a skilful archer and this can fulfil the historical tradition where the Rajput princess has to be taught certain martial arts. Similarly, she knows to read and write which again she could have been taught as a Rajput princess. Throughout the course of the novel, Greeneyes is keen in striving for superiority. She threatens Sugandha and says

she would break her legs off if she tried to meet her paramour. However, her attitude clearly portrays that she is keen on the political role that Maharaj Kumar shall play as heir apparent to Mewar. Nevertheless, she is rarely concerned about the impact of her own behaviour on his career.

Greeneyes breaks all the social norms by singing and dancing in public in front of the other men and becomes the gaze of other men. For this very reason, singing and dancing are denigrated as “bad” arts for those who live in the zenana quarters. Greeneyes songs and dance also carry undertones of sexual release. Her assertion that there is just one male while everybody else is female in relation to Lord Krishna, is yet another instance of such a denial of socio-sexual norms. Then, of course, her sexual ecstasy with the invisible flauntiest contends Maharaj Kumar’s cuckoldry.

Hence, both the women characters in this novel depict that they fight for power not just for themselves but for the males whom they want to be in power. Queen Karmavati creates a web so that her son Vikramaditya may become the apparent heir overcoming the original apparent heir, Maharaj Kumar by degrading him in the kingdom. Meanwhile, Greeneyes plays a vivid role in getting the crown for her husband even though she indulges in cuckoldry.

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