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The Vagaries of Faith: Rise of a Saint and its Human Cost in Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold*

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Abstract

This research paper aims to analyze the cost of the rise of a saint in a family in Kiran Nagarkar's novel *Cuckold*. This novel is situated in the era of the Bhakti movement and is based on the life of Bhakti mystic saint Meera Bai and her Husband. Bhakti Movement, an important part of Indian history, is characterized by an extreme love and devotion of god by a devotee who renounces everything to be one with God. This paper is an analysis of how a person, through extreme love and devotion, gradually rises from an ordinary human being to a celebrated saint and its effect on the people who are connected to them. These effects are political, social, and psychological. The protagonist, Maharaj Kumar, who is the crown prince of the great Rajput kingdom in Indian History,

becomes a microcosmic example of all the people who have made sacrifices, willingly or unwillingly, for a higher cause of the family member who has become a saint.

Keywords: Bhakti Movement, Saint Meera Bai, Lord Krishna, Cuckold, Rajput Kingdom.

Introduction:

The Bhakti movement occupies an important place in Indian history. The lives of the saints of the Bhakti movement have been studied to the full extent that extant sources allow. However, the lives of those who were closely connected to these saints – their family members, their spouses, and their children – have rarely been accorded the attention that they deserve possibly because there is a very little historical record of them. Kiran Nagarkar sets out to explore this aspect of the Bhakti movement through his fictional examination of the life of one such person. His chosen protagonist is Bhoj Raj, the husband of the famous Bhakti saint Meera Bai. Given that there is a very little historical record of Bhoj Raj, much of what Nagarkar has written is fiction, but a fiction that is informed by the history of that period. This paper is an attempt to analyze the way in which Nagarkar frames his narrative and the relationship he establishes between the success of Meera Bai (Greeneyes in the novel) and Bhoj Raj (Maharaj Kumar in the novel). An examination of the novel shows that this relationship is nearly inversely proportional, that is, the rise of Meera Bai is proportional to the fall of Bhoj Raj. Nagarkar shows that Meera Bai is indirectly, and sometimes directly,

responsible for Maharaj Kumar's decline. This is despite the fact, that Greeneyes neither wishes nor makes any attempt to undercut her husband. In fact, throughout the novel, she makes every attempt to help and comfort him. Despite this, the effect of her sainthood is disastrous for Maharaj Kumar.

Bhakti movement has a very long tradition of extreme love, devotion and attachment to a personal god by a devotee. The tradition originated in South India and it goes back to 7th and 8th century, however, it became popular in Northern India in the medieval age and flourished along with the Sufi mystical tradition of extreme devotion to God. This became very popular because it gave everyone, regardless of their religion, caste, and class, a path to connect with their god and attain salvation. Kiran Nagarkar in the historical note of his novel *Cuckold* writes that the mystical Bhakti culture "signaled a sharp break with the totalitarian brahmin control of God and religious rituals, anybody from high caste Hindus to grocers and traders to mendicants and untouchables like cobblers and potters, had access to the Almighty" (608). It was completely accredited to the relationship between the deity and the worshipper. The devotee through extreme devotion and intense love could become one with the eternal, the everlasting one true God. The seventh Narad Bhakti sutra सा न कामयमाना निरोधरूपत्वात् (Sa na kamayamana nirodharupatvat) translated as "Bhakti is not of the nature of desire; because it is of the form of renunciation" (Venkatesananda 25) characterizes the essence of Bhakti which not only requires extreme devotion and intense love but renunciation of worldly objects and relations. One of the main characters in the novel *Cuckold* embodies the spirit of Bhakti saints and exemplifies

that the "supreme love of God is completely different from the love that we have for anyone or anything in the world..." (Venkatesananda 9) and she is ready to renounce everything for the love of her God because "in the case of Bhakti... the object of love is God Who is infinite, Eternal, Perfect and Full" (Venkatesananda 9). She is a Rajput princess married to Maharaj Kumar of Mewar and gradually becomes a saint through her extreme love and devotion for Lord Krishna.

This character of the saint in the novel *Cuckold* is based on famous Indian mystic saint Meera Bai, who has a very large number of songs of love for Lord Krishna attributed to her. According to legends, she considered herself betrothed to Lord Krishna himself. She marries a Rajput prince Bhoj Raj, son of Rana Sanga and the crown prince of the Rajput kingdom of Mewar. Kiran Nagarkar, through a mix the history and legends, construct an epic tale of love, marriage, betrayal which lays bare various aspects of human interactions and behavior. The novel also captures a multitude of the social, political, and religious life of the medieval Rajput kingdom. However, this paper aims to analyze the development of a princess into a Bhakti saint who is the wife of the protagonist in Nagarkar's novel *Cuckold* and will focus on the human cost of the Bhakti movement, by an analysis of the effect that the sudden sainthood of a family member has on the rest of the family and their relationship with the saint. In particular, this paper makes an effort to analyze the toll that Meera Bai's sainthood (who is variously called 'Greeneyes', Little Saint, etc., in the novel) took on Maharaj Kumar, her husband.

Rise of a Saint and Fall of a Crown Prince

The story of *Cuckold*, as the name suggests, is a simple one that has its theme revolving around "Man. Woman. And lover" (Nagarkar 89). The protagonist, Maharaj Kumar, is portrayed as a fine statesman who is ahead of his time in state administration, planning war strategies, and a visionary who wants to break away from the chains of Rajput traditions. His character is based on Bhoj Raj, one of the most forgotten characters in the history of the Rajput kingdom of Mewar. His fame rests on being the husband of the famous saint Meera Bai and he died in a war very early in his life. Nagarkar chooses this character very carefully because of the immense possibility to fictionalize the life events of this historically ignored character. His story proceeds smoothly and with much promise until he gets married. The protagonist's wife is unfaithful to him and interestingly he has been cuckolded by none other than Lord Krishna himself. His wife, the princess of Merta, on the wedding night says that "I'm betrothed to someone else", (Nagarkar 46) she, however, doesn't disclose the name of her lover. Maharaj Kumar could not perform on his first wedding night after this revelation which lasted almost in the entire course of the novel. This failure marks the beginning of the changes that would ultimately result in the downfall of Maharaj Kumar and the rise to the status of sainthood of 'Greeneyes' (or Meera Bai) because on this night he conceives an intense passion to become the one and only lover of his wife. She not only becomes his unattainable ideal, but also the cause of his literal and metaphorical impotence. He is married for the second time to a woman "made of ordinary flesh and blood" (Nagarkar 459) not a saint like his

first wife. However, wedding nights do not suit the ill fated Maharaj Kumar because his thoughts are full of his first wife, the Little Saint. He could not perform on the first night of his marriage the second time and was aghast at his impotency. He says "I could not perform. I watched myself in horror as I shrank into myself. I was in an impotent rage" (Nagarkar 463). These two episodes of impotence act as a foreshadowing of what is to come.

The obsession of Maharaj Kumar to become the only love of his saint wife and his inability to let her go becomes the prime reason for his decline. On the other hand, we observe Greeneyes, the first wife of Maharaj Kumar, evolve from a "nautch girl" to a saint who is worshiped by the people of Mewar, almost as if her rise is predicated on the fall of Maharaj Kumar. As she goes from strength to strength, Maharaj Kumar finds himself, falling lower and lower. She writes songs of love for her beloved Blue God. She sings and dances in the palace in devotion to Lord Krishna. The crown prince is heavily criticized for his inability to control his wife's dancing and singing like a common nautch girl. His stepmother Queen Karmavati says that "I came about the nautch girl in your harem. Are you man enough to keep her under control? Or do you want me to do it for you?" (Nagarkar 9) She is angry at the crown prince who takes the matters lightly. She says "are you listening, you fool? I can see your eyes floating in sleep but there are matters here that need urgent attention. The nautch girl...She has cut off our noses. And our izzat. Our illustrious family name is mud. While Chittor burns, your nautch girl continues to dance" (Nagarkar 10). Maharaj Kumar replies "Dance? You mean bathroom

singing?" (Nagarkar 11) to pacify the anger of his step mother but the situation has already gone too far. His wife has become a thing public spectacle to which Karmavati says that–

The tawaif has graduated from mere singing to dancing. She was swirling on the first floor of the Tridev Mandir while the crowds, eunuches, princes, servants, maids, princesses and queens watched from below. A fine view from under the latticed balustrade as her skirts rose and billowed. A riveting sight even for weary eyes like mine. (Nagarkar 11)

Maharaj Kumar is aware of his wife's singing and dancing, however, he has been ignoring it since he was more concerned about finding the name of the person she is betrothed to. However, the queen's humiliating comments make him furious at his wife. He goes to her and asks "Did you actually dance? [and she replies] 'I don't remember.' [He slams his foot] into her face. It was not the hardest of blows but it knocked her down... Her lower lip was cut open, the blood had stained her blouse" (Nagarkar 11-12). Greeneyes takes his violent acts with kindness and doesn't even ask why she was beaten. He rushes out of his chamber in anger.

The crown prince is also ridiculed by his younger stepbrother Vikramaditya. When he is brought to Maharaj Kumar's court for stealing the horses of Jai Simha Balech, he refuses to recognize it as a legal entity and says–

What court are you talking about? This sad circus with three superannuated clowns and a spineless prince whose wife is a common nautanki girl? Look after your own affairs, heir-aspirant, instead of pretending to look after the business of the state. I have a suggestion for you. That wife of yours, the whole city knows, dances for free. Why not become her pimp? That way you'll have something more worthwhile to do with your time and you'll even earn some money. (Nagarkar 32)

The sainthood of the Maharaj Kumar's wife makes him a laughing stock in the entire kingdom. He is considered to be an imbecile, a weak man who can't control the behavior of his wife who dances like a nautch girl against the royal Rajput codes. However, the status of his wife as saint keeps on rising every day. She is once called a "nautch girl, slut, the royal whore, the people of Chittor had called her every dirty name in the language. When they ran out of them, they invented new ones" (Nagarkar 316). While his inability to control his wife garners ridicule for him, her devotion to Lord Krishna wins her the status of Little Saint. "Now she was called Chhoti Sant Mai" (Nagarkar 316) by the people of Mewar. Even the highly renowned ascetic Swami Rupa Goswami is awestruck by her answer when he refuses to meet her, citing that he doesn't entertain the requests of meeting a woman. Goswami refused to see the Little Saint because he "was certain that she was not just a much indulged Princess but, very likely, an impostor whose public displays of devotion and other antics like dancing and singing were nothing but a ploy to gain attention" (Nagarkar 395). The princess instead of losing her composure or expressing dismay is surprised that Rupa Goswami "was a man. For if he was, what right did he have to enter Brindaban? Did the Goswami not know that there was but one male in the universe and that was the Blue One and all others, barring none, were women?" (Nagarkar 395) which made Goswami realize "that here was an enlightened bhakta who had grasped the essence of the Lord. He agreed to see the Princess" (Nagarkar 395).

The Rajput kingdom is struck by cholera and the chief Mahant (the royal priest) advised "to initiate a month-long Sankat-

Vighna Yagnya [since the] Sankat-Vighna Yagnya is the most powerful antidote available to man against the evil spirits" (Nagarkar 317) however, the crowd of people agreed that "the Little Saint is our Yagnya. She is the fire that will cleanse this land" (Nagarkar 317). The stature of the wife of the heir apparent has risen above the Chief Mahant of the kingdom. The people believed that it is the Little Saint who can expiate them of their sins and save them from the wrath of God in the form of cholera. The Little Saint falls sick and the people started to believe that "the Little Saint had made a deal with the gods: her life in return for the lives of the people at Chittor" (Nagarkar 321). This initially started as a rumour, however, "within a couple of days it was no longer a rumour it was the absolute, certified truth. Crowds of people stood outside the main palace walls at all hours waiting for half-hourly bulletins about her health." (Nagarkar 321). Once a nautch girl, whore, slut, harlot, tawaif dancing for public spectacle, has gained the status of the savior of the city. The little saint recovered and went to Brindabani Temple where she was spotted by the people. The people of Chittor celebrated the return of their savior saint. "No Diwali, no festival, no birth, no victory in Chittor had ever been celebrated the way the Little Saint's return was." (Nagarkar 329) Maharaj Kumar loathes the sainthood of his wife. He is not like Sunder Lal from Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti* who calls his wife Devi and placed her on the high pedestal of his heart's temple. Lajwanti was one of the abducted wives during the partition who returns afterward. She is rehabilitated, however; she is no longer a wife in flesh and blood for Sunder Lal. He calls her Devi and "installed the golden image of Laju

in the temple of his heart and diligently stood guard at its doorway" (Bedi 27).

Maharaj Kumar wants his wife in flesh and blood. The rising status of his wife tires him. He says that "in a few years' time Father should hand over the command of our troops to my wife. She'll sing and dance and the people of Gujarat, Malwa, Vijayanagar and Delhi will catch the fever, disown their kings and follow her wherever she goes." (Nagarkar 341). The Little Saint rising stature pushes the crown prince towards the periphery of the Rajput Kingdom. She becomes one of the chiefly favoured persons by the Rana himself, who attends the prayer meetings conducted by the Little Saint regularly because "the pilgrim and tourist traffic in the citadel has gone up by a hundred and fifty percent... and shows no sign of abating." (Nagarkar 394). His wife becomes one of the most important political and financial assets to the kingdom. Maharaj Kumar says that the—

Caravans of people from Chanderi, Champaner, Jaipur, Delhi, Agra, Mathura, Ahmedabad, Raisen, Daulatabad, Pune, Vijayanagar, even the valley of Kashmir come by bullock and camel cart, by palanquin and on horseback. Those who can't afford fancy transport, load their bedding and a couple of utensils on their heads and walk all the way to Chittor. My wife, as the finance ministry was discovering, is not just a rare and living treasure, she is Chittor's biggest economic asset. All these years, it was Father's vision and diplomacy that tried to bring disparate geographical and historical Rajput interests together. Today the nexus between the Little Saint, the Flautist and His Majesty has bound Rajput, Bhil, Hindu, Jain and Muslim in a manner that would have been almost inconceivable a few years ago.
(Nagarkar 394)

He further says "Chittor or rather, all of Mewar is busy mythologizing her. Already there are enough stories of her purity and piety, of her conversations with the Blue God" (Nagarkar 394) to assert her rising stature as a saint. She is mostly lost in the adoration of Lord Krishna to whom she considers herself betrothed to. She emerges from a nautch girl from the zenana quarters of the palace and dominates the scene in Mewar. Maharaj Kumar is tormented by the rising popularity of his wife. Jaquelin Singh writes about this equation between the crown prince and his wife. She writes that "dominating the community life of Mewar from within the zenana... is the wife of Maharaj Kumar variously called "Greeneyes," the "Little Saint," the "Princes." Their unconsummated marriage gnaws at the core of Maharaj Kumar's tortured ego and is the reason for much of his suffering" (158). The suffering of the crown prince is coupled by the fact that he is cuckolded by none other than the Blue God himself.

Loss of a Mentor God

Maharaj Kumar had a special relationship with the Blue God. He considered Lord Krishna as his greatest mentor. He owed his special consideration towards a plan of retreat, unlike any other Rajput, to Lord Krishna. He considered Krishna to be the greatest strategist in war planning and strike back when the time is right. His victory over Gujarat army's commander Malik Ayaz is an example of using deceit to conquer a strong enemy. He shows a white flag when he realizes that he is losing a lot of Rajput soldier's life and later kills the sleeping Gujarat army at dawn. He runs away from the battlefield and

uses guerilla warfare techniques to kill Malik Ayaz. He follows his mentor Lord Krishna who fled to Dwarka "When Jarasandha, perhaps the most fearsome of all despots... threatened to attack Krishna and his people at Mathura...Finally when it was time to settle scores, he got the mighty warrior Bheem to fight Jarasandha. Jarasandha was very much on top of the situation when Krishna took the twig of a tree in his hand and clove it in two. Bheem understood the unspoken message. He got hold of Jarasandha's legs and tore him apart straight down the middle." (Nagarkar 109) Maharaj Kumar, like Lord Krishna, "had no problems putting his tail between his legs and retreating" (Nagarkar 109). He was a person who had developed a peculiar habit of questioning and reexamining whenever he was in doubt. He would weigh the advantages and disadvantages of everything. Nagarkar writes–

He talked often to Krishna, discussed the pros and cons of a situation or a problem, and set forth his arguments. It was to Krishna's acts that he referred when planning strategy and in times of crises, drew out their meaning and their implications. (Nagarkar 109)

Maharaj Kumar had a special relationship with the Blue God who had a special place in his life. The progressive and visionary ideas of the crown prince are based on his understanding of the teachings of Krishna. He is even willing to modify the teachings of his Lord guide if needed. Maharaj Kumar for his unconventional ideas on war strategies and civil administration is called "a prophet who's come before his time. An early bird waking up people just a little after the hour of midnight" (Nagarkar 307) by his father because, like Lord Krishna, he didn't conform to the codes of his times. His

wife strips him away from the mentorship of Lord Krishna by "claiming the Blue God for her own" (Nagarkar 110). Maharaj Kumar is surprised to know that his wife considers herself betrothed to none other than Lord Krishna, his mentor, and guide. He says—

Why had she not chosen Shiva, Brahma, Indra, Agni, Varuna, Vishnu or any of the other gods? How did she pick the name of the Gita-god, Shri Krishna... Did she know what the Blue God meant to him? He had never told her; what conversations had they ever had that he could have revealed the special corner Krishna had in his heart?
(Nagarkar 103)

However, she didn't do this on purpose. Maharaj Kumar, it appears, was destined to such a tragic loss because she considered herself betrothed to Lord Krishna, even before she got married to the crown prince. His wife's extreme devotion and love for Lord Krishna have earned her the status of a saint, however, it resulted in a great loss for him. Thus we see that "Greeneyes" is not only the cause of Maharaj Kumar's increasingly peripheral role in his kingdom's affairs, or his personal impotence, but she also acts as a spiritual barrier, cleaving him from his god and the source of his spiritual sustenance.

Maharaj Kumar and his wife are devotees of Lord Krishna in their own ways. The crown prince considers the Blue God as his chief mentor in civil administration and war strategic planning, but the latter considers him to be her lover God. Maharaj Kumar kills 10000 soldiers of Gujarat in cold blood using unconventional defensive strategies instead of the proven conventional aggressive Rajput codes of war because he has learned to use such methods from his teacher Lord

Krishna. He is a political devotee or *Bhakt* of his mentor God. He says–

Deception, diplomacy, intrigue, prestidigitation, machination, all these and many small and great things, the Flautist had taught me, were the tricks of a king's dharma and trade. But where had I inherited this wanton cruelty from? I remembered then how the great warrior Arjun and his mentor, the Flautist – mine too till a few years ago – had burnt the whole of the Khandava forest and all its inhabitants without cause or provocation. (Nagarkar 232-233)

The victory over Gujarat's army following the political teachings of Lord Krishna brings much shame to Maharaj Kumar because using deceitful measures to trap the soldier's into a quagmire and killing them stands at loggerheads with the Rajput codes. The crown prince loathed the Rajput codes which results in the loss of life unnecessarily and non-progressive, and hence, he was ready to face the consequences. He is sent to Kumbhalgarh and released from his duties as a crown prince. On the other hand, we have his wife who is a spiritual devotee or *Bhakt* of Lord Krishna. Unlike Maharaj Kumar, she rises to become "Chhoti Sant Mai" (Nagarkar 316) and continues to dominate the cultural and religious scene of Mewar, however, Maharaj Kumar loses his place.

A Faustian Bargain: The Loss of Reason

Maharaj Kumar is affected by the sainthood of his wife at multiple levels. He loses his political authority. He can't accept any other women in his life because of the extreme passion for his first wife. He is a person who is logical and takes rational decisions by measuring the pros and cons of every

situation before reaching a conclusion. However, in his intense passion to become the only lover of his wife, he loses his ability to reason. He strikes a 'Faustian bargain' with a shaman woman, Bhootani Mata, to kill his wife if he can't get her. Nagarkar writes–

Bhootani Mata was not the kind of person he would have turned to, ever. But 'ever' is a flexible and finite word. Whether he knew it or not, he had crossed the shifting line that separates the sane from the unbalanced. Anything, he was willing to do anything, to retrieve his wife from the forces that had robbed her. (Nagarkar 149)

He loses his sane mental balance and wants his wife back at all cost. He wants Bhootani Mata to exorcise her, however, she advises him to ignore his wife and look for other women. She says that "there are others. Why don't you make it with them? You can marry again. Ignore her till she dies" (Nagarkar 151). Maharaj Kumar can't come to terms with the fact that his wife has been stolen by the Blue God and he has been cuckolded by none other than Lord Krishna. He decides to cuckold the cuckold. He chooses a course of action which goes beyond the logic and sanity we expect from him. Maharaj Kumar tries "to wrest Krishna from his wife's grasp, and failing in that, even goes so far at one point as to impersonate the god" (Dardess & Rosenthal 318) by covering himself in blue paint, playing flute, and dressing like the blue God. He went to the chamber of his wife who welcomes him calling "'Krishna Kanhaiyya, Krishna Kanhaiyya'" (Nagarkar, *Cuckold* 565) because she believed that her lover God has come to her in flesh and blood. Maharaj Kumar plays flute like Krishna, plays with 'Greeneyes' by exchanging dress with her and does all sorts of things desired by his wife. He considers it to be a

game and believes that his wife is aware about the reality of these love games. But his hopes are shattered when he realized that–

*She didn't love him, he didn't figure in her night life. The person she held in her arms, talked to, played with and found new ways to love was not him but her lover and god.
(Nagarkar, Cuckold 566)*

He didn't cuckold the Blue God, but deceived himself. We meet a man who has lost everything he could have been just because of the passion he had for his wife.

Conclusion

The choice of the writer to explore the life of the husband of the princess of Merta gives birth to a very interesting read where we are presented with an ignored character of Rajput's history. The legend of Meera Bai, who is a very famous Bhakti saint and has a large number of songs of Krishna bhakti attributed to her. On the other hand, we have Bhoj Raj, whose only fame rests upon being the husband of the Saint. Nagarkar explores the trajectory of the life of his unnamed protagonist Maharaj Kumar and presents him as a fine statesman and a man of promising political future because he is a visionary way ahead of his times. However, his wife variously called as 'Princess', 'Greeneyes', Little Saint, is a timid woman who likes to keep herself to the zenana quarters. She sings and writes songs of love and devotion for Lord Krishna. The reader traverses through a very interesting narrative where a crown prince's wife considers herself betrothed to Lord Krishna. And in her extreme love and devotion to her lover God, she sings and dances in the palace and becomes a

public spectacle for which she is termed as a nautch girl. Gradually, she rises to the stature of a saint and the price of her rise is paid by her crown prince husband.

In Nagarkar's telling, Maharaj Kumar does not simply suffer politically, he suffers emotionally, and he, a man of high intellect, turns almost psychotic as an effect of his wife's emotional infidelity. He finds himself cut off spiritually, and he resents the fact that she, even without trying, achieves greater political influence than him, the crown prince. The fact that this happens despite her best efforts to be a good wife, is a matter of additional shame to him. She responds with love even to his violence depriving him of any just cause for his anger and frustration with her. One must also note that it is not just Maharaj Kumar who is affected. Greeneyes is a destabilizing force in the entire royal household. One wonders whether Nagarkar was making a larger point here. His Meera Bai is saintly in every respect and yet the effect that she has cannot be called entirely benign. For her husband, she was a cataclysmic force of destruction. Were we to similarly examine the lives of other relatives or close friends of other saints, what would we find? Nagarkar seems to suggest that we may well find abandoned wives and neglected children rendered all the more bitter because their rights have been sacrificed on the altar of a higher cause. Whether such a discovery, were it to be made, would tarnish the image of the saint, is a point we would never really know, but it does add another layer of understanding to the complex lives that they led, and the sacrifices that had to be made, whether willingly or unwillingly, not just by them, but by those who found themselves, as it were, so close to the lamp, that they were left in the dark.

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