

**TREATMENT OF RELIGION IN KIRAN NAGARKAR'S
RAVAN AND EDDIE**

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Abstract

Religion is the driving force in the novel Ravan and Eddie by Kiran Nagarkar. From the characterisation to the comic narration the religion plays very important part. The choice of two characters Maratha Hindu as Ravan Pawar and Roman Catholic as Eddie Coutinho are the significant protagonists to elaborate communal inclination and orthodox background. Two school students from common background, from two different religions is the best contrast for religious setting. Generally thoughts about religion are expressed through psyche of characters, how do they think at particular situation is described in lofty narration by author. There is use of literary devices by Nagarkar like contrast, comparison, satire and hyperbole to exemplify observations and critical comments on religions. Despite of majority-minority discrimination writer has presented two different religious approaches at the setting of a Mazgaon chawl in metro city like Mumbai.

Key Words: *religious organizations, parental nomenclature, psychological symmetry, religious ethics, blasphemy, confession, contradictory characters*

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The present novel is the first part of trilogy *Ravan and Eddie* published in 1995. It depicts the childhood and student phase of these two characters. It traces the lives of two boys Ravan Pawar is a Maratha, Hindu boy and Eddie Coutinho, is a Christian, Catholic boy. They live with their family in the Central Works Department chawl in Mumbai. It is a study of strange world of Mazgaon chawl which is presented through the young eyes of the two protagonists. They do their business, devoid of expectation and without the fear of any depression and disappointment. The universe of CWD chawl is collage of different characters. The two protagonists deal with their destinies every day and who offer us a glimpse of lower middle-class in Mumbai. It is a study of the compartmentalized existence of a Marathi speaking Hindu family and Goan immigrant Christian family. They live together in a crowded, congested place at Mazgaon chawl No.17 in Mumbai. Pawar family lives on the fourth floor including Shankar, Parvati and Ram later renamed as Ravan. Coutinho family lives on the third floor including Victor, Violet, Peita. Third floor is occupied exclusively by the Catholics. There are so many religious conflicts between these two communities. Narrator has treated two different cultures living together in Mazgaon Chawl. Nagarkar has used different forms to criticise these two religions. He satirises rituals, criticises congregations and exemplifies emotional weaknesses of the religious followers. Thus the novel represents how innocent minds are enforced by their communities to bind with their own religion. There is also criticism of religious organizations which provoke violent enmity towards other religions.

Ravan Pawar: The Maratha Hindu

Ravan Shankarrao Pawar is the first protagonist in the novel. He is represented as common student in Hindu community. His parents name are Shankar resembles Lord

Mahadeva and mother Parvati resembles goddess Parvati the wife of Lord Mahadeva. Thus even from the parental nomenclature Ravan is truly depicted as Hindu orthodox in name and is belonging to the common people who struggle to thrive in the city like Mumbai. His attachment with R.S.S. a Hindu organisation plays very important part in this novel. Nagarkar has presented the psyche of normal, general students who could not understand the religion itself, are forced to fight for religion. Note the common housewives approach; what Parvati thinks about Ravan's joining R.S.S.,

Parvati had no idea of the political sympathies of the Sabha and it certainly wasn't Ravan's idea to save India from non-Hindus. Parvati's objectives were pragmatic. Keep the boy out of her hair and out of trouble. (Nagarkar, 17)

Thus like common mother she wants to be isolated from her son. She is not able to understand the great cause about what organisations talk. The same psychology might be experienced by majority of mothers in India. This generalisation in form of representative character like Parvati is very important. It represents real approach of commoners towards complex etiquettes of religious organisations. Provoking speeches, emotional appeal, boast of nationality and heavenly thoughts are the core parts of any religious preaching, especially of those who are political organisations. Lele Guruji appeals to the Sabha members;

Every day you reiterate your loyalty to our cause. You swear that you have faith in our religion. But faith is a torch. Unless you light torches in the hearts and souls of others, our flame will waste and die. (Nagarkar, 19)

Such speeches are generally misunderstood by school students. How could be they aware about cause, devotion and faith like things so early? Such method is being used to

provoke the audience. This is the method which Nagarkar criticises through the character of Lele Guruji.

Teenager like Ravan could not understand the great cause and also violent appeals mentioned by Lele Guruji. Such dilemma is depicted in his own thoughts. After listening provocative speech by Lele Guruji, Ravan misunderstood the appeal, '*Our Sabha desperately needs new blood. (Nagarkar, 19).*' He confused about bloodthirstiness of Sabha. Later on he is revealed by the great cause:

Hinduism was an ocean of blood but there was a hole at the bottom, so you had to keep filling it. It is your bounden duty. It is your dharma to enroll at least one new member in the next ten days. Anyone who does so will get a magnificent calendar with a picture of the goddess Bhavani presenting her sword to his royal highness Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. (Nagarkar, 20)

The great people like Shivaji Maharaj purposefully used by religious organisations for their own agenda. Whatever they do, they think as cause for nation. Thus everybody can easily attract towards them after such emotional appeal.

Eddie Coutinho: The Roman Catholic

Eddie the second major character in the novel represents for Roman Catholic religion. Actually as there is setting of Mumbai; Christianity is also very significant religion. Nagarkar has given some historical anecdotes about how some parts of Mumbai were converted into Christianity by the contemporary rulers. He also has added how foreigners entered in Mumbai and spread the Christian religion. As far as history is concerned the record is correct. The character Eddie is having same guts like that Ravan. There is only religious difference. Both these characters are confused about higher preaching of their religion. It is quoted by Rakhshanda Jalil in her review, '*Ravan and Eddie had had more than their quota of failures, stumbling through everything they had*' (Jalil). The major difference is

done by Eddie's attachment with Hindu organisation like R.S.S. His sudden entry into R.S.S. cheers Lele Guruji. He introduces him,

Eddie Coutinho is our prodigal son. How many centuries have passed since he and his people were converted and left us? I have lost count. But he is back amongst his own and we rejoice at the return of our prodigal. (Nagarkar, 33)

Nagarkar clearly pointed out the personal victory of Lele Guruji over the other religion. His excitement after entry of Eddie is notable. At the same time Lele Guruji punished Ravan for late entry in Sabha. Eddie like all school children was just following religion in the way of to follow some traditions. Note Eddie's strange demand through his prayer:

I'll go to Mahim Church this Wednesday and the next eight Wednesdays and lay a wax brain at Mother Mary's feet. No he has enough brains. Its application he lacks. I'll make a table of wax with a book on it. Do not disappoint me, Lord. (Nagarkar, 54)

This is what students life interprets about the religion. A *wax brain* and a *wax table* these two words resemble lexical as well as psychological symmetry of strangeness in the present statement. His attraction towards Hindu religion is observed as;

He would have been surprised if you had told him that its inspiration was Hinduism .He would have been completely befuddled if you had added that while Muslims were suspect and unwanted in the Sabha's paradigm of India, minorities like Christians and Parsees were welcome so long as they subscribed to Hindu pr-eminence. Like most other Catholics, he would have found it enlightening to learn that the Sabha was meant to be a group dedicated to the service of the nation .(Nagarkar,95)

In the above paragraph we find how nationality is bound to religion by some orthodox groups. It comments on omission of Muslims but acceptance of Christians on the basis of nationality which they themselves evaluate. It is the nature of provoking groups in all religions to unite against common hatred and then hate each other.

When Eddie is restricted to be appear for confession there is again dilemma in his mind. Great decorated statues and emotional appeal do not satisfy his quest for truth, when he is preached about the wounds suffered by Jesus Christ; he contemplates:

For Hundreds of years they had left the Son of God hanging on the cross and now Father D'Souza had the temerity to suggest that he was responsible for Jesus' sufferings. In a fit of temper, Eddie asked, 'then why don't you bring him down and bandage his wounds...?'(Nagarkar, 246)

When he speaks out last line, priests themselves confused about what to answer. The question was much practical than religious ethics. As per their own rule they enlisted the same as blasphemy and order him for confession. Meaninglessness of religious images is elaborated through the psyche of Eddie and the question he asked to the priests.

There is another approach towards Christian religion which aims to Peace but sometime enjoys suffering and pain as necessary elements for salvation. Eddie is ordered once again for confession. The queue itself is the part of suffering;

The sinners stood in two rows. There was no knowing which line would end up at Father Agnello's booth. Seven in one queue, nine in the other. Eddie opted to start his penance before confession. Longer he waited, the longer he would suffer. And if he suffered, Jesus might just possibly take pity on him, and instead of Father Agnello, he could relate his litany of sins to Father Constatine .He joined the longer queue. (Nagarkar, 255)

Note the use of words *sinner* and *longer queue*. These resembles some long awaited faith waiting for suffering. Nagarkar comments on how religions enjoy emotional sufferings. Real devotee accepts this as penance and blindly follows the same.

Thus Eddie is mute observer of his religion. Same is about Ravan. Both could not understand the holy great cause behind the religion. Even they follow it as only part of tradition. They don't have any individual identity beyond religion. The same feeling is depicted by Nagarkar through these characters. It signifies, '*while progressivism in form of social realism is still vivid among creative writers, the overall feeling of loss and the resulting effort to recover identity permeates contemporary literature.*' (Hinduism). So for them religion is only playground where they have to play some unwanted game despite their own willingness.

Religion: The Driving Force

After introducing two major protagonists with major references it is easy to get clear idea of religion through characterisation. The religion is the main principle of plot of this novel. It is centralised for the purpose of criticism, humour, narration and contrast. It is stated by Singh about Modern Indian English novel that,

'The Indian English novelists, right from the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, started focusing their attention largely on contemporary problems. Motivated by socio-cultural and political awareness and changed historical situation, they began to conceive the values all around the state and presenting that life and society realistically in their fictional world. (Singh)'

The present novel is the result of such contemporary atmosphere experienced by Nagarkar himself in Mumbai.

Ravan and Eddie both are contradictory characters to each other. Nagarkar explores this contrast through the character Father D'Souza who persuades Eddie not to follow R.S.S.;

And you believe them? Father D'Souza's wrath now knew no bounds. He looked at Violet. It was as if he needed her to corroborate and seal Eddie's guilt. 'Or are you going to believe me and your mother? And Jesus our Saviour who gave his life to save sinners like you? (Nagarkar, 135)

The question is asked on which faith Eddie rely on. The next statement is extra elaboration of what Christianity is having of which Hinduism is lacking. In such manner things observed in Christianity. Another religious contrast among people is observed during the funeral of Victor -the father of Eddie;

The Hindu Boys and girls and their parents from the neighbouring chawls gazed in wonder at the indescribable beauty of a catholic funeral. 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. (Nagarkar, 8)

It explores the death as festival misunderstood by Hindu viewers. This is very true description of religious approach by Nagarkar. He points out every minute details of contrast between these two religions. In the long digression Chapter 'A Meditation on Neighbours', Nagarkar comments the healthy comparison between inhabitants of Mazgaon Chawl 17;

Fortunately it did not occur to members of either community to wonder whether their faith, culture and mores were superior. They took it for granted. It was a happy coincidence that both sides shared the conviction that they were chosen people. It did not

cross the minds of most Hindus. That barring exceptions, they were responsible for Catholicism in India the outcasts of Hinduism, the untouchables, who feel beyond the pale of the caste-system, had ample reason to convert to Catholicism. The caste -Hindus, as a matter of fact, left them no choice. As sub-humans they were little better than slaves. (Nagarkar, 178)

Thus the word *chosen people* refer not only for Christian community but for Hindus too who are living with them. It comments on healthy neighborhood. Nagarkar uses satire as weapon to criticise religions. His comments on R.S.S. as Hindu organisation and its satire through punning words are very humorous and significant part of the novel. The psychological condition of Eddie during the entry of sacrament is notable for the use of satire;

Whenever Eddie went for the sacrament of the communion he gagged, his intestines churned and he choked. He could never get over it. The Romans had killed Jesus almost two thousand years ago, that's twenty times hundred, and they were still drinking his blood and eating his body and forcing him to do the same. (Nagarkar, 118)

The last statement is very factual. Thus Nagarkar's satire is literary as well as reasonable. He uses true reason and then magnifies that through satirical comment on the fact. In such a way he has changed the source of satire. The same element is used through the tales of Lord Krishna read by Eddie:

The Child Krishna- standing on an unsteady pile of vessels and stealing curds from a clay pot hanging from the rafters on the ceiling. Krishna at eight years of age smiling mischievously from the branches of tree while maidens bathing in the lake below pleaded with him to return their clothes. The same child Krishna holding up Mount Govardhan on the tip of his finger and protecting his people from the deluge. Shri

Krishna invisibly frustrating Dushyasan's attempt to disrobe Draupadi in the presence of the august elders in Dhritrashtra's court. (Nagarkar, 115)

There is plain story of Krishna's childhood prodigal works. But the interpretation of Christian boy and the narration of that in sarcastic manner are very noteworthy. Hindu mind is aware about stories of Krishna but the problem lies with Eddie to understand such stories despite any religious context. There is also doubt in the mind of Eddie about Krishna who killed Shishupal after completion of quota of hundred sins. He asks himself, 'besides who has counted?'

The religion in this novel is existing element on priority. It exemplifies the humour, narration and characterisation in the novel. Ravan and Eddie are only mouthpieces of their respective communities. Actually they themselves like common people are victims suppressed under orthodoxy and order of community. Sometimes they try to shift. Later they understood that this is beyond shifting. Such inborn inevitability of individual to the organisation like religion is effectively described in this novel.

Conclusion:

Though the religion is treated as driving force in the main plot of the novel, it is observed that Hindu religion is neither treated as majority nor Christian as minority. On the other hand both religions are centralised in the borders of Mazgaon Chawl-17 to have focus on two main protagonists in the novel. In narration as well as for criticism both religions are treated with equal influence. That's why it is easy to say that to the narrator's side the novel is completely secular. Characters are orthodox; bound to their own community and tradition. They are confused in their religious atmosphere. Thus the novel *Ravan and Eddie* is the best representation of unity of facts although having diversity of thoughts.

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