

BHAKTI, BETRAYAL, AND THE BURDEN OF SANCTITY IN KIRAN NAGARKAR'S CUCKOLD

Dr. Gajanand Nayak

Assistant Professor of English

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar Govt. College Baloda

Dist: Mahasamund, Chhattisgarh, 493558

Abstract:

Kiran Nagarkar's Cuckold reimagines the life of Bhakti saint Meerabai through an unconventional lens, offering a provocative reinterpretation of her spiritual journey and its repercussions on those around her. Set in 16th-century Mewar during the Bhakti movement, the novel shifts the narrative focus from Meerabai to her husband, Maharaj Kumar, portraying his psychological, emotional, and political turmoil as the consort of a woman whose devotion to Lord Krishna eclipses all worldly ties. This paper critically examines the portrayal of Meerabai not as a deified saint, but as a complex woman whose spiritual rise exacts a significant cost on her immediate relations. Through Maharaj Kumar's perspective, the novel becomes a meditation on love, masculinity, powerlessness, and the collateral damage of sainthood. By analyzing the political, social, and psychological dimensions of Meerabai's devotion and the crown prince's evolving sense of identity and emasculation, this paper argues that *Cuckold* challenges traditional hagiographies and invites readers to reconsider the human impact of spiritual transcendence. The study also explores how Nagarkar blends history and fiction to question sanctity, agency, and the price of idealism in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Meerabai, Kiran Nagarkar, Cuckold, Bhakti Movement, Patriarchy, Gender dynamics, Psychological conflict, Sainthood and sacrifice

Introduction

The Bhakti movement, which began in the 6th century CE, evolved into a major religious and social movement in India, uniting people across castes and sects through personal devotion to a chosen deity. In Rajasthan, Meerabai emerged as one of the most revered female Bhakts, known for her unwavering devotion to Lord Krishna. Her poetry, such as *I Know Only Krisna*, expressed deep spiritual longing and subverted the patriarchal norms of her time. In an era when women were considered spiritually inferior and socially subordinate, Meerabai rejected traditional roles—refusing to commit sati and declaring Krishna her eternal husband. Celebrated as a saint, she remains a symbol of spiritual rebellion, poetic expression, and feminine devotion in Indian cultural memory. 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)

***Cuckold* and its unique perspective**

Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* (1997) is a seminal historical novel set in 16th-century Mewar, following the life of Maharaj Kumar, a fictionalized version of Prince Bhoj Raj, husband of the mystic saint Meerabai. Unlike traditional hagiographies, the novel offers a bold, humanized perspective through the lens of a husband overshadowed by his wife's spiritual devotion. Written in English, *Cuckold* reflects Nagarkar's hallmark narrative style—shifting perspectives, psychological depth, and dynamic use of language. His layered storytelling blends history and fiction, offering insights into love, power, and personal identity. Nagarkar's use of digressions, idiomatic dialogue, and internal monologue transforms the novel into a deeply introspective and richly textured exploration of masculinity and spiritual alienation in a patriarchal society.

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. (Nagarkar 8)

Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* offers a radical reimagining of Meerabai, not as a divine saint, but as a distant wife whose unwavering devotion to Lord Krishna deeply affects her husband, Maharaj Kumar. While traditional portrayals celebrate her spiritual purity, Nagarkar focuses on the psychological and emotional consequences of her sanctity on those around her. This paper explores how *Cuckold* presents Bhakti as both spiritual liberation and emotional betrayal, highlighting the personal and political burdens borne by individuals close to a saint. It interrogates how devotion, when idealized, can disrupt personal relationships, challenge masculine identity, and expose the vulnerabilities within patriarchal and royal frameworks, ultimately questioning the cost of sainthood in a socially stratified world. 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)

In *Cuckold*, Kiran Nagarkar subverts the traditional hagiographic image of Meerabai by portraying her sainthood as a source of emotional betrayal and psychological conflict, particularly for her husband, Maharaj Kumar; through this lens, the novel explores how extreme spiritual devotion—when idealized—can destabilize personal relationships, undermine masculine identity, and expose the hidden costs of sanctity within patriarchal and political structures of 16th-century India.

Overview of Meerabai's historical and cultural significance

Meerabai, a 16th-century Rajput princess from Merta, Rajasthan, is one of the most revered female saints of the Bhakti movement. Deeply devoted to

Lord Krishna from childhood, she considered him her eternal spouse and refused to conform to societal or marital expectations. Married unwillingly to Bhojraj, the crown prince of Mewar, Meerabai defied royal customs by rejecting the consummation of her marriage and openly practicing her spiritual devotion. Renouncing palace life, she wandered freely, singing devotional songs and composing poetry that expressed her profound love for Krishna. Her life challenged the gender norms of her time, making her a symbol of spiritual rebellion, feminine autonomy, and divine love. Her legendary disappearance into the sanctum of Krishna's temple in Dwarka further elevated her to mystical status. While widely celebrated, Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* presents a nuanced view, showing how Meerabai's sanctity deeply impacts her husband, revealing the personal costs of spiritual transcendence. 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).

The Bhakti movement: devotion, renunciation, and gender subversion

The Bhakti movement, which spread across India between the 7th and 17th centuries, was a spiritual reform that emphasized personal devotion over ritual practices and caste distinctions. It encouraged a direct relationship with God, making spirituality more accessible to all, regardless of caste or gender. While rooted in devotion and renunciation, the movement also became a space where women could challenge patriarchal norms. Women saint-poets like Meerabai, Akkamahadevi, and Bahinabai used devotional poetry to express not only their deep love for the divine but also their rejection of societal expectations. By choosing spiritual devotion over domestic roles, they subverted traditional gender roles and asserted their autonomy, making the Bhakti movement a subtle but significant form of gender resistance.

Common media/literary portrayals vs. Nagarkar's fictional approach

Meerabai is traditionally portrayed in literature, folklore, and media as a divine, selfless saint whose unwavering devotion to Lord Krishna elevates her above worldly attachments. These hagiographic narratives often idealize her as a symbol of purity, spiritual strength, and sacrifice, rarely questioning the human consequences of her sanctity. In contrast, Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* offers a radical departure from these portrayals by presenting Meerabai through the eyes of her neglected husband, Maharaj Kumar. Rather than glorifying her devotion, Nagarkar humanizes her, highlighting how her spiritual obsession causes emotional alienation and personal suffering for those around her. This fictional approach complicates her image, inviting readers to question the cost of sainthood and explore its psychological and relational consequences. Maharaj Kumar's 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)

Meerabai as a silent but central figure

In *Cuckold*, Kiran Nagarkar presents Meerabai not as the central narrator, but as a silent yet powerful presence who shapes the emotional and psychological world of Maharaj Kumar. Though never directly named as "Meerabai" in the novel, her identity is unmistakable to Indian readers called "Greeneyes" by her husband and "Little Saint" by the people, she remains elusive, distant, and enigmatic. Nagarkar challenges the traditional hagiographic image of Meerabai by portraying her as a woman full of contradictions—both saintly and worldly. Unlike the commonly depicted ektara-holding ascetic in white, this Meera is a bold Rajput woman who enjoys dressing beautifully, manages the zenana with authority, and can hunt with precision. Her choices and devotion to Krishna are shown not only as

acts of faith but also as decisions that deeply impact those around her—particularly her husband. Through this portrayal, Nagarkar makes Meera both real and mythic, both revered and unknowable. She remains emotionally distant, rarely offering insight into her inner world, yet she dominates the narrative by her absence, silence, and the suffering she causes. *Cuckold* thus reframes Meerabai as a complex, silent force—central to the story, yet always just beyond reach, complicating our understanding of sainthood and sacrifice. 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).

Summarize key arguments

Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* offers a critical reinterpretation of the legendary Bhakti saint Meera, shifting the perspective to her husband, the fictional Maharaj Kumar. Through this inversion, the novel explores the complex interplay of faith, betrayal, and social pressures. 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, heiraspirant, 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)

Bhakti and its destructive consequences

The novel explores the corrosive human cost of extreme spiritual devotion when it overshadows human relationships.

The personal toll: Maharaj Kumar is tormented by his wife, Meera (referred to as "Greeneyes"), who refuses to consummate their marriage, believing herself to be wed to Lord Krishna. Her absolute and unyielding devotion to a deity makes his position in the marriage and in his kingdom untenable.

He was my best companion, my close friend and preceptor. This Blue god with the flute and the peacock feather wedged in the band around his head. (Nagarkar 102)

Renunciation vs. duty: While the Bhakti movement promoted spiritual liberation, Nagarkar shows how Meera's complete renunciation of worldly ties, including her royal duties as a wife and queen, is a destructive force within her own family.

The hollow cost of sainthood: Meera's rise to become "Chhoti Sant Mai" (little saint mother) parallels Maharaj Kumar's descent into loneliness and political irrelevance. Her sainthood is an inverse mirror of his profound loss. The novel suggests that the hagiographic image of a saint often obscures the human suffering of those left behind.

Betrayal on multiple levels

Maharaj Kumar experiences different kinds of betrayal that erode his identity and purpose.

Marital and divine betrayal: The most potent betrayal is Meera's. By forgoing her vows for a divine union, she effectively cuckolds her husband with a god. This makes his humiliation uniquely painful, as he cannot challenge or confront his "rival," Lord Krishna.

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? (Nagarkar 161)

Political betrayal: Maharaj Kumar also faces betrayal in the political arena. Surrounded by plotting relatives and rivals who conspire against him, he finds the royal court to be a treacherous place. This political deceit mirrors the personal betrayal he endures at home.

Betrayal of Rajput honor: The crown prince's pragmatic and modern military tactics are seen as a betrayal of traditional Rajput codes of honor. While his actions save lives, they earn him the contempt of his people, who value heroic—and often foolish—valor over strategy.

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. (Nagarkar 253)

The burden of sanctity

The novel scrutinizes the weight of holiness and how society's reverence for a saint can paradoxically be dehumanizing.

Sanctity as a destabilizing force: Meera's sanctity is not benign. Her divine focus destabilizes the entire royal household, leaving Maharaj Kumar isolated and helpless. Those in proximity to a saint can find themselves "in the dark," their own needs and rights sacrificed for a "higher cause".

The silencing of history: Nagarkar highlights how historical narratives and legends often omit the struggles of those close to religious icons. Maharaj Kumar's story is one of a forgotten historical figure whose life is defined by his saintly wife, forcing readers to question their assumptions about accepted legends.

Humanity vs. divinity: The book argues that extreme divinity—whether pursued by a saint or imposed upon a person by society—can come at the expense of one's humanity. While Meera rises as a spiritual icon, she emotionally destroys her husband, raising uncomfortable questions about the nature of true devotion.

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. (Nagarkar 253)

Reimagining the mystic as a flawed human in *The Arsonist*

Nagarkar's critique of idealized sainthood continues in *The Arsonist*, which offers a secular and irreverent reimagining of the 15th-century mystic poet Kabir. Instead of the traditional figure of purity and holiness, Nagarkar's Kabir is a worldly character with human desires.

Mockery of religious dogma: The novel's Kabir enjoys dissecting and mocking religious doctrines for his followers, adopting a highly skeptical view of a personal god. This portrayal demystifies the figure of the saint and challenges blind devotion, favoring a more questioning and rational approach to faith.

Focus on human flaws: Rather than a paragon of purity, Nagarkar's Kabir is presented as a lover of pleasure, including sexual pleasure. By portraying the saint with such worldly appetites, Nagarkar demonstrates that human flaws and spiritual insights can coexist, subverting the traditional, sanitized image of a holy figure.

A critical re-engagement with mythology and tradition

Across his works, Nagarkar's deconstruction of sainthood is part of a larger, critical re-examination of Indian myths and traditions.

Questioning authority: Nagarkar was known as a "questioning writer and citizen" guided by reason, and this stance extends to his literary treatment of religious figures. He uses his narratives to prompt readers to reflect on ethical and social matters, refusing to accept religious narratives at face value.

Exposing hypocrisy: By focusing on the neglected details and human complexities within well-known religious stories, Nagarkar's work becomes an uncompromising stand against hypocrisy and authority. He reminds his readers to look beyond the myth and consider the very real human and social toll that is often hidden.

Final thoughts on the human cost of spiritual transcendence

Kiran Nagarkar's novels consistently challenge idealized notions of sainthood by examining the destructive human cost of spiritual

transcendence. Rather than portraying saints as benign figures, he explores how their single-minded devotion can cause profound psychological, social, and emotional harm to those closest to them. His work forces readers to question whether a saint's divine quest is worth the mortal pain it inflicts.

Nagarkar's exploration of this theme is most pronounced in his 1997 novel *Cuckold*, which reframes the story of the mystic saint Meera Bai from the perspective of her husband, Maharaj Kumar. A similar dynamic appears in his 2006 novel, *God's Little Soldier*, with a modern extremist.

The personal toll in *Cuckold*

Cuckold focuses on the intense and disproportionate human cost of spiritual devotion, especially for Maharaj Kumar, who is married to a character based on Meera Bai.

Destruction of the family: As his wife, known in the novel as "Greeneyes," descends into ecstatic devotion to Lord Krishna, the royal household is destabilized. Her conduct, perceived as un-queenly by the court, becomes a public spectacle that humiliates Maharaj Kumar and his family.

Psychological and political ruin: Maharaj Kumar, a capable crown prince, is rendered a laughingstock and metaphorically impotent by his wife's spiritual "betrayal". His public reputation erodes as his wife's status as a saint rises, creating an inverse relationship between her fame and his decline.

Loss of spiritual foundation: Greeneyes's claim over Krishna as her lover effectively steals Maharaj Kumar's own mentor and guide. This leaves him spiritually bereft and pushes him towards irrational, uncharacteristic acts, such as painting himself blue to try and win her back.

Forced sacrifices: Nagarkar suggests that for every "saint," there are abandoned partners, neglected children, and bitter relatives whose human rights and needs were sacrificed on the altar of a "higher cause".

Relevance in contemporary literary and cultural studies

Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* (1997) remains deeply relevant in contemporary literary and cultural studies for its postmodern subversion of history, its radical re-examination of masculinity, and its potent critique of nationalism and patriarchy. By humanizing the historical footnote of Mirabai's husband, Maharaj Kumar, Nagarkar provides a nuanced perspective that interrogates deeply held assumptions about power, gender, and myth in South Asian history.

Postmodernism and the dismantling of myth

Cuckold employs several postmodern techniques to challenge historical and literary conventions:

Intertextuality and pastiche: Nagarkar sets his historical novel against the myth of the 16th-century Bhakti saint, Mirabai, creating a pastiche that fuses historical detail with contemporary sensibilities. He retells a well-known story from the perspective of a marginalized figure, inviting readers to question dominant narratives.

Metafiction and historical skepticism: The novel is presented as the Maharaj Kumar's diary, a fictional document that questions the stability and authority of historical texts. Nagarkar encourages readers to become active participants, to question their own internalized assumptions about history and legend.

Defamiliarization of myth: By portraying Mirabai not as a saint but as a strong, calculating woman with a spiritual calling, the novel defamiliarizes her popular hagiographical image. This provides a more robust and complex picture of a legendary figure and challenges the reduction of women to sanctified, one-dimensional icons.

A radical interrogation of masculinity

The novel's most significant contribution is its examination of masculinity and its anxieties, which resonates strongly with modern discussions of gender:

The flawed male hero: The narrator, Maharaj Kumar, is a far cry from the idealized Rajput hero. He is introspective, emotional, and insecure, particularly concerning his wife's devotion to a god rather than him. His struggles expose the psychological pressure and performance of masculinity in a deeply patriarchal, militaristic society.

Rejection of hegemonic masculinity: Through the Maharaj Kumar's internal conflict, Nagarkar condemns the patriarchal obsession with heroic ideals like valor and honor. The Maharaj Kumar actively rejects these feudal norms, embracing strategies and ideals considered unethical by his contemporaries.

Queer studies and gender fluidity: The novel's gender dynamics, where the wife is in love with a god and the husband with his wife, can be read through a queer lens. The "cuckold" is not just betrayed by his wife, but also by his favorite god, Krishna, blurring conventional lines of desire and relationships.

Critiques of nationalism and historical revisionism

The novel's exploration of history, myth, and identity provides a powerful postcolonial critique that remains urgent today:

Questioning national narratives: By deconstructing the heroic myths of the Rajput past, Nagarkar implicitly critiques nationalist narratives that use simplified history to forge a singular, often aggressive, national identity. He shows that history is complex, contested, and constructed, rather than a fixed, glorious past.

Personal versus political: While set in a period of intense palace intrigue and war, the novel shifts focus away from grand political events toward the intensely personal and psychological dramas of its characters. This highlights how the personal is inseparable from the political and demonstrates how ideological conflicts play out in intimate spaces.

Cross-temporal connection: By using modern language and sensibilities to portray a 16th-century court, Nagarkar creates a bridge between the past and present, enriching the narrative and prompting readers to see contemporary echoes in historical events.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *Cuckold* is more than a historical novel; it is a timeless literary and cultural intervention. By using a historical setting to explore postmodern and postcolonial themes, Nagarkar offers a masterclass in challenging patriarchal norms, destabilizing grand historical narratives, and exploring the complexities of human identity and desire. The novel's irreverent spirit and intellectual depth ensure its continued relevance in contemporary cultural discourse.

How long will you nurse this enmity? How long will you fight this personal war? And to what purpose? Do you not know that you and I are one? My flute and song are on your lips. We love the same woman: Why, you fool, no power on earth can separate or divide us. (Nagarkar 602)

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