



# Epitome : International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN : 2395-6968

## PORTRAYAL OF A CITY: MUMBAI CULTURE IN KIRAN NAGARKAR'S *RAWAN AND EDDIE AND THE EXTRAS*



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### ABSTRACT

*Kiran Nagarkar mixes every possible element of human existence and man's intense affinity with life and its material pleasures. Nagarkar has focused on themes like luck, destiny, self-preservation, hope and personal determination to be experienced in a metro city like Mumbai. These themes are also central to the fictional and nonfictional portrayals of Mumbai by Vikas Swaroop and Suketu Mehta. Nagarkar's two important protagonists Rawan and Eddie, representing Hinduism and Christianity, living side by side in Mumbai's once famous chawl settlement*

*represent the homogeneous nature of the city. Rawan and Eddie describes the process of growing up in Mumbai chawls and the novel Extras takes account of their grown up life and activities including their Bollywood life as extra actors. In the process of narrating the interesting yet repetitive activities of these two boys and their female counterparts, Nagarkar opens up a treasure of episodes of multicultural Mumbai and several other aspects of human life in Mumbai.*

### KEYWORDS

*Metro city, extras, Chawls, Brass band, Brothels, Studio.*

## RESEARCH PAPER

Besides Nagarkar's first two novels, Mumbai as a multicultural mix has also been central to countless books like *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry, *The Death of Vishnu* by Manil Suri, *Midnight Children* by Salman Rushdie, *Love and Longings in Bombay* by Vikram Chandra, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo, *Dangerlok* by Eunice de Souza, *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts and *Breathless in Bombay* by Murzban Shroff, to name a few.

The name *Mumbai* is derived from *Mumba* or *Maha-Amba*, the name of the patron goddess Mumbadevi of the native Koli community meaning "mother" in Marathi language, which is the mother tongue of the Koli people and the official language of Maharashtra. By the late 20th century, the city was referred to as *Mumbai* or *Mumbai* in Marathi, Konkani, Gujarati, Kannada and Sindhi, and as *Bambai* in Hindi. The Government of India officially changed the English name to *Mumbai* in November 1995. Mumbai is built on an archipelago of seven islands: Isle of Bombay, Parel, Mazagaon Mahim, Colaba, Worli, and Old Woman's Island, also known as *Little Colaba*. The religious groups represented in Mumbai as of 2011 are Hindus(65 %), Muslims (20%), Buddhists (4 %), Jains (4 %), Christians (3.5 %) and Sikhs (0.5 %).

Mumbai's culture is a blend of traditional festivals, food, music, and theatres. The city offers a cosmopolitan and diverse lifestyle with a variety of food, entertainment, and night life, available in a form and abundance comparable to that in other world capitals. Mumbai's history as a major trading center has led to a diverse range of cultures, religions, and cuisines coexisting in the city. This unique blend of cultures is due to the migration of people from all over India since the British period. Mumbai is the birthplace of Indian cinema proudly called as Bollywood. Mumbai has also developed a thriving "theatre movement" tradition in Marathi, Hindi, English, and other regional languages. Mumbai residents celebrate both Western and Indian festivals. Diwali, Holi, Eid, Christmas, Navratri, Good Friday, Dussera, Moharram, Ganesh Chaturthi, Durga Puja and Maha Shivratri are some of the popular festivals in the city. One of the most significant writers of modern India, Kiran Nagarkar is a renowned Indian novelist, playwright and screenplay writer who has written both in Marathi and English. He is a

brilliant storyteller and an excellent stylist. He is a bilingual writer like, Vilas Sarang, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar, and Jayanta Mahapatra who have contributed to the growth of Indian English literature. Basically, he is from Maharashtra, India but thanks to his flexible writing style and groundbreaking schemes he is much-admired equally in India and abroad. He intentionally eluded publicity till the age of fifty. He bears the influence of writers like Graham Greene, John Steinberg, Earnest Hemingway, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez and many movies.

He was born in the then Bombay in 1942 in a well-mannered, lower middle class family. His grandfather was an orthodox Chitpavan Brahmin, later on a Brahmo and was consequently rejected by his public due to the western impact:

I come from a poor family that you may have figured out from *Seven Sixes*, that sort of genteel, very lower middle-class family. But because my parents belonged to a branch of the Brahmo--which in Maharashtra was called the Prarthna Samaj--I come, in a sense, from a very hybrid kind of background. (Chakladar, 2012, p.1).

Nagarkar wrote his first Marathi novel, *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (1974) which was later on translated into English as *Seven Sixes are Forty Three* (1980). It brought Nagarkar an early praise and proved to be a milestone effort in Marathi literature. His plays *Bedtime Story* (1978) and *Kabiraache Kaay Karayache* (1994) translated in English 'What shall we do about Kabir?' are based upon his harsh reaction against social injustice. He wrote several screenplays including *The Broken Circle*, *The Widow and her Friends*, and for a children's film entitled *The Elephant on the Mouse*. He had written a screen play *Ravan and Eddie* (1985) which later on was converted into a novel in 1994. He was awarded the renowned Sahitya Academy award for his second novel, *Cuckold* in 2001. He was awarded the 'Order of Merit' by the German government in 2012 and the Live Achievement award in Tata literary festival (2015) in Mumbai.

*Ravan and Eddie* (1995) which tells a story of two boys, Ravan a Maratha, Hindu, and Eddie, a Christian, Roman Catholic who grow up on altered floors of the Central Works Department (CWD) chawl in Bombay. The chawl, as described in Nagarkar's novels, is a name for a type of residential building found in Mumbai. Typically, housing units in chawls are availed of by relatively poor but gainfully employed migrant families. Chawls were constructed in abundance during the early 1900s, in the textile mill areas of Mumbai, and indeed this is how they

originated, to provide cost-effective housing to mill-workers in Mumbai. This novel represents not only a diverse cross section of contemporary urban life in India but also the impact of low income housing on the lives of people. The author focuses on diverse Indian communities as they coexist and battle with one another. The alternating Ravan and Eddie episodes in the novel are full of digressions and authorial commentaries. These observations offer us a preview of the poverty, anxiety and the tussle among the chawl residents. However, Ravan and Eddie is not a cynical draft of the despicable lives of certain segments of Bombay culture.

Shankar Pawar reluctant to change the name from Ram into Ravan and he says to his wife:

Wait till he grows up and tries to abduct every Sita in town. You'll regret it. Mark my words. Every Sita will be chasing my Ravan. Call him what you want he'll always be Ram for me, the boy will cure you all his life (R&E, 11).

It is about the survival of Ravan and Eddie which also depicts the comicality and misfortunes of metropolitan life: its socialism, its inequalities, its profound separations, and its steady deprivation. The supremacy within the CWD chawl among dissimilar people shows the level of suppression in post-colonial Indian society. Nagarkar explores the problems of contemporary post-colonial Indian life and represents postmodern anxieties about the nature of make-believe, authenticity, certainty, antiquity, and dialectal diversions. The novel simplifies the amalgamation of reality and imaginary of unlike communities, castes, and vernaculars. Nagarkar has combined the tragic and comic incidents in the novel to give the message of living life like Mumbai's all inclusive approach. Ravan's trust in his own extra ordinary powers to do black magic and murder of people is fantastical and prolongs the limitations of practicality. It is through comedy and violence he questions the sacredness of religion, socialism, and superstition. Women in the novel are exploited through fierceness and ill-treatment not just by male-controlled forces but also by the forces of collectivism, insincerity, and religion. He depicts the dark side of Mumbai, particularly the market of lust and sexuality. Sexual exploration has been presented with a sarcastic note that disobeys all norms of puritanism.

Nagarkar's next novel, *The Extras* (2012), is a sequel to *Ravan and Eddie*. The novel begins with the life of the eighteen years old Ravan and Eddie. They choose to do career in the cinema world and join Rajkamal studio to fulfill their dream of becoming a hero. The extras are

also a metaphor that define our lives, binding on the moral reality. It is a philosophical quest of fate and destiny through Ravan and Eddie. There are other several characters like the police, musicians, bartenders, government officers, and people in film industry who are all extras. The novel is set in Bollywood industry of Mumbai and shows the struggle of side heroes and heroines branded as extras in the Bollywood industry.

*The Extras* gives expression to the daydreams of millions of present-day youth living in urban slums, and small towns across India. *The Extras* has a happy ending because their songs becomes super hit in the movie and they earn money. They prospered in their life through music but they did not get what they anticipated: ‘the third world of fantasy however, should not be considered an escapist world but a world in which we live (Timmerman, 1983:49).’

Nagarkar’s writing technique is different from other novelists of his era. Nagarkar’s each novel has a new theme, language and technique. In *The Extras* both Ravan and Eddie sing songs during the film shooting session and in *Cuckold* the songs are written and sung by the little saint Meerabai. He has also used the cinematic technique in the novels. Above all what everyone loves about Nagarkar is his art of narration through which he achieves the art of painting multicultural world of Mumbai city. He speaks about it in one of his interviews: ‘I am an instinctive writer; I’m a believer in the art of storytelling (Chakladar, 2012:4).’

*Ravan and Eddie* is a combination of the description of chawls of lower class people, slums which are dirty and unplanned settlements and towers that belong to elite class. Nagarkar’s characters represent different social classes of the Mumbai city. This novel, from beginning to the end, describes the society and their dwellings in detail. It is a sort of dreamland where everybody is dreaming of reaching to the next higher and best suitable step. It is a mirthful story of Ravan, a Maratha Hindu, and Eddie, a Roman Catholic, growing up to adolescence on the different floors of the CWD chawl No 17 in Mumbai, written so honestly and effectively to bring out ‘the smell of the fish and the urine of the chawls right into our drawing room (Back cover of *R&E*, 1995).’ The novel, with its stunning visual quality, compels the attention and finally delights the readers. It is about Bombay’s two growing up boys, from different cultural backgrounds, and staying with almost all the ethnic groups of India settled in Bombay. Therefore this story- the what and how and where of these two boys ultimately becomes the story of

multicultural Mumbai. The Mumbai as it is named these days has been a packing of numerous chawls, long-drawn-out slums and newly emerging skyscrapers replacing the chawls and slums. Nagarkar describes some erotic events in the novel. Eddie achieves a sex magazine- *Playboy* and looks at some nude pictures from that magazine and is traumatized. He remembers his Geography teacher Mr. Sequoia, who believed that physical needs are more important than intellectual enlightenment, granted him permission to vacate his bladder. Eddie reads a sex magazine and looking at the naked pictures, sings a song:

“Little boy, little boy, what are you holding in your hand? Is it a bat and ball or your cock standing tall?”(R&E 306)

Eddie watches it for a few moments before the door opens. His eyes were shocked to see father Angelo. He says to him, what are you doing? Then Eddie tears the picture in a rush and pulls the chain several times. Nagarkar finds teenager’s changing mind and their odd behavior. Once Ravan and Eddie are grown up, they undergo various experiences of life. Chapter eighteen highlights the Hindu festival, ‘Makar Sankranti’, very famous festival in Maharashtra. On the occasion of ‘Makar Sankranti’, everyone flies kites not only in Bombay chawls but throughout the whole of Maharashtra. On this occasion, Ravan demands money to buy kites:

“...tomorrow’s Sankranti, the only day in the year everybody flies kites. Chandrakant’s got a dozen; the Gokhale boys have fifteen among the three of them. Even that boy from upstairs, Eddie, he’s got six. I’m just asking for one kite.”(R&E 307)

*The Extras*, a sequel to Nagarkar’s *Rawan and Eddie* is the story of two boys born and grown up in a Bombay Chawl. They were never friends due to an unfortunate incident in their early life; the two boys nonetheless lead parallel lives. Both are unsuccessful at school, both become captivated by films and both fondly learn martial arts. The novel is set in the Mumbai Bollywood of the 1980s- at a time when one had to go to the theater to watch movies. Nagarkar tells a moving and emotional tale of love, life, and hope and despair of these two, Ravan and Eddie. The novelist asks the readers a question that who are we? Protagonists or mere extras in that movie called life? The novel deals with the story of these two boys who live with connected destinies in separate floors of the same chawl. Only the dark line that ran beneath the surface of Ravan and Eddie’s life is now more prominent. Mitali Saran points out the merit of the novel:

*The Extras* is an intelligent, memorable, vastly entertaining romp through the intriguing world of background Bollywood. It speaks for millions of contemporary young and hungry dreamers in urban slums and small towns all over India whose can-do spirit may be pitted against ugly realities, but who doesn't give up easily. (Saran 2012:10).

This loss of innocence could be recited as a sentimental and elegiac story of a city that has lost its sparkle. As grown up citizens of a metro city, Ravan and Eddie must now confront the problem of poverty in the middle of plenty. Ravan and Eddie gradually grew up and their age is now eighteen years. They stop further education after tenth standard. They are fascinated by the film world and its heroes. However, there was something in the chawl that never changed. For instance, Parvatibai was still working fourteen hours a day. She was cooking meals for migrants and office workers. Her husband Shankar, as usual, lies inefficiently in his bed with his face to the wall. Along with this, Eddie's mother Violet is still covered in grief. She was still working hard for the whole day, sewing clothes to support her son Eddie and daughter Pieta. Ravan, even after eighteen years still carries the guiltiness of being a murderer. Eddie, as a result, still refuses to speak to him.

Nagarkar highpoints the history of Brass Band and its development in India. British Indian army and the police force had their own bands with entirely western instruments. Rajas, Nawabs and Maharajas from the sub-continent had adopted western style bands and their instruments. Ravan Pawar begins his career as a taxi driver for his family's satisfaction but being a fan of drummer and xylophone, he establishes his own band- *Cum September Jai Bharat Band*. He can sing any song may it be Hindi, English, Chinese, French or German, Classical, folk or pop. His group takes contract of singing songs in the wedding ceremony.

Nagarkar gradually focuses on the existence of illegal Bars and Restaurants in Mumbai. In the Bars, a dozen odd girls, dressed in bright saris, stand unbendingly as if unmindful to the song. Every now and then, they meet the eyes of the men staring at their navels that peek out from above the folding of their saris. Nagarkar describes Mumbai's well known red-light areas. Those women wake up around noon, apply makeup and stand at the landing of their brothels under dimly light. They keep on waiting for someone to walk up. They hope that someone would

choose them and give them money. Every brothel has its owner who lets out her rooms to such needy sex workers. Almost all the sex workers have ‘organizers.’ The novel especially focuses on Bollywood, cinematic life of Bombay. There are various famous film studios including V. Shantaram’s Rajkamal Kalamandir, Raj Kapoor’s, R.K. films, and Mehboob studio. Ravan and Eddie both join V. Shantaram’s studio and they hope that they will get opportunity to reveal their inner talent to become an actor in Hindi cinema. Both join the extras’ union and the recruiting office. On one occasion, in the shooting session the director yells out and humiliates Eddie:

“Abe hero, he moved towards Eddie- you think you are the star of the film? Let me enlighten you, you are not hero, you are just one of the crowd, an extra” (The Extras, 250).

Nagarkar’s novel is witty, funny, and sarcastic. It is good fun to read about the origins of India’s famous brass band or the Bombay taxi or the rise of Johnny walker and Rajanikant. The author has depicted the dark side of Bombay in the form of poverty, open vegetable market, whore houses, illegal bars, and the world of Mafia Dons. Nagarkar, thus, has succeeded in the portrayal of Mumbai and its multicultural life in his first two novels, *Ravan & Eddie* and *The Extras*. Being an extraordinary writer having the creative potential like Marquez, Nagarkar shows his ability to create the real image of Mumbai and diagraming of the small India that is hidden in every corner of this city.

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