

TRANSPARENCY AND DEPTH: AN INTERVIEW WITH KIRAN NAGARKAR

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Photo © Joel Kuortti.

Kiran Nagarkar, one of India most respected writers, was born in 1942. He is best known for having published in Marathi and English. In 1974 he published his first novel in Marathi, *Saat Sakkam Trechalis*, which was later translated into English as *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three*. The play *Bedtime Story*, written in 1978, took him into trouble with the Shiv Sena among other political organizations. Besides, the text was highly censored and the performance banned. His production as playwright continued with *Kabirache Kay Karayche* and *Strangers Amongst Us*. He has acknowledged his obsession with cinema and this has led him to write some scripts like *The Broken Circle*, *The Elephant on the Mouse*, or *The Widow and Her Friends*. His next novel was written in English and published in 1994, entitled *Ravan and Eddie*. He was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in English in 2001 for his novel *Cuckold*, published in 1997. His latest novel, published in 2006, is *God's Little Soldier*. It has been translated so far into German, Spanish, Italian and French.

The voice recorder was on for a bit more than one hour, but this interview took longer than that. With the first question we, supposedly at work, were still unfocused, as Nagarkar joked here and there. The students, attending the interview, and I would burst out laughing. What made him so comical was that he was all the time making fun of himself as a supposedly important writer who must create artificial boasting around him.

The beginning of the interview soon led me and the students to discover hidden nuances in Nagarkar. Through his commentaries he revealed his very experienced and thought-out views on literature, the world and their close relationship. He openly talked about his problems with the censorship of the Maharashtra political authorities as well as the fierce rejection he suffered from the Marathi literary establishment, and overtly expressed his considerations on the Iraq war and other worldwide conflicts. When both engaged in conversation with him or at reading any of his novels, one appreciates the harsh reality which is brought to the fore thanks to his humor, a corrosive sense of irony and hilarity which almost reaches absurdity. But Nagarkar does not write to give messages, he has never done. Instead, he contents himself with confronting readers with that nonsensical reality we sometimes happen to live in.

However, the final version of the interview was later tempered by Nagarkar himself through a fluid email interchange.¹ His dedication to the interview was flawless, as he thoroughly reviewed the transcription despite being hospitalized. His amendments permeated the text with his natural wisdom, allowed him to remove too narrow and local references and to leave only the most significant ones. This interview made his writing more transparent to me in the sense that it permitted me to better appreciate the crystal clear depth of his aesthetics. It is the reader's decision now to ponder upon both, transparency and depth to his art.

CG: *What is the reason why you started writing? Did you feel that as a need? Or maybe you understood that your writing was necessary for society?*

KN: There are, as you know, two reasons why writers of fiction, plays or poetry write. Because they have a message or wish to improve society. Or they wish to entertain. I belong to the second category. Which is not to say that I have not occasionally written a play to give a message. But that is an exception.

CG: *What kind of writer do you see yourself as?*

KN: I am a story-teller. I trace my lineage to Homer and the people who wrote the great Indian epic called the *Mahabharata*. Homer was an oral story-teller. Nothing more than that. But look at the kind of stories that he told. Two and a half thousand years later, we're still re-telling stories. Because they are not mere stories. Embedded in them are eternal archetypes. That is why Freud makes such generous use of them. Because they tell us something fundamen-

¹ I want to thank Rosalía Villa Jiménez, Nitesh Gurbani and Laura Sánchez Ceballos for their help at transcribing the audio files.

tal about human beings, their relationships and why they behave the way they do. It's the same with the *Mahabharata*, the longest epic in the world. The people who are responsible for these epics are such damn good storytellers, what they do first of all, is to grab your attention and then in the telling itself various resonances arise. On the face of it what you are reading are engaging stories and nothing more. But underneath the surface they are dealing with the primal issues of life and obliquely offering invaluable insights. My aspiration and endeavour is to make the story the product, a compelling product and the insights and the deep questioning by-products.

CG: *But in the past these resonances have been causing you troubles... I remember that you were saying at your conference that if you have some time offered a message, immediately afterwards you thought that you shouldn't have done that. Maybe because of these troubles or...*

KN: Oh, no, no, no. Troubles have got nothing to do with that... No, as I have said very often... I'm a complete coward.

CG: *What do you mean? Is it that you feel guilty?*

KN: No. I really have no desire to go to jail. I have no desire to be beaten up. If some of my fellow-countrymen don't understand the nature of what is being said, and deliberately misinterpret it that's not my problem. But while I'm a coward, all I can say is that so far it has not prevented me from writing whatever I want to. The play which got me into so much trouble is called *Bedtime Story*. And even though it has a message, it is a very different kind of message. The message, as I've said again and again, is about responsibility. You and I can't sit here and say: "But we're in Spain, so we can't do a damn thing about the Israelis killing the Palestinians or the Americans killing the Iraqis." I genuinely believe that you and I are responsible for the deaths in Iraq. Just as, if something terrible happens in India, Americans and everybody else in the world... How many years is it that the Palestinians are not even sub-citizens? Israel is the only country in the world which has got no borders. Every other country, if it is to join the U.N., has to declare its borders. And the saddest part is that the Israelis themselves, the Jews have suffered so much. And to use a sentence from one of my novels: *The one thing that experience seems to teach us is to make the same mistakes again and again*. But like most people who have suffered so much the Israelis have not learnt a damned thing. You would think that their own holocaust-experience would have taught them never to treat anybody the way they were treated. But they're doing exactly the same thing. If you come to India, you will find that, for example, if I want to get married in the orthodox manner, then in the arranged-marriage sequence, my bride's mother and father have to pay me money, the dowry. Because the implication is that from now on I'll have to look after her. She may be my wife, I may be with her, and she will beget my children and she'll look after me when I'm ill and stand by my side through thick and thin but she's still a burden. But do you know that once she and I get married in India, sometimes though not always, I will start making demands. Her parents then will borrow money



and I will get a small car. Post-marriage I will start torturing her because my rapaciousness knows no end. I want more and more. The funny thing is when my wife becomes a mother-in-law herself, she will treat her daughter-in-law exactly as she was treated. I'm not making this up. When I wrote my *Bedtime Story*, the Vietnam war was going on and I was deeply upset about it. It was their country, what was America doing there? So I wrote a play about responsibility. Have you seen the Chinese play table-tennis? You can't see the ball because it flashes past. In my play, when it was performed finally in an underground fashion, the dialogue moves like that ping pong ball. The actors liked the play in my mother-tongue, Marathi, so much that they paid for all the production costs when it was done in Hindi.

When we tell children stories, Indians always want to give a message. They always ask: "What is the moral of the story?" I'm not interested in stuck-on morals. Stories are a basic human need. But package the story as a moral and you'll put off children and even adults for good. *Bedtime Story* is a very violent play. I think it's the only play in the world where the audience is killed at the end of the play for not taking the responsibility for what is happening in the play. In it, I use the *Mahabharata*. I take stories from the epic because most Indians know them intimately. Then I play changes on the stories, which come as huge surprises, sometimes very unpleasant surprises. The idiom and language of the play are contemporary. For instance in the game of dice that the two cousins play in the great epic, in my drama, they bet Microsoft, they bet Airbus. It's that kind of contemporaneity. So the play has an immediacy and reality that we can identify with.

CG: *Then, is this not a humorous story?*

KN: Oh, there is tremendous humour in the play, you should have seen the actors, they just had a ball... *Ravan and Eddie* is supposed to be my funniest book to date though *Cuckold* too has humour, but of a different and subtle order.

CG: What about the last book, *God's Little Soldier*? The scene with the Saint Kabir has humour but is it the kind that will get you into trouble for making fun of God.

KN: The book is humorous off and on but not on the same scale as *Ravan and Eddie*. The scene between God and Kabir which I read out at the seminar is a very funny scene. And there're some other funny scenes in it also, especially in the Kabir section.

CG: *Do you think you've been modifying your humour, then? The kind of humor you're using in your writings?*

KN: No, no. I think that's a very important point about my writing. I don't take external decisions generally. *God's Little Soldier* took eight years to write. I wrote and re-wrote it and re-wrote it because initially I thought I was going to make it a funny novel. I am known for writing ribald stuff. I like to be bawdy and sex plays a big part in some of my novels. And that's what happened in the beginning, in this *God's Little Soldier*. But then I realised that if I was going to write about an extremist character, he would not be open to humour.



In my earlier novels, even when my characters did dreadful things, they still came across as very human. For instance, the protagonist of *Cuckold*, the Maharaj Kumar, who is the heir apparent, is responsible for the death of ten thousand enemy soldiers but both male and female readers identify intensely with him. He's considered one of the most memorable characters in literature.

But when I started writing *God's Little Soldier* I knew that the protagonist, Zia Khan, was a character who was going to be very difficult, that people might even hate him. So I was afraid that I was going to lose my small constituency of readers. My initial impulse was to humanize him by introducing humour. And I did just that: he sleeps around and some of those episodes are very funny. But as I wrote and I finished my first draft of 840 pages, handwritten, I realized that something was wrong. By the time I wrote the third or fourth draft, almost all the sex had disappeared from *God's Little Soldier*. Because Zia is not that kind of character, humour is alien to his character. He's an extremist. He's a really good man to start out with but everything he does, he takes to extremes. In the final version, he doesn't fall in love too often, actually just once. There's something deeply ascetic and intolerant about him. His intentions are almost always honourable. He wants to make the world a better place and he is willing to lay his life on the line for it. But when he sets out to do good, he takes it to extremes. Idealists are so hard to come by today. Ironically, till the Muslim fundamentalists took centre-stage in the last decade and a half, we were ashamed to feel passionately about anything. We were afraid to use words like noble or virtuous. Compassion had already fallen on hard days in the twentieth century. But after the neocons in America began their talk of compassionate conservatism, it became synonymous with hypocrisy and everything that is fraudulent and self-serving.

Like all these fine qualities, idealism is something that we have lost. How many of us today want to do something for our country? And I do not mean patriotism or fighting wars. How many of us want to do something for the poor, for the elderly or whatever? But Zia is that kind of person, if he takes it into his head, he will do his utmost. The problem is he'll push so hard, that he'll subvert the good work he's doing. As his brother tells him... you're a good man gone terribly, terribly wrong. So then, by the time I finished my last draft, most of the humour was gone, though fortunately there are still some very humorous bits in the book.

CG: *Why then is it that your writing is so little known?*

KN: I have no answer to that. When my book *Cuckold* was written... my British agent thought it was going to be one of the biggest books of the decade. Nothing of the kind happened. There is a review of the book by Makarand Paranjape which says that this is a book which people, publishing houses and critics don't have the equipment or the capacity to understand what it is trying to do and its worth.

CG: *Do you think it is a question of time? That maybe in ten, fifty years' time...*





- KN: I'm not interested in time. My close friend Arun Kolatkar, one of our most remarkable poets, is no more. What's the point of his being recognized as one of the Indian finest poets after he's dead? I don't know. But other people think there is one of the things that really make me furious beyond words. Think of Van Gogh, his paintings for sixty million dollars but when he was alive, he barely got sixty cents. It's obscene that anybody will pay a million for a painting. But what difference does it make to Van Gogh?
- CG: *No, what I meant to say is that, is it not a question of time? What I wanted to say is people are not aware or not prepared to appreciate what you are trying to do. It's maybe that you're telling a story for a ten year-old child and we're still four year old child. That's why many critics may fail to appreciate the value of your work and communicate its worth to readers.*
- KN: I don't know. But I don't think so. I've been saying again and again that chance plays an immeasurable role in writing or anything we do. We underestimate the power of chance and luck. *Cuckold* is located in the sixteenth century story. But I have written it in a language which is very contemporary. I mean just as you and I are talking, except that there's no slang. I had no idea about the beginning of my novel, and so I started with this Small Causes Court where the main character, the Maharaj Kumar himself is the judge. All the plaintiffs want justice. Somebody has grabbed a neighbour's plot of land; somebody's wife has run away with something... Authors make out that everything written in their work is so deeply thought out. Hardly. Some of it is happenstance and sheer luck. *Cuckold* came out at the same time as Arundhati Roy's stunning debut novel *God of Small Things*. The latter took off like a rocket. *Cuckold* was a slow starter but a fairly steady one.
- CG: *Do you think that critics can do anything to help?*
- KN: If you read the reviews of *God's Little Soldier* in Germany, many critics have said it's the best book of the year. Others have maintained that it is the most profound meditation on the spiritual roots of extremism. Let's hope that helps.
- CG: *How is that it has done so well in Germany and not in England?*
- KN: I have no idea.
- CG: *But anyway, it's great it happened in Germany. For example, here in Spain, hardly anybody reads English. Are some of your books translated into Spanish?*
- KN: *God's Little Soldier* will be the first one to be translated into Spanish. And then next year, God willing, *Ravan and Eddie* will get translated. France too will publish *God's Little Soldier* this year.
- CG: *Have you written in any other language apart from English?*
- KN: Yes, I wrote my first novel, *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (Seven Sixes are Forty-three) in my mother tongue.
- CG: *Marathi. And was it translated into English?*
- KN: Yes. It sold much more in English than in my mother tongue. Much, much more. I think it's gone into the seventh or eighth edition now. In Marathi, it's considered an avant garde experiment and not necessarily in the happy

sense of the phrase. Many critics think it's difficult read. But if you are used to seeing movies, if you're used to flash-backs, then there's no problem at all. Except that the language is very different from normal Marathi. Some critics, who like the book very much, have said that *Seven Sixes* reinvented Marathi for the first time after eight hundred years. It's a very different jagged kind of language. And it moves very fast. You have to have the patience to go along with the book. Because there's no narrative thread in the conventional sense, a beginning, middle or end. The narrator is talking to a woman whom he has lost. He is not necessarily talking about their own lives. He just recalls simply different things from the past, some things, some ok things, some exuberant moments. That's why the book moves back and forth, back and forth. If you have a little patience (and don't want to know who the murderer is on the first page), then it works perfectly.

CG: *How is it that you decided to start writing in English after having written in Marathi?*

KN: No, the question has to be the other way around. Why did I write in Marathi when I had only four years of education in it? The rest of my studies were in English and for better or worse, English has been my lingua franca for most of my life. And I also come from a westernized family. So Marathi was the surprise. I really wish my father and mother were around to find that their son had actually written in his mother tongue. They would find that hard to imagine.

CG: *So it keeps being sold in Marathi, you said.*

KN: No, no, no. In Marathi the sales are horrendous. I told you I am in the Guinness book of records for the worst sales of a book ever... I am making this up. But it's that kind of situation really. *Seven Sixes* is supposed to be a milestone, it's a landmark in Marathi and in Indian literature. *Seven Sixes* is full of spirit and hi-jinks and terrific fun and terribly tragic at times. But even *Ravan and Eddie* which is a very funny book, still has a tragic undercurrent.

CG: *Is there something that a reader should know about your books before reading them?*

KN: No.

CG: *So, the point is to just enjoy them.*

KN: I don't go very often to seminars and academic discussions. I went to the Cambridge seminar and there were authors there, big authors, at that time I was a nobody and people asked me was John Fowles there or Rose Tremain or Hillary Mantel, God, how much time did you spend with them? And I said not a minute, why should I want to spend time with the author, I want to read his books. How can you get to know anybody, let alone an author in one passing meeting? Books are so much better, they tell you something very revealing about the author. Sonia was asking me if I had written anything autobiographical, like the work of many authors. My first book is partly autobiographical. Now that I have written other books I find I expose myself, perhaps I always feel naked when I don't write about myself. It sounds



paradoxical but you know what gets exposed is your mind. I really feel vulnerable in front of people when they are reading *God's Little Soldier* or *Cuckold*. In the former Amanat says: "There is only one God, and her name is life. She is the only one worthy of worship. All else is irrelevant." He is telling this to his brother who becomes a terrorist. Amanat writes a fictional book about the poet-saint, Kabir and these words come are put in Kabir's mouth. For Amanat there is nothing as reverential as life, for him life is God. But certainly not the God who expects you to take life in his name.

CG: *Are you an eclectic reader? Who are the authors who have influenced you?*

KN: Spanish authors. French and English authors.

CG: *Which Spanish for example?*

KN: *Don Quixote*, I mean Cervantes and others. The Latin Americans.

CG: *In your conference you mentioned Pedro Páramo, by Juan Rulfo.*

KN: He's completely unknown in India and I think he's fairly unknown in Europe also except in Spain. And Vargas Llosa, García Márquez and Fuentes, Cortázar, Borges but that was a long time ago. I was heavily into American authors at one time, Eugene O'Neill, Joseph Heller, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison. And of course Camus, Sartre, Louis Ferdinand Céline. I don't think that we realize what an incredible influence he has had on us. You cannot imagine twentieth century literature without Céline. I recall Coleridge saying that you have to be a stone not to be influenced by others. The question is whether the influences become so overwhelming that your work becomes and remains imitative. If you are worth your salt, you'll assimilate the influences and find both your own individual voice and yourself. I have little doubt that I too have been deeply influenced but I do not know who my influences are. My writing is so different from the people I have just mentioned. Many Indians were influenced by Rushdie but I started writing much before he did. I don't know in what way Céline, Graham Greene have affected my writing but I suspect these things work in a subtle and oblique fashion.

CG: *I get the impression that you read great stories, you've been reading great writers, who wrote great stories, like Dostoevsky, with amazingly long narratives. You were saying the other day that you considered yourself not a writer who sets out to be different. But a story-teller and... I'm not being clear, maybe. Let me...*

KN: No, I take the point. What you're trying to say is that I don't consider myself somebody who wants to be an original writer or playwright. Someone who has set his mind on doing something totally radical and different. I've no desire to theorize and reinvent the novel, for instance.

CG: *A post-modern writer... hiding yourself so that nobody can know who you are really or something like that.*

KN: Tolstoy is a great story-teller. Dostoevsky is superb but they do it so casually without being precious or self-conscious. And yet there he is, Dostoevsky telling you a story about a man who has committed a murder and yet what you get is a deep meditation on guilt, the need to confess and absolution.

CG: *Yeah, that's my point.*



- KN: A great story-teller manages these wonderful things almost glancingly.
- CG: *Yes, because you imply more than you say. You're not telling people what to think. You're telling people that story and leave it to them to extract the meaning.*
- KN: That's why ambiguity plays a very big role in my writing. I like to be ambiguous...
- CG: *Humour is ambiguous in a way.*
- KN: Yes. When you think of Dostoevsky, I'm thinking "My god!" *Crime and Punishment* is something else. Jesus! Here is this man who murders a guy for the money. And then, the police commissioner says all we have got to do is wait and watch, he will come to us and he will tell us everything. That's an amazingly insightful story. It's of little importance to me whether what you write is postmodern or in the vein of Borges; whether you are orthodox or daring; whether you are the very first one to do it in a particular way or not. What matters is whether an author makes it worth the reader's time. Whether he can pull off a difficult task without making a fuss about how great he is.
- CG: *Do you sometimes read poetry? Do you like poetry?*
- KN: It's one of my major failings. Occasionally I've had to write poetry for my characters but I'm uneasy doing it. Every once in a while I'll respond to some poem or poet and then it's a wonderful feeling of being transported to some other world.
- CG: *Okay. What style would you say is specifically yours?*
- KN: I hope none. It's the content that should dictate the style instead of the style being detachable from the content and form. There have been always two schools and they come in cycles. People write more and more difficult language. Sometimes there is a need to write it because the concepts are so intricate and convoluted. It was not Derrida who mucked up the whole scene for most writers, critics and theorists but his disciples. They thought that the only way to write great philosophy is to make oneself completely incomprehensible. And they thought that was an indication of depth of thought.
- When I was young I went to Kashmir (in those days you could go to Kashmir) and I felt very sick. So all my school mates and the priest who was shepherding us had to leave for the next town because I was so sick. It was a very, very lonely time. Because there were nobody there and I was alone in an attic. Every once in a while in the evening the doctor would come up. When I recovered, I travelled towards a much higher altitude. The bus stopped and there was a pond with a marble railing around it. And I looked and I asked in Hindi: *how deep is it?* It was just blue water, absolutely blue with lots of fish swimming there. *You can go down there forever and not come back. It's that deep.* That has stuck in my mind. That if I want to, if you are really any good, then the more transparently you write, the deeper you can go. You can't see the bottom at all.
- As one of my Professors used to say if you don't know your subject, then you obfuscate it, you cloud it, in that sense transparency has a major role in my writing, because if you are any good then on a clear day you can see



forever because of the language you choose to use. We degrade language because we don't know the value of words. Take a book and you see the back cover. The blurbs will tell you it's a masterpiece, fantastic, great. The only language we know is hyperbole. Which is why we have forgotten that there is such a word as good any more. You no longer say it's a good book. It has to be brilliant, awesome and so on. You can't use the word because there's no punch. People don't seem to understand that there are various registers in language to describe and evaluate any work of art.

Only you know the Dostoevsky is up there. Márquez, Vargas Llosa and Louis Ferdinand Céline who is such an awful human being but a terrific writer are there, then, the rest of them can't fit in that category. They must find their own level and there is no shame in that. All of us can't be Shakespeares and Cervantes.

CG: *Thank you, Kiran. I hope that readers enjoy this interview as much as I have.*

