

## Conflicting Beliefs and Identities in Kiran Nagarkar's *Ravan and Eddie*: A Critical Study

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*Meenu Pandya and Seema Bhupendra*

It is evident that a man is a part of multiple organisations and carries many identities. The illusion of a single identity conceals and disregards man's many affiliations and memberships, including class, political beliefs, occupation, gender, area, country of origin, citizenship, belief in or lack of belief in an afterlife or life before death, and much more. The way people are understood within the confines of religion or culture cultivates conflict. As a result, the solitarist, communitarian viewpoint that analyses and explains people within a single, strict group membership sows the seeds of division and hatred. It encourages people to be aggressive and violent.

The title of Nagarkar's novel, *Ravan & Eddie*, is significantly suggestive of the communal creed, and one anticipates the cultural conflict or juxtaposition jaunt through the pages of the novel. The word 'communal' conjures up images of the two arch-rival Indian communities, Hindus and Muslims. But this appears to be the first Indian novel in English that shifts the focal interest of the study from the Hindu-Muslim to the Hindu-Christian communities. The fundamental theme of the novel, *Ravan & Eddie*, is the friction and enmity between the two religious groups, the Maratha Hindus and the Catholic Christians. The distance between the two groups is so strong that it separates them into two different universes. Nagarkar, in extremely particular detail, highlights the ambivalence present in the chawl culture:

The Hindus and Catholics in Bombay's CWD chawls (and perhaps almost anywhere in India) may as well have lived on different planets. They saw each other daily and greeted each other occasionally, but their paths rarely crossed. Ravan and Eddie too went

their separate ways. It was not just a question of different religions and cultures; they shared neither a common colonial heritage nor a common language. . . . (16)

Nagarakar highlights how these two religions differ in terms of individual cultural characteristics and social involvement, such as festivals and rituals. Hindu festivals are mainly based on traditional rites and customs. Christmas, New Year, and Easter celebrations by Christians are mostly imitations of those held in the West and have been somewhat modified to fit the Indian context. Christian festivals exhibit organised celebrations and limited activities. Hindu festivals and festivities are commonly characterised by rowdy behaviour and a noisy environment. The numerous microphones and megaphones continue to disrupt the serenity and tranquillity of the entire town. This point is illustrated hilariously by Victor's funeral procession, which coincides with Parvati's Pooja. The following lines also express clearly how ignorant and indifferent individuals are to one another's cultures:

. . . the van looked like a bridal bed in a fairy-tale and Victor was the prince. It was just a matter of minutes before the incredibly lovely princess in white came and kissed Victor on the lips and the two of them flew into the sunset on the Air India plane. 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. (10)

On the other hand, Hindu ceremonies are loud and boisterous:

Suddenly all hell broke loose. The earth rocked and the heavens swayed. The people at the funeral looked shattered even father Agnello D'Souza was speechless. Were these the voices from the Tower of Babel? Loudspeakers placed in Parvatibai's windows were blasting the entire neighbourhood with the Satyanarayana rituals. Parvatibai's had hired a Brahmin priest to offer thanks to God for the miracle that had saved her son from certain death and he was giving her her money's worth. . . . (11)

The interlude, ‘A Meditation on Neighbours,’ deals with differences between Hindu and Christian communities. The digression focuses on the lifestyle, culture, and living patterns of the community. Hindus bathe in the morning and shower their established Gods as well. Nonetheless, Goan Catholics do not believe that there is a causal connection between salvation and bathing. Hindu ladies traditionally wear saris. On all except special occasions, Catholic women wear saris instead of dresses. On Sundays, Hindus rise later. They read the newspaper while having morning tea and breakfast on an easy chair in the corridor. Catholics go to the bazaar at 9:30 or 10 a.m.; unshaven and unbathed, to buy mutton and fish. Catholics speak English and Konkani, whereas Hindus speak Marathi. The novelist further explains other differences between the two communities:

Hindus ate betel nut and chewed paan and tobacco and spat with elan and abandon in the corners of staircases, on the road and, if you didn’t watch out, streaked you an earthen red from double-decker bus windows. Hindus didn’t think that spitting was peeing through the mouth. Catholics did. They didn’t eat paan, and could not be faulted for indecent public acts. Catholics ate beef and pork. Even non-vegetarian Hindus hardly ever did. . . . (142)

Religion is an essential part of defining one’s cultural identity. All religious adherents are expected to follow a set of codified beliefs and rituals, study holy books and conform to a specific cultural tradition. These elements make a religion or the religious identity of a group or community different from other faiths or religious identities. Amartya Sen’s *Identity and Violence* is a sustained attack on the ‘solitarist’ (Sen 110) theory which says that human identities are formed by the membership of a single social group. Sen believes this solitarist fallacy shapes much communitarian and multicultural thinking, as well as Samuel Huntingdon’s theory of “clashing civilisations”. In each case, it involves the fallacy of defining the multiple and shifting identities present in every human being in terms of a single, unchanging essence. In Sen’s view the idea that we can be divided up in this way leads to a “miniaturisation” (Sen ii ) of humanity, with everyone locked up in tight little boxes from which they

emerge only to attack one another. According to Sen, a person can be affiliated with a variety of groups and identities:

The same person can, for example, be a British citizen, of Malaysian origin, with Chinese racial characteristics, a stockbroker, a nonvegetarian, an asthmatic, a linguist, a bodybuilder, a poet, an opponent of abortion, a bird-watcher, an astrologer, and one who believes that God created Darwin to test the gullible. We do belong to many different groups, in one way or another, and each of these collectivities can give a person a potentially important identity. We may have to decide whether a particular group to which we belong is—or is not—important for us. (Sen 26)

Nagarkar vividly satirizes how communal and cross-cultural connections often occur inside the Indian social establishment by allowing Eddie to follow RSS traditions and Ravan to follow the customs of church-managed institutions. Ravan and Eddie almost had parallel cultural growth. Ravan learns the Cain curse and is rejected by the sabha, a Hindu organisation dressed in white shirts and flared khaki half-pants. He enrolls at St. Teresa's convent school to learn English. Conversely, Eddie speaks Marathi and inspires others to join the sabha, where he outperforms everyone. He excels in gymnastics, drills, physical exercise, martial arts, and spiritual singing.

The author contends that the only way to lessen haughtiness, brutality, and horrors committed against one group by another is to promote competing identities. It indicates individuals should be recognised for their varied connections to different communities. Although Dalit people are considered untouchables, once they become Christians, their caste identity fades, and both Muslims and Hindus recognise them as Christians. The odd social behaviour might be linked to the rise in Dalit conversion to Christianity. Children who are first captivated by caste differences (religion) in Indian culture soon learn to follow their elders in upholding it. This is because caste discrimination is so blatantly evident in Indian society. With Ravan's initial response to Shahaji, a member of the Dalit community, the writer highlights the purity that permeates a child's psyche:

Shahaji Kadam, now there was an enigma . . . when he had cleaned up and shaved and went to a movie with Tara he looked like any other man; . . . Then why did almost everybody avoid him and his people” ( 90)? While viewing this divided universe, Nagarkar asks at one point through Eddie: “How Christians can be discriminated from Hindus, when as a human being there is no difference? (164)

Nagarkar is also sharp enough to point out that the cultural differences between or among different ethnic, regional, and religious groupings are more prominent among the middle- aged and elderly and are more blurred among the younger generation. While the older generations cling to their cultural differences, creating a virtual barrier that prevents social interaction between different groups. The younger generations are more liberal in that they are willing to conduct social and personal interactions with people from other communities and create a universal identity in the name of their nation, social obligation, and financial obligation. The relationship between Ravan and Pieta shows how young people do not hesitate to interact beyond community lines and actively participate in events. Sometimes these interactions go beyond the restrictions defined by the older generations. For instance, Eddie’s interest in the culture permits him to interact freely with the RSS Hindu organisation, which teaches and attempts to convert him to Hinduism. Moreover, it demonstrates the ease with which young minds embrace rational justifications and ideals.

Eddie and Ravan both innocently and rationally question religious belief systems. The storyline allows for such speculations, much like young children do with their elders’ religious beliefs. Eddie’s remark about Jesus Christ’s appearance and compare it to Shree Krishna is an example to prove the point:

Why didn’t Jesus ever laugh or play a practical joke? Did he never have any fun in life, not even a day of it? Why was he always so glum and longfaced? Did he never have a fistfight as a child? Did he ever throw a stone at a clay-pot hanging high from the ceiling, knock a hole through its bottom and drink buttermilk from it? Oh, he

knew Jesus was stronger than the strongest but why was he not tough and muscular? Why was he so goody-goody? (113)

Eddie is once again perplexed when he is forced to come for confession. When he hears sermons on wounds endured by Jesus Christ and his bleeding image, he ponders. Greatly painted statues and emotional appeal do not satisfy his quest for truth:

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 . . . ?' (246)

When he says the last line, the Father is perplexed as to how to respond. The question was far more practical than religious ethics. Eddie is the truth-teller here. They charged him with blasphemy and ordered him to confess following their own rules. The meaninglessness of religious iconography is expanded through Eddie's mind and the question he addresses to the Father. The author makes us think about this point why do we always talk about the bleeding and never do anything to heal? Nagarkar over and over again raises this kind of question which is centred on religion or individuals' confronting religion. Each time he opens a door for us to see something wise and also shows us there are ways out of this if only you would see them and respond to them.

Eddie is therefore a quiet observer of his faith. Ravan is the same way. Both were unable to comprehend the religion's divine grand cause. They, too, observe it as a matter of custom. Beyond religion, they don't have a distinct identity. The writer uses these characters to express the same emotion. So religion is merely a playground for them, where they are forced to play an undesirable game despite their willingness. Religion plays a significant role in everyone's life. Religion should not be followed blindly; rather, it should instil in people positive thoughts and moral values. Religion can unite a nation in the right way. It should not divide the country by praising one religion as superior to another and snubbing other religions in the worst way possible. According to Nagarkar, change

is inevitable in all facets of human existence, and people should be prepared to embrace change, even with their religious beliefs in order to maintain peace and harmony and establish a just and egalitarian world.

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