

The New Subaltern: A Study of Kiran Nagarkar's *Jasoda*

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India is a country full of diversity where everyone has their class, caste, belief, region and other specific features. Interestingly, the society is divided along these very lines. The upper class and caste dominate the lower and dispossessed people. Marginalisation has been rooted in class, caste and gender in Indian society for many centuries. Since ancient times, the caste classification of Indian society has been completely based on the Varna system, on the basis of which the hegemony of the Brahmins was established. As a result, the society got divided into various castes and sections where lower class people, labourers, Dalits and women were considered as subordinate. In the modern democratic era, marginalisation is still prevalent in India.

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls marginalisation/silencing a kind of epistemic violence. She rejects the binary opposition between the centre and margin, self and other, subject and object, and majority and minority by using the phrase ‘silenced centre’. According to Spivak, the subalterns or marginalised people are those who cannot speak with their voice and are divided into caste, class, gender and region. That’s why they cannot stand up in unity to raise their voice.

Ania Loomba extends the perception of marginalisation in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. In the book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998), Ania Loomba considers women, lower class and oppressed caste as marginalised, along with others. Loomba writes, “...marginalised people- be they women, non-white, non-Europeans, the lower class or oppressed castes...” (229). Loomba admits Spivak’s definition of the subaltern in her essay, “...it is impossible to recover the

voice of the ‘subaltern’ or oppressed colonial subject” (229). Loomba creates a relationship between colonial discourse and literature and highlights the anticolonial thought and movements in the colonized countries. She carries forward the issue of gender in the colonial period as the subaltern woman that Spivak has included in the category of subaltern. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s subaltern woman, in Ania Loomba’s words, is, “Silenced by the combined workings of colonialism and patriarchy” (229). Women especially the Indian widows were burnt alive on the pyre with the dead body of their husband, called ‘Sati’ in the colonial period. ‘Sati’ becomes the example of subaltern subject, suppressed and silenced by colonization and patriarchal structures and norms.

In the beginning of the project ‘Subaltern Studies’, the group of intellectuals considered the study of the lowest sections of society, including lower caste and class. Later, Spivak includes subaltern women in Subaltern Studies. In the 21st century, she coined the term ‘New Subaltern’ which comprises the oppressed caste, class, gender, and tribal/aboriginal who have agency, resistance and a voice to speak against discrimination and subjugation. In her essay “The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview”, recently published, Spivak writes, “Today the ‘subaltern’ must be rethought. S/he is no longer cut off from the lines of access to the centre. The centre...is altogether interested in the rural and indigenous subaltern as source of trade-related intellectual property” (326). Spivak suggests that there is a need to rethink Subaltern Studies. It requires a revision of ‘subaltern’ in the contemporary scenario. In her essay, she justifies her consideration, “We are...on the level of social agency – institutionally validated action. The institutions concerned are democracy and development – politics and economics” (333). She delves into the provision of minority privileges and the development of civil society. In the present context, politically, fundamental rights have been provided to the marginalised sections of society on the basis of the constitution.

The novel *Jasoda* (2017) by Kiran Nagarkar, deals with a number of dimensions of marginalisation, including intersectional ones, comprising

gender, class, and caste. The protagonist Jasoda represents the condition, status and role of women in the patriarchal society. Her journey is painful, full of challenges and struggles, an existence driven by determination but a lack of choices. *Jasoda* (2017), was long listed by the Jury for The JCB Prize for Literature in 2018 and was appreciated in the following words, “This is a moving account of the epic journey of a woman through many wrenching obstacles; patriarchy, poverty and feudalism. A very upsetting and moving novel – one that ultimately celebrates female resolve and resilience” (The Jury).

Kiran Nagarkar (1942- 2019), is a bilingual writer, playwright and screenwriter. He has written in Marathi and English. Born in Bombay, he is the author of several English novels, including *Ravan & Eddie* (1995), *Cuckold* (1997), *God's Little Soldier* (2006), *Jasoda* (2017), and *The Arsonist* (2019). *Ravan & Eddie* is a trilogy of Nagarkar. Its sequels are *The Extras* (2012) and *Rest in Peace* (2015). He has also written a large number of plays and screenplays. His first book *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (1974), written in his regional language, Marathi and translated into English as *Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three* (1980) by Subha Slee, is considered a landmark in post-independence Indian literature. He is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award which he won for *Cuckold* in 2000 and the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2012. He is a storyteller, noted drama and film critic. He has been a critically acclaimed English writer in the post-colonial era. He has documented the vulnerability of the poor and marginalised people. He has contributed to exposing the harsh reality and the challenges faced by the common people of Maharashtra. In Indian English literature, his works are remarkable in portraying the marginalised sections of society, their oppression in myriad ways as well as the resistance offered by them.

In *Jasoda*, ‘Paar’ is a kingdom, known as ‘mirage country’, suffering from a decade-long drought. The story is placed in the village of Kantagiri which is the capital of the province of ‘Paar’. In Kantagiri, the protagonist Jasoda lives with her family consisting of her four sons-Himmat, Pawan, Sameer, Kishen and a daughter Janhavi (Jasoda gives birth to Kishen

and Janhavi in the city after leaving the village), her husband Sangram Singh and her old mother-in-law. There is no water, no meal and no groceries for cooking in the home. Jasoda struggles to fulfil the stomach of every member of the family. She is the only breadwinner in the family but still she is a victim of domestic violence and verbal abuse by her husband Sangram Singh who has authority of the patriarchal norms. Sangram Singh violently expresses his anger, “The back of her husband’s hand caught her on her jaw. She staggered and fell back upon Himmat. ‘Wasted the whole day and what do you have to show for it? No water, no kerosene.’ Sangram Singh kicked her in the small of her back. ‘Get up. I’m late. Cook my meal first’” (13-14). Jasoda is portrayed as an Indian wife, victimised by the patriarchal structures which are unwritten, conservative and based on prejudices and assumptions.

A prolonged drought enforces the villagers to leave Kantagiri and almost everybody has left the village. There is a shortage of food and water in the village and the situation becomes worse for the poor villagers due to which only few families are left there. In such a situation, Jasoda visits the palace to ask her husband for some help or money for the survival of her children and the treatment of his mother. However, he does not show any interest in caring for his family and responsibility towards it. The following discussion clearly shows it,

Who gave you permission to come to the palace? Have you no shame?...

Did you think for a second that I would respond to your threats and ultimatums? What was so important that it could not wait?

There’s nothing to eat in the house.

What am I to do about it?

I need money to feed the children. Your mother needs to see a doctor badly. The baby hasn’t had any milk either...

About time you, the children and Maa left.

Where would we go?

Where everybody from the village has gone. To some city or the other.

And you, won't you come with us?

I've got responsibilities here. Do you expect me to leave His Highness? (91)

Finally, Jasoda decides to leave the village and goes to Mumbai with her family where she is sexually harassed by the Mafia for not paying the rent for living in the slum. She works hard doing part-time jobs to earn money. The difficulties in the unknown metropolitan city make her situation worse but her determination towards life does not let her give up. She gives her children an opportunity to get education. She does not discriminate between sons and daughter. When her husband, Sangram Singh comes back to her after killing the Prince, she is again tortured and cheated by him. As an empowered woman, her rebellion is marked, when she kills Sangram Singh in a planned way and presents it as an accident to the police.

The exploitation and oppression of Dulare and his wife Savitri who belong to the lowest section of society, exemplifies victimisation based on caste by the so-called upper-caste person, Sangram Singh. They are the untouchable servants who plough the high caste's land for a fixed period and pay a price in return. Sometimes those poor people even have to mortgage their houses and animals for this. Even then, they are treated like slaves. When Dulare and Savitri come to Sangram Singh to borrow an ox, Lakhan, Dulare says, "...Ten years running there's been a drought, Huzoor...you are like God to me and my family...we'll all die...I'll mortgage my hut" (14-15). The caste marginalisation makes it difficult for the dispossessed people to even survive. The fear of the upper caste person Sangram Singh, overpowers Dulare so much that he hides himself in the dry well. Hatred and inhumanity towards the untouchables is depicted in the following words of Sangram Singh, "Which untouchable would dare to enter our well and pollute it?...no one will be able to drink from that well again" (66). Not only this, Dulare struggles to stay alive inside the well the entire night "All night long, Dulare asked for water" (66) and outside, his wife, Savitri keeps pleading with Sangram Singh for permission to provide him food and water. Ultimately, they are compelled to leave the village.

The condition of a woman in the lowest section of Indian society is even worse. She has to endure more exploitation along with sexual harassment than other male members. Dulare and Savitri are discriminated against on the basis of caste but being a woman, Savitri is sexually harassed by Sangram Singh. Her pathetic condition is obvious, "Her left eye was swollen and purple-blue. Her lips were red, ready to burst, the lower lip hanging out pendulously. She did not venture to look at the rest of her body" (44) "...stop, stop, you are hurting me. He paid no heed to her pleas...She screamed in pain" (49). The exploitation and disgrace of a woman on the basis of gender reaches its peak when she is thrown out of her mud house without any clothes while being watched by Sangram's son, Himmat. She says, "Please open the door,...There was no response from within. Please open the door, please. Someone will see me" (49). The height of Sangram Singh's cruelty is seen when he stops his son Himmat from touching Dulare and Savitri while he himself comes to their house and makes a relationship with Savitri. Women suffer double oppression by the upper caste and the dominant established structures in society.

Even the upper caste people suffer in the hierarchy of class and power. Sangram Singh belongs to a Rajput family. Due to his attraction towards the luxurious comfort of the Alakhnanda palace in 'Paar', he goes to the palace every day to serve the Prince without caring about his family and even his old and sick mother. The Prince treats him like a slave. Sangram Singh having authority as a male suppresses his wife, Jashoda and belonging to the upper-caste, manipulates the lower caste couple Dulare and his wife Savitri and Prince Parbat Singh from a royal family and the upper class subjugates Sangram Singh. Prince, Parbat Singh insults him using abusive words,

Take that bloody obsequious face of yours and don't show it here or in any part of this world. Ever....Can't you pick up some ghastly disease, syphilis or smallpox or leprosy, something that will make you die a long death so that I don't have to see your ugly face till my dying day?...There is no use for you, Sangram, no earthly use for you. What grievous sins did my ancestors commit that I have to

see your inauspicious face every morning?...Get out. Or I'll kick you down the stairs. (23-24)

Sangram Singh is a Rajput but he is subjugated and exploited by the Prince, Parbat Singh of the 'Paar' kingdom. In his resistance, Sangram Singh kills him and it is supposed to be an accident to others. Another female character is Rat Rani, the Mistress of Parbat Singh. She is sexually abused by Sangram Singh after the death of Parbat Singh. Finally, she commits suicide. She is portrayed as a victim, though she belongs to a royal family. Nagarkar might have been conscious of when he presents the women empowered after being victimized but suppressed even in the position of empowerment, in the royal family. Nagarkar has pointed out that in the case of women, class and caste does not matter. Women are equally ill-treated in the patriarchal order. Nagarkar has portrayed the protagonist, Jasoda, as a strong female character who makes her choices and empowers herself while shouldering the financial responsibility of the family. The women, the Dalits, as well as the poor suffer at the hands of men, upper caste people, and feudal lords respectively. The value of Nagarkar's narrative lies in the largely realistic depiction of socio-cultural reality. Equally realistic is his portrayal of the ways and occasions when the oppressed ones stand up and resist without caring for the costs they have to pay.

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