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KIRAN NAGARKAR'S GOD'S *LITTLE SOLDIER*: ENQUIRY INTO THE DECAYING SOCIAL
–MORAL WORLD

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Abstract

Kiran Nagarkar (1942—2019) is an important Indian English novelist. 'Scepticism' about the authority and the received wisdom in the forms of the 'grand narratives' of religion are major concerns in Nagarkar's fictional world. His novel *God's Little Soldier* (2006) portrays the gradual downfall of the protagonist, Zia Khan. In search of the true God, the protagonist goes on shifting his identities. The journey of the protagonist provides a space to Kiran Nagarkar to probe into the dynamics of institutionalised religions. The novel unfolds the rampant disintegration of social and moral world in the present times. The present paper is an attempt to comprehend the writer's predicament and his understanding of the true meaning of God and religion.

Keywords: Kiran Nagarkar, postmodernism, grand narratives, religious fundamentalism

Kiran Nagarkar (1942—2019) is an important Indian English novelist. Sahitya Akademi awardee Kiran Nagarkar's oeuvre includes the novels namely *Seven Sixes are Forty-three*, *Ravan and Eddie*, *Cuckold*, *God's Little Soldier* etc. 'Scepticism' about the authority and the received wisdom in the forms of the 'grand narratives' of religion are major concerns in Nagarkar's fictional world. He perceives that the foundations to our system of thought and belief are losing their credibility. Pamela Sue Anderson identifies the threefold loss of the modern belief in postmodern times in (i) the moral progress of human kind in history, (ii) a conception of reason as ushering in universal agreement, or certainty, and (iii) a grand

narrative account (Sim 45). The impulse of this kind of loss drives the social and personal world in Nagarkar's fiction towards chaos and anarchy. It does share the tensions and the anxieties between the belief in a personal God and the critical engagement with religious practice. Though Lyotard insists that the rejection of foundations of belief will not entail a collapse into a social disorder, the 9/11 events demonstrate that 'grand narratives can reinvent themselves' and as Stuart Sim puts it rightly that 'grand narrative of religious fundamentalism is now acknowledged threat to global peace' (vii).

God's Little Soldier (2006) encompasses the twofold dimension of Nagarkar's predicament. At

one level, he doubts the credibility of grand narratives of religions. And at the other level, he perceives a threat to the human world because of the re-assertion of grand narrative in the form of religious fundamentalism. He fears that break up with 'scepticism' may retrieve the human world to the pre-modern conceptions of religion which are not only 'dogmatic' but are 'oppressive' too (Sim 49).

The novel *God's Little Solider* encompasses these dynamics of religion through the protagonist of the novel and his three different *avatars* pertaining to three major religions of the world – Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. The journey begins with the protagonist's, i.e. Zia's Islamic identity. It is Zia's aunt who nurtures the spirit of Islam in Zia. The aunt's idea of Islam is confined to her understanding of the Koran. She believes that Islam means the act of surrendering, the surrenderer of the true believer to the one and only God who is Allah (25). She often quotes from Koran, 'The righteous shall surely dwell in bliss' (26).

From his childhood, Zia is much influenced by this perception of Islam. Like the aunt, he too believes that the only path to know the prophet is through suffering and agony. That's why when his parents did not allow the aunt to ask children to go for the fasting during the month of Ramazan, Zia opts for his own way and keeps 'roza' secretly. Similarly, during his school days, at one instance, Zia participates in the procession of mourners on the day of 'maatam' of the prophet's grandsons, Hassan and Hussein. For mourning, Zia chooses a 'zanzeer' with 'seven chains ending with stunted S-shaped steel blades'. Zia sweeps the zanzeer on his body weeping "Hai dost, hai dost".

Both the episodes reveal that how Zia is getting obsessive with his inclination towards Islam. Zia's becoming a 'Mujahdeen' and joining a terrorist camp in Afghanistan provides a larger space to the author to comment on the growing fundamentalism and the distorted nature of religions. In Afghanistan, the 'Madarasa' puts Zia through an intense period of indoctrination. He has been trained for the three months along with the volunteers from the other countries. These 'jehadis' are not the mercenaries. They are fighting for 'the greater glory of Allah'.

Zia recalls an incident when he was involved in blasting off one of the girls' schools perhaps the last school that was functioning in Kabul. After the blast, Zia watches one woman searching for her daughter. Zia helps her; fortunately the girl is alive. The police van takes her to the hospital and then to the police headquarters. Zia accompanies the woman through the whole procedure. Meanwhile, the curfew has been declared and so the woman could not go to her home. In the morning, Zia takes her to the home. Immediately after this incident Zia decides to leave Afghanistan perceiving a threat to his life. While departing from Afghanistan, in the open ground, Zia finds the mob executing punishment to a woman. Zia is stunned when he realizes that it is the same woman to whom he has helped after the bomb blast. She is convicted guilty on two charges: one she has lived outside the house for one night which implies that she has committed the sin of adultery, and she has insisted her daughter to be educated. The mob starts to beat her with stones. The irony of the situation is that not only her husband, but her daughter too becomes a party in punishing her. The whole episode and the overall Talibanization of Islam reveal the gruesome nature of religion.

That's why, when Zia returns to Afghanistan for the second time in connection with the arms dealing with another terrorist (Nawaz), he would like to reassess the concept of 'Jihad'. He becomes restless after watching the ruinous state of Afghanistan. Because of the handful of fundamentalists the state has been forced to the dark medieval ages. So he asks Nawaz to take an initiative to call all the tribes together to bring normalcy and peace to the land. Of course, Zia admits that it is a 'mission impossible' but at the same time, he reminds Nawaz of the struggle and strife of Ireland.

Contemplation about Christianity is a significant aspect of Nagarkar's fictional world. As Zia Khan is transformed into Lucens Kahn, his strong reason and intellect compel him to re-think and re-assess the concepts of the Church. During his apprenticeship as a monk he writes an assignment on "The power and the Glory". He maintains:

The Church has always been at the crux of the timeless confrontation between institutional power and individual freedom and choice, organized religion and a need for a personal God. As with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is so often tortured and twisted in theological writing we need to bring clarity to the concept of the Church. (213)

He wants to minimize the role of Church in the relationship between the worshiper and God. He opines that instead of the Church, 'faith' should have more free play. The Novice seeks clarification from Lucens about how to differentiate between bad faith and good faith. For Lucens it is not a great problem. But the Novice cites an example of the Sri Lankan Catholic priest, who tried to question and reject the fundamental tenet of the Christianity: the idea of the original sin. In that context, the Novice asks Lucens, "Who is to decide these highly complex and tempestuous questions? Is faith alone enough?"(214). Lucens has no answer to this question. Thus, the Novice asserts the supremacy of the Holy Church. Lucens, who is already under the tremendous burden of sin that he had committed in his previous avatar as Zia, finds it irrelevant to argue about the new faith. Zia's quest on the new path, by this way, comes to an end.

Lucens finds the monastic experience as 'a severely dislocating one'. He perceives fissures in the anchored church institution. He is perplexed by looking at the monastic life. He finds the strictures compelled by the Church are leading the monks nowhere. He can't understand why the brethren stuck to such kind of life in isolation. In his opinion, the monks are 'stuck in a grey man's land' and yet he observes that, in spite of their associations with the Church for years, they are seldom away from the common human desires. They share the same traits of eccentricity that can be seen in any ordinary human being. As Lucens is fully acquainted with this new world, being disillusioned, leaves the path of scepticism and like others becomes a part of this world.

Christianity believes that charity is religion. But in modern times, even for charity, money is needed. The evils of capitalism cannot spare even

the institution like Church. Lucens, who is exhausted with the scepticism, shifts his attention from the theological enquiry to the monetary policy of the Church. The carpentry shop of the church is having a good name in the market. It is engaged in the making of artifacts like crosses and icons. Lucens wants to exploit this identity. And he decides to transform the carpentry shop into the furniture industry making wooden closets, beds and tables and chairs. The transformation of the fathers and the monks into the 'blue-collar workers' is really pathetic. The deadly effect of the interference of the monetary world with the moral and spiritual world of the Church is seen in the event when the Abbey at Terraferra is ruined because of strong winds. To reconstruct the Abbey, Lucens invests the funds of the Church in the share market and raises the amount.

Being frustrated by the perception of the Church, Lucens feels that the Abbey cannot lead the society to reinstate the morally homogenous world. So when he comes to know that 'Mother Care' is engaged in cases of abortion and some people are engaged in this sin, he decides to launch the project of the IPUC. The activities of the IPUC lead to a kind of civil war between the pro-lifers and the pro-choicers. The anti-abortion activities of the IPUC begin with the agitations. He writes articles in the newspapers in support of the activities of the IPUC. The IPUC also desires to go into the court against the government's abortion policy. But when Lucens realizes that all his agitations and the movement are not working much effectively, he assigns one of the activists the task of the Butonic acid attack. At this point, Lucens realises that mere extinction of some people will not solve the problem. Tomorrow, a few others will emerge, and once again the abortion industry will flourish.

Lucens aspires to eradicate the root of this social evil. He understands that most of the teenagers are the victims of this evil. For which he considers that the moral training is essential. Thus, Lucens conceptualizes the 'Guardian Angles' through which he aspires to work against abortions, homosexuality, same-sex marriages, and divorces, highly ambitious, ideal and extreme project, indeed.

Zia Khan's new identity, Tejas Nirantar that comes in the third part of the novel highlights the world of Hindu ascetics and deconstructs the Hindu myth of 'nirmoha' and 'maya'. Hindu yogis and maharshis who have a pretty long tradition since Vedic antiquity reveal the principle of the strict adherence to the ascetic way of living. Their world is confined to the contemplations and the meditations which are in accordance with the Hindu concept of religion that defines 'knowledge' as religion. But the depiction of Shakta Muni in the novel who is a 'yogi' and the mentor of Zia, contradicts the image of Hindu ascetic and the Hindu way of living.

Zia meets Shakta Muni for the first time at Cambray Park, Cambridge where lives Zia's school days' friend, Roy Cambray. Zia feels discomfiture when he meets Shakta Muni for the first time. Zia remains aghast, when Shakta Muni unexpectedly asks him, "So you are the one who wants to save the world ... The question is, young man, who's going to save the world from you?" (119). Then onwards, all through the ups and downs in Zia's life, it is seen that Shakta Muni is keeping a close eye on Zia's movements.

For his ambitious project of the Guardian Angels, when Zia (Lucens) needs money, Shakta Muni come to his help and offer him the amount of \$1,50,000. Lucens invests the amount in a share market and very soon returns the amount. When Lucens's luck turns against him in the share market, he loses everything. He finds no other way than to close down the 'Guardian Angles'. In this situation, he returns to Shakta Muni. Shakta Muni asks him to come to his ashram, so that he can help him. Lucens suspects that Shakta Muni wants to convert him. Shakta Muni assures him that he is inviting him not for the sake of conversion but to seek the 'yogic' experiences which 'opens doors and becomes a voyage of discoveries'. This brings Lucens to Shakta Muni's ashram at New Delhi. At the ashram, along with the different yogic experiences, Lucens goes through an elaborate procedure of physical, moral and spiritual purgation, and Shakta Muni announces Lucens's new birth with the new identity as Tejas Nirantar.

Lucens cannot work out the real identity of Shakta Muni, whether he is a real thing or a fraud. Lucens is mesmerised by looking at Shakta Muni's ashram in Delhi. The ashram is spread over acres of land with huge, airy classrooms, meditation halls, laboratories, hostels, play grounds, swimming pools, woods and garden. Security is ever present on the campus. Lucens broods over the huge money that comes to the ashram. He suspects that the politicians, stars, celebrities, and industrialists must be financing Shakta Muni's activities.

Very soon, the mystery of Shakta Muni is disclosed. Zia comes to know that Shakt Muni is indulged in the business of arms dealing. Through internet search, Zia also comes to know that Shakta Muni is one of the world's foremost alchemists and runs 'The International Academy of Science and Alchemy'. CIA and other foreign hands finance Shakta Muni's Academy which makes it clear that under the name of Science and Alchemy Academy, Shakta Muni runs the business of lethal weaponry.

The paradox of the situation is that in spite of realizing the true nature of Shakta Muni, very willingly, Zia gets involved in his business. He justifies his new business in the name of the 'Guardian Angels'.

This is how, through Zia, Lucens and Tejas, Nagarkar poses some serious issues in relation with the major religions of the world. He doubts about the credibility of those 'grand narratives' while projecting the rampant corruption at every stage and every level, and presents the bizarre world sinking deeply into chaos, anarchy and violence.

To conclude, it can be said that *God's Little Soldier* depicts the rampant disintegration on social and moral level in the contemporary world. The social world as it comes in the novel, and Zia's personal world, despite his attempts to restore the lost world, moves in the same direction towards a deep, dark and unending chasm.

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Dr Nitin Jarandikar is working as Head and Associate Professor in the Dept. of English, Radhanagari Mahavidyalaya, Radhanagari (Affiliated to Shivaji University, Kolhapur, Maharashtra). He has a teaching experience of 20+ years. He has completed his Ph. D. in 2011, and the title of his dissertation was *An Exploration of Kiran Nagarkar's Fictional World*. Contemporary Asian fiction and translation studies are his areas of interest. He has published a number of research articles and the translations in reputed journals. He has contributed to the Sahitya Akademi Encyclopedia and Marathi Vishwakosh (Marathi encyclopedia published by the government of Maharashtra).
