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## Negotiating Power and Patriarchy: The Role of Women Characters in Kiran Nagarkar's Historical Novel 'Cuckold'

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### ABSTRACT

Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* offers a fundamental reframing of feminine subjectivity within the masculine and medieval ambiance of sixteenth-century Mewar. The novel forefronts prominent women characters such as Mira Bai, Sugandha, Kausalya, Leelavati, Saubhagyavati, Bhootani Mata, Rasikabai, Queen Mother, Court women and female attendants etc. These female characters act as self-sufficient individuals driven by mystical conviction, emotive truthfulness, and personal choice. Mira's steadfast devoutness to Krishna undermines conventional prospects of wifely submission and sexual faithfulness. It destabilizes the mannish personality and royal authority personified by Maharaj Kumar. Through her repudiation to imitate to normative marital structures, Nagarkar presents womanliness as a site of struggle rather than obedience. Other female figures in the novel further confound the gender treatise by embodying varying degrees of conventionality, compromise, and rebelliousness within patriarchal restrictions. Nagarkar's nuanced portrayal avoids romanticism. Instead it emphasizes the complex connections of gender, power, sexuality and spirituality. By yielding women moral agency and narrative significance, *Cuckold* challenges androcentric historiography and salvages quietened female voices. Eventually, the novel redefines feminineness as an authorizing force that



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contests social convention, questions mannish authority and proclaims the legality of individual yearning and conviction.

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## Introduction

In the canon of Indian English Literature, Kiran Nagarkar has imbibed remarkable print as an Indian English bilingual writer, novelist, film and drama critic, playwright, screenplay writer and columnist. His works depict several thematic concerns such as power, desire, patriarchy, spirituality, resistance, self-destruction, sexuality, politics, history, identity, pain and sufferings, absurdity, alienation etc. His writing style is absolutely different from other Indian traditional writers. His narration is investigational and non-linear where he employs myth, legend, history, satire, parody, irony, metafiction and modern reality etc. in his works. His literary contribution is noteworthy. It includes: *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (1974), *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* (1978), *Ravan and Eddie* (1995), *Cuckold* (1997), *God's Little Soldier* (2006) *The Extras* (2012), *Jasoda* (2017), *The Arsonist* (2019) and *Asides, Tirades, Meditations: Selected Essays* (2024). Besides this, his well-known plays are: *Bedtime Story*, *Kabirache Kay Karayche* etc.

## Literature Review

Literature review is the most important attribute that investigates the earlier researcher's elucidations on the theoretical subject. The present study depicts the significant feminine characters in Kiran Nagarkar's 'Cuckold'. In support of this, the researcher has attempted to portray the viewpoints of several academicians and research scholars. The essential authorizations are legalized as per the obligation of the happenings. Following references will help the readers to understand the depth of present research.

1. **Nagarkar, Kiran. *Cuckold*. Penguin, 2000.**

It highlights the historical happenings and mystical aspects.

2. **Sarkar, Tanika. *Notes on a History of Purdah*. Essays on gender and space in South Asian history.**

This essay contextualizes gender roles in pre-modern Indian courts.

3. **Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. *Feminism in India: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*. (Essays on historical narratives and women's agency)**

It offers frameworks for analyzing female subjectivity across genres.



4. **Mishra, Sudha. *Rewriting History: Female Agency in Cuckold*. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2008**

This research paper examines how Mira Bai's spirituality subverts normative gender roles.

5. **Desai, Meenakshi. *Femininity and Power in Nagarkar's Cuckold*. *Indian Literature Review*, Vol. 22, 2015**

It focuses on courtly women's navigation of power structures.

6. **Patel, Rina. *Narrative Voice and Gender in Contemporary Indian Fiction*. *Literary Insights*, 2019**

In this research article, narrator discusses the allocation of narrative space to women's interiority.

7. **Sanga, Jaina C. *South Asian Novelists in English* (Greenwood)**

This book showcases perspectives on Indian writing of major Indian English novelists.

8. **Deshpande, Anirudh. *Interpretative Possibilities of Historical Fiction: Study of Kiran Nagarkar's Cuckold*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 2002**

It focuses on *Cuckold's* historicity and analysis of character psyche and intrinsic conflict.

9. **Paranjape, Makarand R. *Another Canon: Indian Texts and Traditions in English* (Anthem Press).**

The book contains extended discussion placing *Cuckold* within post-colonial and existential frameworks.

## **Aims and Objectives**

### **Aim:**

To explore representation of female characters in 'Cuckold' and to study the major aspects such as gender, society and identity.

### **Objectives**

1. To identify the major female characters in Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold*.
2. To analyze their roles, traits and narrative significance.



3. To examine themes like autonomy, resistance, oppression and agency.
4. To contextualize these depictions within socio-cultural and historical frameworks.

### **Research Problem**

Kiran Nagarkar's 'Cuckold' is a historical and masculine confessional narrative. It delineates **the several female characters, their agency, spirituality and resistance within a patriarchal feudal order**. This research seeks to examine how Nagarkar constructs female subjectivity and whether these representations subvert traditional gender norms in Indian historical fiction. The basic research problems of this research are: conflicts between agency and patriarchy, spirituality and resistance, narrative meditation of narrative voices, diverse models of femininity, interpretation of faith, sexuality and autonomy.

### **Research Methodology**

The research comprises with qualitative, descriptive, contextual, analytical and interpretative methodologies. The researcher has used primary and secondary sources for the better interpretation of the text. He also prefers close reading of the texts with respect to the concerned research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study employs the theories in order to support the literary analysis. **Feminism focuses on** literary representations of women, caste and class interfaces, cultural identities, gender roles, power relations and patriarchy. The theory of narratology examines how narrative structure and point of view influence the portrayal of female characters. The research is theoretical, descriptive, analytical and based on close reading of the text. In addition, it examines the facts through secondary sources.

### **Index Terms**

The present research demonstrates the index terms such as feminine characters, subjectivity, womanliness, feminism, female voices etc. through Kiran Nagarkar's selected fiction 'Cuckold.'.

### **Feminine Characters**

Feminine characters identities, roles and experiences reflect culturally constructed ideas of femininity. They are often located within patriarchal family and societal structures. Their emotional depth can be envisaged through inner conflicts, demonstrative complexity, desire, fear and determination. These female characters are downgraded and submissive sufferers and eventually they grow from silence to



self-expression.

### **Feminine Subjectivity**

It refers to the manners to know the world from within, through personal consciousness, inner life, feelings, dreams, emotions and beliefs. It is revealed through stream consciousness, dreams, fears and experienced realities. Gender subjectivity reflects how social norms influence self-hood. Feminine subjectivity proclaims a sense of self within male-controlled structures. Their identity can be exposed through body, sexuality, motherhood, memory and confrontation.

### **Womanliness**

**Womanliness** refers to the mutually and ethnologically constructed standards, performances and qualities conventionally related with women. It is performed individuality of women which is shaped by history, emotional understanding, patriarchy, class, structure and culture. Thus it is strengthened by male authority and gender equivalence. It is interrogated as a patriarchal hypothesis and power hierarchy. The readers can conceptualise it as an illustration of women's lives, voices, bodies and power.

### **Feminism**

**Feminism** is a socio-political and precarious movement. It exposes, challenges and transforms **systems of gender-based dissimilarity**. It focuses on how texts **represent women's lives, voices, bodies and power**. It promotes for equal rights, opportunities and depictions. It also examines male supremacy in family, culture, religion and language. Feminism highlights subjectivity and voice.

### **Female Voices**

**Female voice is an act of ethnic and political improvement**. It refers to the expression of women's **experiences, judgments, emotions and perspectives** within literary texts. It tells about **who speaks, how they speak and whose stories are heard or quietened**. Female voices may appear through first person description. They gain voices through confrontation and self-assertion.

### **Discussion**

In India, women would appear as marginalized nearly in all societies. The space for a women is clearly demarcated and restricted. In the traditional family, she stays within the house or within the zenana quarters. Deliberately she is kept away from larger concerns of society and from public events. Notions of gender and ethnic superiority are prominently reflected in Kiran Nagarkar's historical novel



'Cuckold'. In this novel, Kiran Nagarkar has employed women character's perspectives, narrative voice and interiority. These women characters attempt to move out of the social and sexual boundaries. He shifts the narrative lens to discover how women exchange agency, unworldliness and power within a masculine Rajput court. The novel delineates historical occurrences, specific ancient figures, events and cultural realities of 16<sup>th</sup> century Mewar. Nagarkar says about events,

'Events are the raw material of history. They are in real sense, causes and flow of history. Events need human agency to occur and the intricacies of characters that causes these events are not given much significance in traditional histories.'

(Yasmeen Lukmani: 274)

'Cuckold' is set in historical and medieval Rajasthan during the reign of Rana Sanga. This period deals with historical events as well as the personalities of the characters. It describes Rajput polity, warfare, court culture and feudal values. Nagarkar invents the historical figure of Maharaj Kumar and Bhojraj. Saint Meerabai, Meera of legend, is the wife of Maharaj Kumar. The novel depicts Rajput codes of honour, masculinity, lineage, Bhakti movement, devotional spirituality and loyalty. It centres on a marginal historical figure, Meera's husband, Bhojraj. It reveals jealousy, desire, humiliation and insecurity. The novel demonstrates the glimpses of postmodern era and questions the objectivity of historical truth. It gives prominence to female voice and spiritual autonomy through Meera. She emerges as a **resistant female presence and challenges** patriarchal marriage and royal expectations. The novel showcases female devotion over male authority. Thus Cuckold interprets medieval Indian history through subjective narration, psychological realism and feminist revisionism. Cuckold is the story of the Maharaj Kumar and his exploits. It is also a portrayal of the social, political, cultural and sexual climate of the times. Within that climate, the women achieve some kind of satisfaction and self-awareness. The fusion of historical content and the novel form makes it possible for the text to look into aspects of human relationships and the impact of these human feelings on public events.

### Character Analysis

The novel presents history as a series of human relationships. It depicts lengthy analysis and relationships of the characters. It also provides space to understand the way these relationships affect others and the manner in which social and political life changes as a result of personal factors. The novel displays feminine and postcolonial theory through the lives of several characters. It showcases Meerabai as a devotional agency and other female characters as a women of conformity, resistance and negotiation. In Cuckold, the recurrent projection of the female body is not in order to dehumanize woman by using her



as an object of lust. The feminine characters of the novel are as under.

**Queen Karmavati (Meera Bai)** is the most noteworthy female charisma in Cuckold. She depicts spiritual independence and feminine rebelliousness. As a Rajput princess, she is expected to follow to the principles of compliance, chastity and marital commitment. However, Mira rejects matrimonial life by consecrating herself totally to Lord Krishna. Her devoutness subverts the institution of marriage and discloses its masculine practicalities. Mira's confrontation is non-violent and emblematic. She confronts indirectly and uses bhakti as a means of self-assertion, transmuting secretive conviction into a public spiritual uniqueness. Through Mira, Nagarkar redefines womankind beyond biological replica and hereditary duty, presenting a woman who claims power over her body, sentiments and opinions.

Queen Karmavati has the potential to affect political decisions and personal actions. She is the most powerful and power hungry woman. She has fully internalized all the socio-sexual norms of femininity and masculinity and uses these to the advantage of her son. She is strong, active and free woman. She is the reflection of social customs. She reads her as a woman character who influences both the Maharaj Kumar as a man and Mewar as a nation.

‘Queen Karmavati refers to the Maharaj Kumar's wife as a nautch girl.’ (Cuckold: 9).

Her machinations to get the crown for her son Vikramaditya is a significant political event with wide ranging indications. Queen Karmavati reveals norms of feminine behavioral ideals as a mark of faithlessness. She uses for the benefit of her own son. After visualizing that her son is unable to rule as an individual, she aspired to rule by proxy, by making him the king. She uses her femininity to influence the king. She gives certain examples such as Tughlaq's stepmother in Girish Karnad's play 'Tughlaq'. She quotes another example of Kaikeyi from the epic Ramayana where she reveals her genuine ambition of maternal aspiration to rule through her son Bharata. Here we can see that Queen Karmavati is the incarnate of Kaikeyi. She also combines the traits of Manthara. Thus she becomes cunning and more dangerous for her heir apparent, the Maharaj Kumar in Cuckold.

‘From within the zenana quarters, Karmavati gets news about everybody at all times. She had a complicated network of spies and the most roundabout way of checking whether the information she received was a hundred percent reliable.’  
(Cuckold: 8)

In this way, Queen Karmavati shows her intelligence and prowess to make Vikramaditya as king. She works as the advisor of the king. She keeps strict vigil on every military and political moves of the King.



For instance, King takes the decision to send the Maharaj Kumar as the commander-in-chief of the Mewar forces in the battle against Gujarat appears to be the result of. Maharaj Kumar asserts in ironic way,

‘Mother Karmavati’s good offices.’ (Cuckold: 161)

Karmavati plans to appoint one son as heir apparent or to remove the existing heir apparent from his place. After Maharaj Kumar’s victory in the Gujarat war, the Maharaj Kumar is faced with the question of what is happen to him, his thoughts immediately turn to the women in the house who can plead his cause for him. Karmavati pleads to the King and broached the subject. (Cuckold: 253) The other possibility is drawn out that his wife Greeneyes was out of favour because of her singing and dancing. Finally Queen Karmavati influenced her husband, the King and compelled him to make Vikramaditya as a king. She played a significant role in the course that history takes. Instead of staying in zenana quarters, she hatches the schemes to make her son as a king and ruler. She also attempts to remove the present favourite ruler from his privileged position. Here the narrative voice says about sending Maharaj Kumar as a leader of Mewar armies against Malwa,

‘as usual His majesty had already made up his mind.’ (423)

Maharaj Kumar’s earlier notion of Greeneyes that,

‘it would not occur to her to stay in Father’s orbit, cultivate him and insinuate herself into his inner circle.’ (Cuckold: 253)

Nagarkar says about Queen Karmavati that Greeneyes has colourful names such as shrewd, stubborn and calculating woman under the name of Meerabai.

Queen Karmavati subtly turns public opinion against the Maharaj Kumar by imagining his wife as a prostitute because she sings and dances and for coming out of the zenana quarters. In effect, Queen Karmavati uses all available discourses about what constitutes masculinity and femininity as her ammunition. In Rajput tradition, a man who cannot control his wife is traditionally seen as unmanly or weak. Patriarchal discourse does not give a man space to indulge in comparison or the soft emotions to Rajput Men. For women, it defines limitations to women to stay outside the boundaries, i.e. freedom of choice, singing and dancing and other such activities. Nagarkar reveals the fact of female seduction,

The raping of women and the unspeakable horrors perpetrated against them during times of riots or crises is an attempt to engender a sense of moral defeat, a sense that



the men are incapable of protecting their women.’ (Yasmeen Lukmani: 276)

According to Indian tradition, women adore their husband and call them as *pati-parmeshwar* which gives women supreme power. Often the attraction of patriarchal discourse is the promise of special powers for women. (Tamil Classic Thirukkural: 56)

Maharaj Kumar refers Meerabai as Greeneyes or Little Saint or Little Princess (the Meera of Legend). Both Queen Karmavati and Greeneyes are the silent machinery in the form of women and operate in the public sphere. Nagarkar’s depiction of Meera as Greeneyes or the Little Saint is partly to create a credible woman out of Meera lore and partly to create a tribute to a highly individual woman who knew her own mind. Greeneyes enjoys the emotional power she has over the Maharaj Kumar. Nagarkar describes the development of the Princess from a denigrated nautch girl and tawaif to Little Saint. The readers witness how Royal Princess turns into sainthood as Meerabai. Her transformation is the major cultural event in the entire history of Mewar. She is the symbol of spiritual subjectivity. She is blissfully and deeply in love with Krishna. She changed her role as a highly self-willed girl born and brought up in royal family and a woman of potential power over others to a spiritual and devotee of Lord Krishna. She shows her untiring commitment to Krishna. Thus she becomes a form of spiritual self-sufficiency that challenges not only chivalrous norms but also the male-centric impression of duty. She plays the role of typical pativrata to the Maharaj Kumar, washes his feet and puts them to her eyes even when he hits her.

In the second half of the novel, legendary Meera reflects herself as a woman of other-world. The Little Saint’s Sainthood is seen through a perspective not uncommon in re-writings of hagiographies. Basically hagiography refers to the glorified story of a saint. Here Nagarkar reveals the feminist agenda,

‘To look at wives of male saints and see them as victims of their husband’s

sainthood is part of the feminist agenda.’ (Yasmeen Lukmani: 280)

In this marginal discourse, for her husband, she is depicted as victimized figure. Both Queen Karmavati and Greeneyes use their sexual power over their husbands. Karmavati does it to win the crown for her son Vikramaditya and Greeneyes does it simply because she seems to enjoy it. Greeneyes influence over the king is a subtle use of gender politics as she plays the role of the ideal daughter-in-law to him. She is shown as a woman of extraordinary sexual power and of great shrewdness. She is represented as a woman who cheats with great clan at cards, a woman who can bandy words with the king and promise to take back all the money she lost to him. She is a woman surrounded with extraordinary conventions. Her



father-in-law understands her well and sees many sides of earthly aspects. He asserts,

‘This woman is not saint. She has a moneylender’s heart, mind and soul.’ (Yasmeen Lukmani: 281)

Mira represents the **transcendent, spiritual feminine**. Her inner life and desire are projected dominantly. Her spiritual obligation enables her to confront the potentials of marriage and obedience. In India’s cultural history, The Bhakti Movement is one of the most significant aspects. Soon this notion has been resulted into a widespread social rebellion. Bhakti poets were seen as victims of society either of its caste system or gender politics. Meera is visualized as the victim who raised her voice against the oppression of women. The Little Saint is a consummate archer. Being a Rajput Princess, she continues historical tradition by taking the lessons of martial arts. She also knows how to read and write. She threatens,

‘She would break off the legs of the Maharaj Kumar’s second wife, Sugandha, if she tried to meet her paramour.’

Her attitude also shows her as keenly aware of the political role that the Maharaj Kumar has to play as heir apparent to Mewar. Similarly her jealousy at the entry of Sugandha portrays Greeneyes as having surfaced for a while from the stronger personality of the Little Saint. Her relationship with her husband is interesting; she is unable to be a wife to him. She successfully breaks the barriers between good and bad arts for women. She flaunts herself in public, immersed in singing and dancing with blue God. Thus she becomes the object of male gaze. Singing and dancing are denigrated as bad arts. Dancer attracts the attention of many men. Greeneyes songs and dances carry undertones of sexual release. Her assertion that,

‘there is just one male (Krishna) while everybody else is female in relation to him is another instance of denial of socio-sexual norms. There is her sexual ecstasy with the invisible Flautist that completes the Maharaj Kumar’s cuckoldry.’(Yasmeen Lukmani: 282)

Unlike Queen Karmavati, Greeneyes has no political ambitions for herself. That’s why Queen Karmavati is more overt in her designs than Greeneyes and uses ingrained social notions of good and bad to win her battles. She is the embodiment of patriarchal discourse. On the other hand, Greeneyes does not think about societal notions. She is divine, spiritual and other-worldly. She boldly breaks all restrictive rules and does not have any joy or regret over this. Greeneyes falls in love outside marriage, especially with a God. She does not face the penalty of death. She gets the standing of a saint by which she is effectively



removed from the bonds of socio-cultural norms. Her marital infidelity is no longer judged by standards of normal behaviour but at the same time, she is removed from being able to influence the course of events. To Greeneyes, a saint's impact is relegated to the realm of the mystical. Greeneyes has cuckolded the Maharaj Kumar to a greater extent. Greeneyes is in love of Flautist who has many images. Princess escapes to the God within her. Queen Karmavati and Greeneyes are presented as active agents of history. Karmavati identifies herself and her power only with her son. She is caught in this vicious circle which allows her no scope to change and develop.

### **Other Female Characters**

Other female characters, queens, attendants and relatives reveal different responses to patriarchal influence. While sustaining their inner agency, they exemplify survival strategies and emotional labour in royal institutions. Nagarkar presents them as diverse, self-aware and morally complex individuals shaped by their social circumstances. Their internal struggle is highlighted through religion, emotion and politics. The novel depicts narrative authority by placing female voice at the centre in male dominated world. Maharaj Kumar seeks his pleasure with Sunheria and Kausalya and can enjoy Leelavati's company, he never once berates them or treats them as objects meant for entertainment. The roles of Leelavati, Sunheria and Kausalya are confined to their relationship with the Maharaj Kumar. Kausalya and Sunheria have a strong emotional hold over the Maharaj Kumar. But they do not use their influence to political ends like Queen Karmavati. They both appear as individual women taking individual decisions. They are capable to take full responsibility for the outcomes of these decisions.

**The Queen Mother and Royal Household Women** represent **outdated patriarchal womanliness**. They function as custodians of Rajput honour and ancestry, strengthening social codes such as purdah, submission and female stillness. Nagarkar portrays them as women who have **adopted male-controlled values** to endure within unyielding social structures. Their existence highlights the **inter-generational transmission of male dominance**, where women themselves become representatives of control over other women.

**The Zenana Women** are the women who comes under the category of maids, dai or wet nurse, washerwoman, attendants and noblewomen. They form a communal female space which is preventive and unrestrained. Within this encircled sphere, women exchanges information, sensations and thoughts, subtly manipulating radical and domestic conclusions. This challenges the perception of female inactiveness and divulges the zenana as a site of subdued power and intercession.



**Sunheria** is the minor character in *Cuckold*. She works as the washerwoman. She reveals the demonstrative, sensual and psychosomatic dimensions of Rajput patriarchy, especially in relation to male aspiration and feminine downgrading. She is a sensuous, **manageable and socially acceptable woman**. **She is a woman with connubial closeness**. Sunheria is the substitute space for quenching male lust, especially fulfilling the Maharaj Kumar's bodily and expressive needs. Her presence discovers the gendered double principles of the royal household where male sexuality is billeted while female sovereignty is repressed. She accepts the patriarchal orders openly. Her existence depends on **adaptation, emotional obedience and bodily disposal**. This makes her archetypal of women whose agency is controlled by **financial and social weakness**. Sunheria displays responsive astuteness, faithfulness and consciousness of her limited position within the male hierarchy. She exemplifies the **worldly, corporal female**. In feminist terms, Sunheria delineates how **male-controlled systems produce different kinds of female suppression**, benefiting mystical pureness in some women and sexual efficacy in others. Her character excavates the novel's investigation of gender by foregrounding the silent durability of women who exist on the boundaries of history.

She deliberately initiates an affair with the Maharaj Kumar. She carries her sexuality with pride and dignity. She is already married to a very old man. Her husband accuses her of loose living. Maharaj Kumar as judge of small causes court, asks her whether she is having an affair with someone else. She rudely answers,

‘Ask him if he has performed his husbandly duties to me even once after my father got me married to him two years ago,’ (Lukmani: 285)

She retains this freshness of outlook throughout the novel. Ultimately she falls a victim to her husband's jealousy and suspicion. She responds by fatally attacking him. Later she commits suicide.

**Sugandha** is Maharaj Kumar's second wife. She is shown as the subaltern female subject. She is portrayed as marginalized, victimized and secondary female attendant. Here we can visualize Queen Karmavati's designs against the Maharaj Kumar and opposes to child birth. Sugandha displays female manifestation, service and emotional labour within the male-controlled structure of Rajput court. Her identity is shaped by trustworthiness, quietness and effectiveness. As a woman of service, she operates within the *zenana*, a space that concurrently shelters and confines women. Through Sugandha, Nagarkar draws attention to the **invisible work performed by women such as** care, facilitation and maintenance of domestic order. Sugandha is a mixture of obedience and emotional sensitivity. She listens, observes and responds modestly. She prioritizes other's needs over her own. Her voice is muted by class and



gender. She can be survived through **quietness, flexibility and service**. While royal women debate honour and dedication, attendants like Sugandha engross the emotional result of these struggles. Sugandha stands for the innumerable unidentified women of history whose labour and existence remain mainly obscure yet indispensable.

**Leelavati** is a significant character in 'Cuckold'. Nagarkar reveals several traits of Leelavati such as **female intellect, emotional restriction and practical existence** within a harshly masculine Rajput society. She represents a **worldly, coherent and socially accustomed femaleness**. She comprehends the potentials imposed on royal women and selects **adaptation over disobedience**. Her silence and self-possession are the strategies for self-preservation in a culture that values female compliance and honour above personal longing. Leelavati plays a reconciling role within the domestic and expressive life of the Maharaj Kumar. She offers **company, emotional equilibrium and steadiness**. Leelavati is a female agency that operates **quietly within patriarchal norms**. From a feminist perspective, she demonstrates transferred **agency, a woman's capability to exercise choice within limited structures**. Her character exposes the unsatisfactory moral standards applied to women. Leelavati sustains domestic synchronization and male well-being. She stands between the binaries characterized by Mira and Sunheria. She is neither holy nor sexualized excessively. Instead she occupies the **grey zone of survived womanliness** where fortitude, astuteness and cooperation become instruments of persistence. Through Leelavati, Nagarkar recognizes the **imperceptible labour and emotional pliability** of women whose lives remain within the limitations of tradition.

Leelavati is the granddaughter of the financier to the royal family, a mathematical wizard in her own right and of enormous help to her husband in his business. She is married to somebody else. She falls in love outside marriage, especially with Maharaj Kumar, who is made of flesh and blood. He is Leelavati's paramour. It was an unconsummated passion between them. She does not face the penalty of death. Being victimized character, Leelavati is realistic enough to point out to the Maharaj Kumar that her patience in waiting for him is not infinite and that her life is not entirely dependent on him. Leelavati shrewdly says in her letter to Maharaj Kumar,

'No living creature can be more self-centered than saints. They are self-sufficient. There is no life beyond themselves. When they need you, they use you. There is no malice in them, nor is there memory.' (Lukmani: 282)

Leelavati probably tires of waiting for the Maharaj Kumar. She carries her sexuality with pride and dignity. She is suddenly escalated into womanhood because of Vikramaditya's malicious words



suggesting that she had been having an affair with the Maharaj Kumar. In some context like Greeneyes, Leelavati also has cuckolded her husband. Maharaj Kumar and Leelavati's husband both seem to take their wives infidelities with great compassion. Leelavati's ideas about the role of the Rajput clan in that milieu show up the little saint in a very negative light,

'There are two Flautists: The warrior and the Lover. We need to study the warrior. Instead the Princess's pursuit of her paramour has made the philanderer Blue God the paradigm of Mewar. We are a warrior race, not a tribe of adulterers and gay blades dallying with maids in our sylvan dales.' (Lukmani: 286)

Leelavati is keenly aware of and rooted in her socio-cultural milieu. She does not allow her milieu, however repressive to women, to subdue her spirit, either as a child or after she becomes a woman. Like Sunheria and Greeneyes, she also follows the dictates of her heart against socially imposed sexual norms. Leelavati's transition from a girl to a woman is also a transition from her role as the Maharaj Kumar's proxy-sister to his proxy-lover.

**Kausalya** is the dai or wet nurse of Maharaj Kumar. Hence she occupies the place of his mother. The readers can visualize the traits of Kausalya through female duty, **domestic ethics and the internalization of patriarchy** within the Rajput royal household. Kausalya represents the **flawless outdated woman**, shaped by norms of respect, amity and unthinking faithfulness to family and husband. She accepts the social codes governing women such as purdah, spousal duty and self-effacement as natural. Kausalya **supports and legitimizes these prospects** through her behavior. Her character exemplifies how patriarchy is continued by male and female authority who **captivate and replicate its values**. Kausalya's instructions and responses often emphasize social order, highlighting honour, reputation and permanence over individual female aspiration or self-rule. In this sense, she functions as a **defender of tradition** within the domestic province. Kausalya's presence highlights the social risks attached to female unconventionality. The Maharaj Kumar's relationships with Leelavati and Kausalya border on incest. There is an oedipal relationship between Kausalya and Maharaj Kumar which cannot be truly ignored. They both were totally unperturbed by it. Both of them take this as just another natural phase in their relationship. Kausalya remains protective towards the Maharaj Kumar throughout the course of the action. In many ways, she is antithesis to Queen Karmavati. She reveals herself as a self-sacrificing woman. Kausalya never uses her influence over the Maharaj Kumar to get anything done for herself or her son Mangal. Kausalya's individuality comes across very strongly in the novel. Without ever disobeying the Maharaj Kumar, she does only what she seems to be correct or in the best interests of



the Maharaj Kumar and Mewar. In many ways, she is the quintessential Rajput woman for whom the son's valour and courage are all important. Kausalya's relationship with the Maharaj Kumar is singularly devoid of any overt display of emotion but the undercurrent of affection and love is very strong. Her son Mangal points out once to the Maharaj Kumar that Kausalya was an independent woman fully capable of taking her own decisions, besides being economically independent. Kausalya is the woman who remains dependent upon her father in childhood, husband in youth and son in her old age. Kausalya has invested her mind and soul deeply in the Maharaj Kumar. She groomed him with appropriate ideas so that he could become the responsible citizen of this nation.

**Bhootani Mata** is the symbol of subaltern modern mysticism. She is culturally charged, malevolent and benevolent figure. She is the priestess and deputy of the all-pervasive Devi. She is a woman with deep understanding of folk certainty, feminine influence and alternative religious perspectives. She belongs to the world of **anxiety, misconception, ownership and village belief systems**. She reflects how ostracized communities theorize feminine influence as impulsive, ferocious and mystically powerful. From a gendered perspective, Bhootani Mata embodies the **misbehaved feminine**. She exists outside of patriarchal control, Brahmanical power and royal dignity. She is the quintessence of disorder and interruption. She undermines sagacity and exposes the delicacy of male authority by illuminating how deeply society depends on unreasonable credence. Bhootani Mata can be read through feminist and cultural theory as a reminder that **female power in masculine societies is often expatriated onto legend and fantasy**. By uplifting women as goddesses or spirits, society circumvents granting real power to living women. Bhootani Mata enriches femininity beyond courteous and religious spaces. She is the character who attempts to fulfil the desire of the Maharaj Kumar to kill Greeneyes. Both Bhootani Mata and Greeneyes are votaries of the gods; Bhootani Mata in a tantric mode and Greeneyes in a spiritual mode. Bhootani Mata openly claims to affect the course of events while Greeneyes seems to do this innocently. Bhootani Mata appears to be Kausalya's alter ego as she attempts to fulfil Kausalya's desire to get rid of the Princess. Maharaj Kumar defeats them both at this attempt. His victory seems to be victory of the Princess. The position of Bhootani Mata is quite ambivalent. Nagarkar asks about the position of Bhootani:

'Is she the fabrication of imagination? Is she a psychological manifestation of the Maharaj Kumar's fears and hopes? Does she have some foundation in material reality? Certainly she doesn't exist on the same plane of existence as the other women.' (Yasmeen Lukmani: 274)



**Maharaj Kumar's Sister** is a **minor but significant female character**. She is the **incarnation of gendered politics of marriage, association and hereditary honour** in Rajput society. As a royal woman, she is mainly observed through her **marital value**. Her identity is defined by her function within the masculine and medieval order. This echoes the wider condition of royal women in the novel, who are treated as **implements of governance**. She **submits to dynastic duty without resistance**. Her obedience underlines the scarcity and fundamental nature of Mira's defiance. Her resilience reveals the **lack of choice** afforded to women whose lives are entirely composed by male authority. Her character exemplifies the **expurgation of female voice in historical chronicles**. She exists more as a symbol than as a person. This character shows that female subjugation operates most effectively in a normal mode. Though marginal, Maharaj Kumar's sister contributes to the novel's feminist subtext by highlighting the **structural quietening of women** within primitive power systems. Her character represents the immeasurable royal women of history whose lives were shaped by responsibility rather than choice. Being a victimized character, she dies because of an infection in her leg. This infection becomes her root cause of not having marriage with others.

Rasikabai is the singer in the court of Maharaj Kumar. She is the minor character. She symbolizes female devotion, performance and marginal spirituality in medieval Indian society. She is connected with spiritual aspects such as bhakti, music and devotional expressions. She adopts religious practices. Her devotion is socially acceptable and performative. She functions within established cultural norms. Her devotion is safe and radical. Her spiritual expression is tolerated because it entertains, soothes or decorates the cultural space without threatening patriarchal authority. Her devotion coexists comfortably with them. She aesthetically pleases people through her bhajans. Her marginality underscores the narrow limits placed on women's public visibility and spiritual authority. She is a foil to saint Meerabai. Rasikabai's bhakti underpins social harmony whereas Mira's bhakti produces anxiety and rupture. Thus she reproduces the graded nature of female religious expression, from decorative devotion to disorderly otherworldliness. Her character helps the reader to understand why Mira's choices are perceived as dangerous in a world that prefers compliant femininity. Singing of the Little Saint is compared with of the courtesan Rasikabai who ended all her programmes with a bhajans. By the end of the novel, nearly all women in Mewar hang on her lips and are singing her songs.

**Saubhagyavati** is a minor but significant female character. She is a fortunate married woman. She encapsulates the patriarchal ideal of feminine fulfilment that the novel consistently interrogates. She is the symbol of normative Hindu ideal of womanhood. However she is defined by marital bliss, wifely devotion, fertility and auspiciousness. Within the cultural framework of the novel, her value is measured



by her status as *saubhagyawati*, one whose husband is alive and whose life conforms to social expectations. Thus her identity is relational. She embodies social conformity and ritualized femininity. She accepts the codes governing women such as obedience, silence and devotion to the husband. Through her behaviour, Nagarkar highlights how patriarchal ideology is **normalized and idealized**. She illustrates how **language and ritual sustain patriarchy**. The cultural glorification of the *saubhagyawati* status erases female suffering and denies women alternative paths to fulfilment. Her presence exposes the limitations of a system that equates womanhood solely with marital success. Thus she functions as a celebrated and socially sanctioned. She embodies the **ideal against which all women are measured**. It **allows** Nagarkar to question the cultural myths surrounding marriage, female virtue and happiness in medieval Indian society.

**Kumkum Kanwar** reveals **Rajput codes of honour, female sacrifice and the glorification of wifely devotion** in medieval society. She represents the **ideal of the Rajput woman whose identity is inseparable from her husband's honour and fate**. She embodies the cultural expectation that a woman's ultimate loyalty lies in **self-effacement and sacrifice**, even unto death. Through her, Nagarkar foregrounds the tradition of **pativrata dharma**, where female virtue is measured by unquestioning devotion and readiness for suffering. She internalizes patriarchal values fully. Her acceptance of sacrifice highlights the **ideological pressure on women to equate virtue with endurance and self-negation**. The reverence accorded to such figures reveals how patriarchy transforms female suffering into moral capital. She illustrates how **heroic narratives of sacrifice erase women's agency**. She stands as a **counterpoint to Mira's spiritual rebellion**. Her virtue is defined through loyalty to a mortal husband. Her character exposes the **cost of idealized femininity**, making visible the silent suffering behind celebrated cultural ideals.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Present study helps to understand Kiran Nagarkar's interpretation of feminine characters. Meerabai challenges the outmoded image of inactive, housebroken femaleness in historical descriptions. Instructionally, this helps students to ask questions about **male-controlled historiography**. **They can identify active ethical and mystical agents and comprehend how history can be re-told through marginal voices**. **Female characters are demarcated by their inner beliefs and longings**. This motivates learners to study partisanship as a literary hypothesis and to analyze historical techniques that honor **inner life over peripheral action**.



**Present research helps to recognize** bhakti, resistance and spiritual self-sufficiency so that they will be familiar with plural radicalism and argumentative feminism. The study exposes mannish authority and gendered power relations. The illustration of female characters releases paths to interdisciplinary pedagogics by linking literature with history, religion, gender studies and women's spiritual sovereignty. Pedagogically study helps to encourage virtuous reading of women's choices and reserves. Finally the study helps educators to teach literature through the lens of womanly perspectives considering gender, history, devoutness and power interconnectivity.

### **Major Findings**

The major findings of this research are as follows.

1. It is observed that female characters are self-ruling subjects than passive figures. Their individualities can be formed by their inner strength.
2. It can be studied that religiousness and consecration are the commanding gadgets of feminine conflict.
3. The research highlights that womanlike quietness can be viewed as a eloquent expression.
4. Nagarkars female characters are described as intricate entity whose choices dislocate social synchronization.
5. It is found that female characters inhabit spiritual, ethnic and moral spaces.
6. Female characters renders the sensitive and emotional strength entrenched in patriarchal matrimonial prospects.
7. Women's are observed as mediators of narrative change and facilitators of male self-realization.

### **Scope for Further Research**

The research further can be studied as follows.

1. A Comparative Study of Feminine Perspectives with Kiran Nagarkar's Other Indian Historical Novels.
2. Bhakti Movement, Narrative Voice and Gender Studies Witnessed in Indian English Literature
3. Female Characters in Kiran Nagarkar's Other Works
4. Masculinity Studies in Kiran Nagarkar's Select Fiction
5. Postcolonial Feminine Perspectives in Kiran Nagarkar's Selected Novels



6. Silence, Absence and Feminine Expressions in Kiran Nagarkar's Works
7. Cultural Interpretation and Female's Voices in Kiran Nagarkar's Fiction

### Conclusion

Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* proposes a nuanced and unconventional representation of female characters that challenges patriarchal, historical, and literary stereotypes. Women in the novel are not confined to passive domestic roles; instead, they emerge as autonomous individuals whose identities are shaped by inner conviction, spiritual commitment, and ethical independence. Through the figure of Mira Bai and other women characters, Nagarkar foregrounds feminine prejudice as an influential counterforce to mannish expertise and imperial power. The novel redefines resistance by locating it in unworldliness, quietness and non-compliance. Female characters proclaim agency through commitment and inward liberty. This interpretation confounds conformist feminist binaries of tyranny and authorization. It presents women as multifaceted figures whose choices are both redemptive and disorderly. *Cuckold* exposes the delicacy of macho power by depicting male concern and emotional reliance in response to female independence. Thus women function as conceptual promoters that shape the protagonist's self-realization. In conclusion, the illustration of female characters sustains a socially rooted, native radicalism that emphasizes spiritual sovereignty, ethical conflict and personal autonomy.

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