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From Silence to Survival: A Study of Domestic Violence in Kiran Nagarkar's *Seven Sixes are Forty-Three* and *Jasoda*

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Abstract:

Domestic violence is among the most deleterious social evils that affect the lives of women across the boundaries of class, caste, religion, nationality and economic status. It threatens the quality of life, physical and mental health and deteriorates the social fabric of the community. It may manifest in various forms ranging from physical (battering, burning) and sexual assaults (rape, genital mutilation) to psychological (neglect, threats, taunts). Despite advancement in legislation and increase in awareness against domestic violence, it remains pervasive due to the complex interplay of cultural, economic and patriarchal forces. The rigid norms and expectations pertaining to gender roles and responsibilities are established by the patriarchal system. This hierarchical structure of power and dominance works to subjugate women by designating traditional roles of homemaking and childcare to them. Lack of autonomy and agency results in their exploitation in one form or another. Kiran Nagarkar is one of the most prominent writers who paint a realistic picture of the Indian society and the condition of women. In his novels *Seven Sixes are Forty Three* (2003) and *Jasoda* (2017), he

explores the theme of domestic violence and abuse. Nagarkar through his female characters foregrounds the predicament of women in the Indian context. The present paper, through the women characters in the novels, attempts to study how patriarchal power structures lead to the marginalisation and exploitation of women. It highlights how gender norms prove detrimental to the status of women in the society and make them vulnerable to violence and abuse. Violence at the hands of intimate partners, husbands and other family members becomes a threat to their physical and mental well being.

Keywords: domestic violence, physical, sexual, psychological, patriarchy, abuse, autonomy.

Violence against women is a globally prevalent phenomenon that poses a serious threat to the physical, emotional and social well being of women and has negative and detrimental effects on the society in general. Gender based violence is a gross violation of the basic rights of a woman. Despite being major contributors to the functioning of any community, women are often treated as second class citizens due to the gender based discrimination and inequality. Several regressive ideologies, institutions and malpractices give rise to biases and prejudices that result in the subordination of women. The most widespread and vicious manifestation of gender based inequality is the violence that is perpetrated against women.

Over the centuries, women have been relegated to a subaltern position through constant denial of their basic human rights and regressive social practices. Patriarchal power structures and social constructs that permeate the lives of women, subordinate their status in the society. Violence is used as a tool by the male counterparts for the subjugation of women. They are subjected to violence and abuse by men who seek to assert power and control and establish supremacy over them. The female body is often viewed as a mere vessel to bear

children and as a territory that bears the assaults of patriarchy. Malavika Karlekar in her article examines the various dimensions of violence and abuse against women. She asserts that women are subjected to physical, emotional and psychological exploitation in order to keep them subservient and compliant,

It often becomes a tool to socialize family members according to prescribed norms of behaviour within an overall perspective of male dominance and control. The family and its operational unit, the household, are the sites where oppression and deprivation of individual psyches and physical selves are part of the structures of acquiescence: often enough, those being 'moulded' into an acceptance of submission and denial are in-marrying women and children. Physical violence, as well as less explicit forms of aggression, are used as methods to ensure their obedience. (1742)

Violence against women has become quite common in India in the recent decades. Women are subjected to discrimination, violence and abuse in both domestic and public spheres of life. Crimes such as rapes, physical assaults, acid attacks, dowry deaths, honour killings and female foeticides have skyrocketed in rural as well as urban areas. Violence against women is primarily motivated and reinforced by gender norms and values that place women in a subordinate position to men. Domestic violence is the most common crime against women which is inextricably linked to the perpetuation of patriarchy. The institution of marriage often places constraints on women and pushes them to a position where they have minimal stake in decision making and are burdened with childcare and household responsibilities. Cultural and religious practices and customs have been structured in such a way as to promote the exploitation and subordination of women. Discussing the discriminative and unequal economic and social structures, Govind Kelkar says:

While violence against women is part of the general violence inherent in all social structures of class, caste, religion, ethnicity, etc., and in the way the state controls people, the specificity of violence against women underlies aspects of structural violence and forms of control and coercion exercised through a hierarchical and patriarchal gender relationship in the family and society. (2)

The term 'domestic violence' is often used synonymously with 'domestic abuse', 'intimate partner violence', 'conjugal violence' and 'wife battering' to refer to the violence occurring within marriage, cohabiting or non-cohabiting intimate partners. Domestic violence is not limited to physical assault and verbal abuse but can also be defined as a pattern of coercive control by one partner over the other. Threats, emotional abuse and economic deprivation are often used by abusers to dominate the victims. Domestic violence may be defined as "the power misused by one adult in a relationship to control another. It is the establishment of control and fear in a relationship through violence and other forms of abuse" (Kaur and Garg). As pointed out in *Violence Against Women in India: A review of trends, patterns and responses*, domestic violence is "part of a pattern of abusive behaviour and control rather than an isolated act of physical aggression. Physical violence in intimate relationships is almost always accompanied by psychological abuse and, in one-third to over one-half of cases, by sexual abuse" (7). In countries like India, where women are often deprived of means and opportunities, norms and traditions are used to perpetuate gender inequality and reinforce power imbalances, leading to the normalization of abusive behaviour. Fear of social stigma, lack of economic freedom and inadequate support system further exacerbate their vulnerability. Domestic violence not only has debilitating effects on the physical and mental health of the victims but also proves detrimental to the progress of a community and a nation. It is cultural and social conditioning of both men and women that,

along with the cultural construct of gender roles, leads to the exploitation of women. As Johan Galtung aptly points out in 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', "when one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance there is structural violence" (171).

Kiran Nagarkar through his works foregrounds the patriarchal oppression and the precarious existence of women. He depicts the subaltern position of women in the society through his female characters. Nagarkar has highlighted the violence committed against women focusing particularly on the abuse and violence that occurs within the household. In *Seven Sixes are Forty Three*, he deals with the issue of domestic violence in the opening episode itself. Pratibha, the protagonist's neighbour, threatens to set herself ablaze to escape her husband's constant abuse. Pratibha is subjected to regular beatings and mental torture by her drunkard husband, Ajit. Frustrated and helpless because of frequent abuse, she commits self-immolation. A product of the patriarchal society, Ajit considers himself superior to the women of his family and treats his wife like a slave. "He'd hit her whenever he flew into a rage, with whatever came to hand, wherever he could lay his blows" (*Seven Sixes are Forty Three* 12). In the opening scene of the novel, Ajit comes home in an inebriated condition and starts beating his wife like every other day. In her desperation, Pratibha threatens to set herself ablaze, "You hit me once more and I will set fire to myself. I'm fed up. I've had enough. I don't want to live anymore. I don't care what you do. I just don't care anymore" (*Seven Sixes are Forty Three* 12). Her abusive husband goads her on and does not even try to save her when she sets herself on fire. Pratibha's identity is deeply grounded in the Indian views towards marriage and motherhood and obedience to men. Even on her death bed, she requests the doctors to save her as she is worried about taking care of her kids and family, "They need me – my children. And my husband. He needs me too" (*Seven Sixes are Forty Three* 13).

Nagarkar shows how women are conditioned to believe that their identity is dependent on the husband or the men in the household. The patriarchal setup of the society establishes the concept of men being the breadwinners and women being solely responsible for child bearing and household duties. Pratibha worries about her family even after suffering abuse at the hands of her husband for years. Domestic violence affects not only the intimate partners but often includes other female members of the family. Ajit not only batters Pratibha but often beats his aged mother in his drunken state. The protagonist Kushank, recalls his upstairs neighbour Mr.Kathavate who beats his wife and young daughters every night. Kushank's girlfriend Chandani, also becomes a victim of abuse and violence at the hands of her father when he discovers that she is having an affair. Domestic violence is employed as a tool to marginalize women and deny them the right to make their own choices and decisions. Domestic violence strips women of the opportunity to lead a healthy and dignified life. Nagarkar shows "the state of women and their secondary status in the patriarchal society" (Ammanagi 73).

While *Seven Sixes are Forty Three* represents domestic violence in the urban sphere, with post-independence Bombay city as its setting, Nagarkar's *Jasoda* depicts how domestic abuse manifests in rural and under developed regions. The titular character, a dutiful wife, mother and daughter-in-law, is an uneducated woman who struggles to feed her family with the limited resources available in a remote, fictional draught-stricken village in Rajasthan. Jasoda's husband, Sangram Singh, is a violent, abusive and selfish man who thrashes her at the slightest pretext. At the beginning of the novel, when Jasoda goes out in search of water and kerosene, he violently beats her for not preparing his meal on time:

The back of her husband's hand caught her on the 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 fast.’ (*Jasoda* 13-14)

Jasoda is representative of the women belonging to the uneducated and economically weaker sections of the society who are conditioned to believe that obedience, submissiveness and servitude are the desirable merits of a woman. Jasoda never objects to the constant abuse and inhuman treatment, rather accepts it as a part of life and even performs the Vat Savitri puja for her husband’s long and healthy life. Another victim of domestic violence in the novel is Savitri, the wife of Dulare, a lower caste man. When Dulare is insulted by Sangram Singh, Savitri speaks up but is snubbed by both the men, “Dulare slapped his wife. ‘Don’t listen to her, Huzoor, she didn’t mean what she said.’ ‘Better cut your wife’s tongue before it grows longer than your debt.’” (*Jasoda* 15). Savitri is a victim of abuse at the hands of both Dulare and Sangram Singh. While Dulare slaps and beats her, Sangram Singh sexually abuses and humiliates her. Belonging to the lower caste, Savitri is rendered powerless and is exploited by Sangram Singh for his sexual pleasure. Later in the novel, Jasoda learns about the death of Princess Antaradevi, who was stabbed by her husband when he saw the doctor holding her hand, “He proceeded to stab her thirty-one times even as the man kept telling him that he was the family doctor and had been called because the Princess was pregnant and had been throwing up all evening” (*Jasoda* 176). In *Women and Violence: Realities and Responses Worldwide*, Davies discusses how violence is used to impose patriarchal control over women:

Gender violence is a manifestation of an unyielding belief in most societies that women are inferior to men; they are physically weak, socially and economically dependent on men and in continuous need of male protection. Therefore, they are men’s possessions, just like land and property and can be treated as men consider appropriate. Keeping the woman of the family in control is seen as a sign of manhood. (8)

The traditional social and cultural norms regarding gender roles often devalue the role of women and lead to discrimination against women and girls. The deeply ingrained patriarchal pressure to only produce male heirs, causes Jasoda to kill her daughters the moment they are born. Economic deprivation is another form of domestic violence that is used to ensure the subordination of victims. Controlling and restricting access to finances and resources leads to the increased dependence and vulnerability of the victim. Sangram Singh refuses to provide for his family and abandons them in times of crisis. He takes over the local palace by deceit, becomes rich and even marries another woman. Jasoda is left to fend for herself and her family. She struggles to feed the children and her ageing mother-in-law and is forced to migrate to Mumbai, taking up odd jobs and facing abuse at the hands of men. Working as a midwife and then starting a small business helps Jasoda gain economic independence, however even after being aware of her husband's misdemeanours, she remains a devoted and dutiful wife. "In a society where a woman's existence, identity and social status are defined by her marital status, Jasoda has little choice but to stay in an abusive marriage" (Obed 43). It is only after she has built a flourishing business and a secure future for her children that Jasoda is able to break free from her abusive husband.

In both the novels, women are subjected to violence, ill-treatment and abuse at the hands of their own family members. The household, supposed to be a place of safety and security, ironically becomes a place where they suffer discrimination, violence and abuse. Pratibha, Jasoda and even Savitri, are trapped in the cycle of abuse because of their deeply ingrained values and beliefs that a woman's place is subordinate to her husband. They accept abuse and violence as their lot in life. Kiran Nagarkar has highlighted how the institution of marriage in these circumstances acts to privilege male members and disadvantage female members of the household. It empowers the husbands to assert dominance and exercise control over their female counterparts and leads to abuse and exploitation of wives, daughters

and even mothers. However, Nagarkar through his female characters shows how victims of exploitation and violence suffer in silence before attempting to break free from their abusers. Pratibha protests the daily bashing she gets from Ajit and, in an attempt to free herself, threatens suicide. Even though she ends up losing her life, Pratibha attempts to stand up to her abuser. Jasoda on the other hand survives the abuse and later thrives in her life. After decades of violence and abuse at the hands of her husband, she builds a successful business for herself and her children. With economic agency and independence, Jasoda becomes aware of her infinite potential and kills her husband when he threatens to disrupt her family and business. Even Savitri, the woman belonging to the lower caste, breaks free from the chains of abuse and violence. She kills her husband and leaves the village to build a life of her own. The women who had deeply ingrained the patriarchal mindset eventually break free from their submissive and meek shells and actively fight for their survival and a life of dignity. They use violence against their abusers as a means to achieve their freedom., emerging as heroes of their own lives.

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