

## **Landscaping of History and Religion in Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* and Namita Gokhale's *Things to Leave Behind* Novels**

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### **Abstract**

*Indian Sensibilities* are deeds that infuse history and values into a piece of literature that was born, developed and transformed on Indian soil. The term 'Indian Sensibilities' is difficult to define, but we can think of it as a quality that appears in the writings of all Indian authors. To assess the worth of literary texts, one must contextualize the literature with reference to the background of the cultural, historical, and social time periods. Understanding how socio-political events affected Indian sensibilities will be revealed by changing historical events and societal dynamics. "Cuckold" by Kiran Nagarkar and "Things to Leave Behind" by Namita Gokhale provide insightful analyses of Indian sensibilities, their decision-making process, regional focus, and potential for conformity that could lead to a partial understanding of the country. This essay addresses a variety of sensitive topics, including religious ethics, familial relationships, gender discrimination, historical perspectives, landscapes, power and politics, psychological aspects, social hierarchies, inequalities, traditions, and holidays. By illuminating the intricate tapestry of history and religion through these literary landscapes, Kiran and Namita provide readers with a profound and engrossing exploration of the human experience throughout time and space.

**Keywords:** Landscaping of history, landscaping of religion, Cuckold, Things to Leave Behind, Mewar kingdom, Kumaon region.

### **Introduction**

Indian Sensibilities are deeds that infuse history and values into a piece of literature that was born, developed and transformed on Indian soil. The phrase, Landscaping of History refers to the historical backdrop, legacies, regional trends, socio-cultural context, visual arts, architecture, and planning in the time period where the literary works are situated. The incorporation and portrayal of religious themes, beliefs, festivals, rituals, interfaith relationships, spiritual quests, and symbolism in literary works are referred to as Religious Landscaping.

Kiran Nagarkar was a well-known Indian author noted for his many literary achievements. His creative works, which encompass a wide range of literary forms, include novels, plays, and articles. His literary career extended five decades, during which he published eight novels and seven plays. Nagarkar was awarded the Federal Republic of Germany's Order of Merit for his considerable contribution to Indo-German cultural cooperation. Nagarkar's legacy continues with his thought-provoking

work, which has been praised for its depth and creativity. His novel "Cuckold," published in 1997, won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2000. The novel is about Bhoj Raj, the spouse of Bhakti Movement saint Meera Bai, the title of the novel refers to him only. Kiran refers to him as Maharaj Kumar and his life is a reflection of 16<sup>th</sup> century Mewar, including history, politics, palace intrigues, society, religion, warfare, and interpersonal connections. Khushwant Singh praises the novel as, "Cuckold is historical fiction at its best." The other novel chosen for insightful analyses of history and religion is "Things to Leave Behind."

Namita Gokhale is a well-known Indian writer who has made significant contributions to the global promotion of Indian literature. She is most known for organizing the Jaipur Literature Festival, one of the biggest literary gatherings around the world. Ananda Puraskar was also awarded for her significant contribution to Bengali literature. Her novel "Things to Leave Behind," published in 2016, chronicles the complex legacy of the British Indian past from 1840 to 1912, which also won the Sahitya

Akademi Award in 2021. It follows the lives and experiences of two remarkable hill women, Tilottama and her albino daughter Deoki, who weave their stories within the pastoral beauty of the Kumaon region. The depth of Gokhale's involvement with Indian society and its rich cultural heritage is evident in her writings. According to Gokhale, "This novel is written from memories, family histories, conversations, and things read and remembered over the years." (Gokhale305)

### Landscaping of History

In the novel "Cuckold," the historical setting is of 16<sup>th</sup> century Mewar, Rajasthan in India, and the Sisodia dynasty to which the protagonist Maharaj Kumar belongs. He is the eldest son of Rana Sanga and the heir apparent to the throne of Mewar. The Rajput clan has many stories, anecdotes, and memories from the past to the present. In the year 1303, when AlauddinKhalji of Delhi attacked Chittor, the men ofChittor fought to the death and the women committed Johar (practice of mass self-immolation) in Chittorgarh fort, which was led by Rani Padmini. Rana Kumba, who is the great-grandfather of Maharaj contributed architectural constructions like Kumbhalgarh which is the highest fort in Rajasthan. Mewar consists of many other famous architectural figures such as Atithi Palace, Chandra Mahal, and Victory Tower. Maharaj meets Sahasmal, the Head of City Planning to construct wells, channels, drainage systems, roads, and tunnels since the population of the town increasing and problems are faced due to weather changes. Despite the passage of the river Ganga, Chittor's people believe that their mother is river Gambhinee. "We are kings before we are warriors," (Nagarkar205) says Maharaj to encourage a sense of self-respect and self-esteem, reminding individuals to recognize values and dignity in any circumstance they face. Rana Sanga, Maharaj Kumar, Mangal, who was appointed as the Head of Intelligence Services, and other Mewar kings fought against sultans like Muzaffar Shah II of Gujarat, Mahmud Khali II of Malwa, Ibrahim Lodi of Delhi, and Babur of Moghul on barren battlefields of Malwa, Khanua and Panipat. The mountains range like Aravalli, Hindukush, Ramkali hills, Kahraj and Peshgram valleys where the kingdoms crossed to expand their dynasties. The novel emphasizes the regionally specific customs and

political contexts of the Mewar kingdom with its diverse cultural heritage.

The novel "Things to Leave Behind," is a complex tapestry of historical narratives, incidents, and cultural legacy that defined the identity of the hilly region in Kumaon, a portion of the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand and between 1840 and 1912. The Colonial Era is characterized by the British colonial control, which has been shown in historical events such as European civilisation, Indo-European culture, Christianity, and missionaries and development of hill cities like Nainital and Almora. Kumaon was impacted by the Indian independence movement since many locals there actively participated in the fight for freedom. In 1857 Tilottama's uncle Badri Dutt Uprety was hanged for his participation in the Sepoy Mutiny. He addressed the crowd, "I die for my country. I die for the liberation of our land," (Gokhale 36) which left an indelible imprint on them. In 1870 India witnessed an Indo-European telegraph line linking London and India, the Great Trigonometrical Survey, and a legislative act, the Female Infanticide Prevention Act. Sual River, Nainee Lake, Panna, Sat, and Bhim Tals are the beauty of majestic Himalayan waters. The English language which was introduced during British colonial rule has been associated with power and privilege. Almorah Annals is an English weekly publication by Cantonment Press and a rival Hindu publication called Almora Akhbar by the Debating Club of Almora was started. Tilottamaas an educated woman started to read these publications and frequently visited the Municipal Library to read copies of The Times of India, The Statesman, and The Hindu to get information about ongoing events. Indian ground gave hostage to nine thousand Boer prisoners of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899. A new century and a brave new world began with lots of surprises like electric bulbs, radio receivers, the jute industry, cotton textiles, and tea production, British India boasted the third-largest network of railways and many others. The year 1905 witnessed the 'Nightingale of India,' Sarojini Naidu's *The Golden Threshold*, her first collection of poems, and the Swadeshi movement, to promote nationalism and boycott British goods. The Indian Press Act of 1910 was criticized by many nationalists including Tilottama, when she came to know a case was

filed against the English language weekly publication *Bande Mataram*, founded by Bipin Chandra Pal and edited by Sri Aurobindo. Ultimately these activities landscaped the consciousness of nationalism and the spirit of freedom in the young minds of the nation.

### Landscaping of Religion

The novel "*Cuckold*," describes the customs, prayers, and offerings that the characters involve at various events. This was the period in India, where Hinduism and other faiths coexisted according to their respective religious principles. It delves into religious themes, particularly the complex relationships between different religious groups in medieval India. All the Raos, Rawats, and Rajas in the kingdom have only one authority above them that is Shri Eklingji (Lord Shiva), Maharaj says, "*We are His representatives on earth*" (Nagarkar33). The construction of Tridev Mandir by Maharaj's grandfather Rana Raimulhas two floors for the family where the ground floor is for Lord Shiva, the first floor is for Lord Krishna, and the second floor is for Sun God. When Meera was married to Maharaj, on their wedded night she opens up about her relationship, "*I'm betrothed to someone else*" (Nagarkar46) and she portrays Lord Krishna as a human being and in letters she calls Him with names like Shyam, Giridhar, and Gopal. Her friendship and love grow constantly from childhood to adulthood. She is referred to as 'Greeneyes', 'Nautch girl', 'Princess,' and 'Little-Saint,' throughout the novel but not as Meera. She madly performs spiritual songs, bhajans, and dances wherever she roams either in the palace or temple, especially during the festivals of Janmashtami, Holi, and Diwali. She was saved twice by Him, when Maharaj's dai (caretaker) Kausalya tried to kill her because she couldn't fulfill the role of a wife. This shows her worship is divine, pure, and beyond. "*Long live the saint-princess*," (Nagarkar273) the praise she got from the people all around as she is a gifted poet, composer, and mystic of the Bhakti movement. "*Krishna is the yogi. She is the jogan or devotee*," (Nagarkar609).

In the novel "*Things to Leave Behind*," the narrative focuses on the religious lives of numerous generations and the spiritual activities that play a significant role in their daily lives. The temples and shrines of powerful goddesses Kali, Sati, JakhanDevi, and Naina Devidenote that the

Kumaon region is a sacred landscape. Kumaoni, Thuldhoti, and Pirali Brahmins are from high-born castes whereas Rohilla tribes, Nepalese goorkhas, and Dotiyal coolies are the low-caste communities. The novel touches on an issue relating to customs, and rituals when, Jayesh Pant converts to Christianity and changes his name to 'Jonas Jayesh Pant' his uncle, Jeewan Chandra Pant, who is fundamentalistic follows a death ritual to show Jayesh no longer belongs to the Brahmin family and community. This shows the interplay of diverse religious beliefs, and practices, and how they influence individual choices, conflicts, and relationships. Then there is Tilottama, mother-in-law to Jayesh, also a high-born Brahmin and a rationalized person who changes her daughter's name to 'Deoki Diana' so that they both can lead the same community life. This is a religious transformation, how Christianity has influenced the Kumaon region and a result of colonization and missionary work. Gokhale's characterization of Tilottama is a result of her voice and experiences, shedding light on the struggles she faces and the resilience she displays. This parent-child relationship particularly emphasized the protective nature of parents. The blue-eyed Rosemary Boden runs Eden Ashram where leprosy people are treated with great aplomb. Four out of eleven children who were born to leprosy-affected Hindu parents were baptized. When an American visitor, Philander Phipps arrived, all the children began to sing a song from Psalms led by a Hindu child. "*They began with 'The Lord Is Close to the Broken Hearted'. Their voices were strong and joyous, and the distinguished guest listened most appreciatively.*" (Gokhale153) The incident proves the harmony of Indian people irrespective of their caste, creed, and religion. This spirit is seen even in contemporary India.

### Conclusion

Indian history and religion are marked by incredible diversity. A long complex history with many dynasties, empires, rulers, and foreign invasions. Similarly, religion is characterized by a multitude of faiths, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and others. Throughout history, India has witnessed both conflicts and harmony among various religious communities. Understanding both is essential to grasp the complexities of India's past and present. In

modern India, religion continues to be a central aspect of life, and the country's history is reflected in its diverse religious landscape. India is known for its secular constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion while promoting religious tolerance and pluralism.

Both novels contain fascinating information about Medieval and Colonial India. *Cuckold*, focuses on the theological dynamics of royal courtly life, personal problems, and political dynamics of Rajputs and their confrontations with the Mughal Empire during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. *Things to Leave Behind*, is the tension between tradition and modernity as the region undergoes cultural changes due to colonialism. Geographical range focuses on the Himalayan region, and covers a longer time span from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Writers used evocative language in their rich lyrical and comprehensive prose.

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