Discourses of History and Subjectivity: An Introduction

The thesis seeks to underscore the centrality of history in making and functioning of human subjectivity and it simultaneously posits a critique that human beings are merely an effect of their historicity. If subjects see themselves in relation to their social practices, ideologies and discourses, physical-material circumstances, institutional powers and positions, they are also capable of transforming their social set-ups and practices and at times go to the extent of defying the given in existing institutions and structures. Admitting the fact that the subjects are embedded in their social-economic situations and circumstances and derive their powers from the social structures of language, culture, and tradition, and hence they are not autonomous individuals. However, at the same time, one also needs to admit that these power-structures provide them a capacity to posit as subjects by their acts of self-reflectivity and self-differentiation.

Thus, a proper understanding of “subjectivity” involving individual experiences, emotions, beliefs, motives and abilities, requires a perspective in addition to and other than the historicist one. The history-centric approaches treat human subject as consequent upon the forces of history. It is hoped that the discussion around this theoretical frame would help in understanding and analyzing the novels of Kiran Nagarkar.

The term ‘subject’ is often understood in contrast to that of the ‘object’. ‘Object’ is generally understood in the sense of a ‘thing’ or ‘commodity’. It is something that is there in the world, to be seen or observed. The ‘subject’, on the contrary, signifies “a thinking animal”, “a tool making animal” or a human being with an awareness of himself and his relationships”.

(Lohana 1986: 4)

The subject in epistemology generally functions as a counter point to the phenomenal object, and is commonly described as the sum of sensations, or ‘consciousness’ in relation to which the external world can be posited (P. Smith 1988: XXVII). The term also suggests a sense of domination, a person under the control of someone or a being subject to a superior force or structure. The subject is always subject to something, linked with something outside itself. It is never self-contained and some kind of social and cultural involvement is always implied in the phrases such as subject to language, social formation in relation to gender, power, caste, class culture and politics etc. In addition, the term ‘subject’ also contains some sense of agency exceeding subjection or subjectification i.e. a subject as knower, conscious giver of meaning, and an initiator of actions.

Connected with the term ‘subject’, the subjectivity is ‘the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as ‘subject’ (Benveniste in Kaja Silverman 1983: XIII). Donald E Hall notes: it is

[O]ften used interchangeably with the term ‘identity’.
Subjectivity more accurately denotes our social constructs and
consciousness of identity. We commonly speak of identity as a flat, one-dimensional concept, but subjectivity is much broader and more multifaceted; it is social and personal being that exists in negotiation with broad cultural definitions and our own ideals. We may have numerous discrete identities, of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. and a subjectivity that is comprised of all of those facets, as well as our own imperfect awareness of ourselves (Hall 2004: 134).

The subjectivity suggests the cultural contents and the matter of the human interior that one is not born with. Along with conveying a sense of intense emotions and perceptions, it is simultaneously inalienable from a certain types of representations. Stephen Greenblatt extends the semantics of subjectivity with a sense of fashioning one’s self-image or self-presentation “there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulative, artful process” (1984: 2). The concept of ‘subjectivity’ is, thus, amenable to multiple meanings and significations: the realm of subjectivity ranges from the intimate and intense personal feelings and desires to the most objective discourses and ideologies of social institutions and circumstances.

History: The source of the subject

History stands “in reaction to the practice of deducing from first principles truths about how people are obliged to organize themselves socially and politically” (Hamilton 2007:2). The attempt to understand human beings – too divergent and different culturally and socially – in terms of legislation and laws universally applicable would not amount to anything less than the termination of history itself. Hence, human beings and their actions being value loaded, intentional and purposive in character are intelligible only from the perspective of historical reason and consciousness. These do not fall under scientific jurisdiction to be studied through the lenses of universal causality and the uniformity of nature. Human life “coheres... not a theorem but a story, not a science but an aesthetic receptiveness ......” (Hamilton 2007: 63). For historians, human essence and character-if there is any - is intrinsically and inescapably historical. The historians insist “on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds” (Ibid 2007: 3) including human existence. History is an “enquiry into the past of man in society” (Carr 1961: 59) though “the past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present...” (Ibid: 69). History, primarily, studies all the social, political and economic forces operating in a society which put human beings in a certain relations independent of their will. Frederic Jameson puts it more systematically and precisely: “History is what hurts, it is what refuses desires and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis ......” (1981:102). Thus, violence, inequality, exclusion, famine and economic oppression, ethnic-cleansing, racism, religious persecution etc. force human subjectivity to undergo frustrating and constraining experience.
which further constitute the essence of historical exploration and pose a fundamental challenge to the historian’s vocation.

No man is an island and self-contained. History circumscribes us and fabricates us. The significance of history is exhibited in the formation of human subject. As a primordial and ever present force, prior to individual’s germination and maturation, history determines the possibilities and limits of individuals’ achievements and unfolding. There is no outside history. “As soon as we are born, the world gets to work on us and transforms us from merely biological into social units”. (Carr 1961: 36-7)

Even the grasp of the sense and significance of human action and behavior is subject to the situation specific and historically produced.

The actions of human agents, to be intelligible, must be seen against the background of a history, a history of causes and goals, of failure, achievements, and aspirations (Kerby in Schrag: 1997: 43)

There is a constant tension and tussle between human beings and their situations in the society. The forms of their consciousness and ideological locus standi do not remain timeless and the same in every situation. They cannot do with a unitary and unchanging self. In this connection, Gabriel Garcia Marquez has remarked very perceptively:

He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once for all on the day their mothers give birth to them but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves. (Love in the Time of Cholera, 2007)

For structuralist and poststructuralist theorists such as Althusser, Foucault and Lacan, individual subject is viewed as largely conditioned and constructed by the structures of ideologies, discourses and language etc. In their theoretically frames, institutional structures take priority over human agency and determinacy over intentionality. They have almost effaced human subject and questioned its capacity to change the world. Far from being constitutive, the subject is shown to be constituted, the effect, in particular, of specific social practices. (Callinicos 2009: 17)

Highlighting the bleak and depressing vision envisaged by Foucault with regard to the human subject and its incapacity to make and create history, Alien Munslow writes:

...... Man is not able to stand outside society and history and thus generate objective and truthful knowledge. ..... through the functioning of language, we cannot avoid being placed in subject positions where the repression of the world fixes us – like moths pinned to a collector’s board” (1997: 13). For Foucault, there is hardly any difference between knowledge and ideology.
Althusser privileges the subjected status of the human subject. Man for him is an effect of ideological interpellation, a function of ideology. The primary function of ideologies, for him is to fashion individuals as subjects. Human subjects simply act as role-bearers and thus, “Althusser leaves little room for an elaboration of a theory of human agency” (Smith 1988: 17). Continuing with the poststructuralist privileging of structure over agency, Lacan also extends the Freudian position that “Human ego is not even master in its own house” (Freud 1973: 326) and his stance of projecting language as the cause of the subject further reduces subject’s sovereignty and significance. From the Lacanian perspective, the gaze of the other (the symbolic of language, beliefs and ideologies) is a prior condition for one’s making as a subject. The subject can neither function nor remain subject unless it is in the field of the other. To sum up, the mission of man figuring in the discourses of Althusser, Foucault and Lacan is quite frustrating and dehumanizing. For them, human subject is nothing more than an organism trapped and suspended in the web (of language) he himself has spun.

The critique of the poststructuralist gesture towards the human subject/subjectivity should not lead to the impression that human beings are not historically conditioned and situated. It also does not endorse the view that history is dispensable for the making and shaping of human subjectivity. The reflection over issues pertaining to identity, difference, change, tradition, progress, social order, hegemony, justice and recognition constitute the cornerstone of the domain of history and historical inquiry. They are of immense significance for forging human subjectivity. Above all, history is a mode of being in the world. The problem, however, remains with extreme historicism that renders human beings as merely puppet in the hand of historical forces. The problem is with that stand and position immanent in historicism which deprives human subject from its intentionality, autonomy and agency (the capacity of choice-making and self determination). Human beings’ capacity of self-reflexivity, discernment, transcendence and spirituality always exceed the human subject’s discursivity and historicity. So “A person is not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them – or not.” (Smith 1988: XXXIV-V)

**Human Subject: The Driving force of History**

If it is valid to state that history and historicity are inevitable for the achievement and realization of human subjectivity, it is equally valid to hold that the subject and subjectivity are indispensable for the history to occur and sustain. History is conceived and conceptualized in the human mind, and it is later that distinguishes and differentiates human beings from the rest of the species. “The object is dependent for its status as an object on there being a subject to differentiate it as such”. (Myers 2009: 115). Such individual traits as affectivity, expressivity, innovation and creativity, rapture, solidarity, and recognition, purposivity, resolution, experience, value-seeking and meaning etc. cannot be reduced to the flux of a person’s collectivity despite
his immersion in his historically specific situation. “No-one is ever fully explained by [his/ her] socio-historical category – there is always some surplus of ‘humanness’ directed towards the future”. (Dentith 1999: 100)

Human subject cannot be reduced to the material world of representation. “To be a subject” and “be a representation belonging to subject” (Carr 1999: 21) are not one and the same thing. Speaking subject is different from the spoken subject. Along with the self-reflexivity, the act of thinking, knowing, expressing, perceiving, imagining and violation are some of the attributes of the human subject. Any historic-materialist approach to grasp the subject leads to its reduction to the subject represented. “The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world”. (Wittgenstein 1963: 5.632). The subject “is the prime condition of the possibility of the world, but only insofar as the world has meaning for us, it does not determine the world’s being” (Carr 1999: 134).

The two descriptions of the subject – subject for the world and object in the world – are equally necessary ….” (Carr 1999: 135) to highlight the coalesce of the transcendental as well as historic-empirical dimensions of human beings. For German philosopher of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, the experience of ‘I’ is much more fundamental than experience of the personality or worldly identity.

The former is experienced through an inner mechanism that he calls the “transcendental unity of apperception”, different from the “empirical unity of apperception”. The latter is the source of worldly self-awareness. Thus, the inner-self-awareness and outer self-awareness are accessed through the two different faculties of the human.

To be a subject or self implies “to adopt a subjective attitude towards the rest of the world…” (Myers 2009: 36). Such a person refuses to be seduced by the razzle-dazzle of his worldly exposure with a highly enthusiastic and impassioned spirit, the person confronts and critiques all kinds of domination and orthodox, clericism and official cults. For example, Kabir denounces the excess of the institutionalized religion of his time prevalent both in the Hindu and the Muslim communities. The subjectivity of such a person constantly grapples with the question of making sense of his/her life.

The self can be understood as a symbolic project that gives us a guiding orientation to ourselves, to other people, and to the broader society. The self, in this sense, is a process of symbolic elaboration; we use symbolic materials (languages, images, signs) to interpret our motives and the motives of others, and to tell and retell narratives of identity. (Elliot 2001: 4)

The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, develops this point in a very impressive way.
We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity if worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues. To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided questions, one to which there could not in principle be an answer.

So one crucial fact about a self or person that emerges from all this is that it is not like an object in the usually understood sense. We are not selves in the way that we are organisms, or we don’t have selves in the way we have hearts and livers. We are living beings with these organs quite independently of our self-understandings or – interpretations, or the meanings things have for us. But we are only selves in so far as we move in a certain space of questions. (1990: 34)

The spirited and soulful person provides “a catalyst for the transfiguration of the life of self and society” (Schrag 1997: 126) and registers protest against all hegemonic aspiration and practices. An immanence of transcendence operates in all walks of his life. Such a person curtails any temptation to achieve Godly posture. This soulfulness and spirituality provides him all safeguards to fight against any absolutization of beliefs or creeds.

India occupies a very position with regard to the issue of selfhood and subjectivity. There have been varied perspectives and traditions, pertaining to the nature of self, inscribed in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavadagita, Buddhism, Jainism, Sanikhya-yoga etc. In many philosophical schools, the purpose of the self-knowledge is assumed to seek the highest value of life: ‘Mukti’ (liberation). The self is primarily understood as a composite of knowing, thinking, feeling and doing and a person is taken to be as the knower, feeler and actor (jñāta, bhokta and kartā). In Indian wisdom traditions, one common assumption is that there is an inalienable relationship between one’s actions and their consequences. Unrestrained indulgence in worldly and sensuous pleasure leads to sufferings and bondage. So, according to the Upanishadic and Vedantic injunctions, the true and lasting happiness is attained not by the pursuit of money and power, but through the attainment of Sat, Chita and anand (truth, consciousness and bliss). Inexhaustible source of happiness lies in the exploration of the interior and not in the externalities. Performance of one’s duties without a sense of attachment and expectation is an illustrations injunction embodying ‘transcendence in immanence’.

A great soul force, Mahatma Gandhi, inspired profoundly by the tradition of Indian culture, wisdom and values and a trenchant critic of modernity and denouncer of modern civilization espouses that enjoyment of freedom solely rests with individuals and their mental attitude” (Gandhi 1961: 182:9). One’s spiritual power or soul-force becomes fully developed though self-sacrifice, one has mastered the technique and has attained Swaraj or control over the
mind is free.” (Dalton 2011: 25). For Gandhi, obedience to one’s self leads to freedom: “the only tyrant I accept in this world is the still small voice within” (cited in Dalton 2011: 22). His conviction in the soul-force makes him embarks on non-violence, violence for him is a use of body force and thus “those who take the sword shall perish by the sword” (Hind Swaraj 1998: 70).

An ardent follower of Gandhi, Dr. Rammanohar Lohia also criticizes the modern materialistic civilization as it produces endless boredom and tension in people.

In his view, in today’s world, “man has to put up with the endless boredom of reproducing himself without variations” (1986: 70). According to Dr. Lohia, the root cause of modern man’s unhappiness lies in his failure to strike an accord between the interior and the exterior, the spiritual and the material. Without “a culture of outward activity and inward poise” and “the sloth of poise and the strife of activity” (Lohia 1986: 70), the modern man cannot obtain the “total efficiency”. By striking a negotiation between revolution and compassion that is civil disobedience and with a ‘personality of poise as well as struggle’, one can take part in the new civilization of tranquil activity”. (73)

A simple perusal of the two sections (History: the Source of the Subject and Human Subject: the Driving force of History) may reveal that man is both an actor and acted upon, an essence and construct, at once. Simultaneously, one cannot ignore the complex social, historical and cultural specificities that account for one’s making and shaping, and at the same time, one cannot be explained fully and finally in terms one’s historico-cultural categories. A sensible and reasonable accounting of human condition must avoid the two extremes: dissolving the individuality and subjectivity of a person into an impersonal and collective flux of history and treating the entire social structures as the mere consequence of individual actions and initiatives. Human being entails contradictory impulses, Louis A. Montrose says:

The term subject has come to suggest ‘an equivocal process of subjectification: on the one hand shaping individuals as loci of consciousness and initiators of action – and on the other, positioning, motivating, and constraining them within – subjecting them to – social networks and cultural quotes that ultimately exceed their comprehension or control (in Veeser 1989: 21).

The similar gesture is showed by Mikhail Bakhtin. “An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero; no form that he could fill to the very brim”. (in Dentith 1995: 63)

The connection between the individual and history is stated by Marx very perceptively: Men make history but they do not make it as they please: they do not make it under
circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. (in Callinicos 2009: XXVI)

**Kiran Nagarkar: An Introduction**

Kiran Nagarkar (born in 1942) is one of the most significant, wide-ranging, provocative and living writer in India. “It would not be an exaggeration to consider Kiran Nagarkar as one of the best recognized and most talented of Indian English novelists. (Paranjape 2009: 130). His works are attempts to make formulations of the tragedy and alienation existence unleashed by the socio-historical conditions of India (post-colonial). With a sense of ideological commitment and concern, his works are searing critique of contemporary social realities. An ideologue of modernity, his writings exhibit a denouncement of the religious-ideological militancies and extremist upsurging in Indian society. With an emphasis on the religious, linguistic, economic and social problems and issues, and giving voice to the deprived and marginalized sections of Indian society are the central motivations of Nagarkar’s oeuvre.

Born in a Marathi family, Chitpavan Brahmin, living in Mumbai, Kiran Nagar is critical of religion, caste, hegemonic and oppressive structures, generating such burning problems as hierarchy, discrimination, exclusion and untouchability. He represents and exhibits an other of the religion-caste-class domination. Markand Pranjape calls “Nagarkar’s modernism rebellious without being revolutionary, irreverent without being impious.” (2009: 133). On account of his uncompromising critique of community and culture, Paranjape dubs Nagarkar as “a cultural outsider” (133), placing him along with Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Keki N. Daruwalla, and Jayanta Mahapatra and U.R. Anantha Murthi. “Kiran Nagarkar is a part of this larger tradition of Indian English Literature in which not so much insiders and majorities, but outsiders and minorities have found prominent voices”. (Paranjape 2009: 133)

As a bold and subversive writer, Kiran Nagarkar traces his lineage and influence to Tukaram, Kabir and the Tamasha (a show of entertainment) tradition that gives a capacity to laugh at oneself. In his view, people have become intolerant because of the loss of touch with rich tradition of self-critique and self-caricature. He is a ribald author. Kiran Nagarkar presents very dystopic and disturbing pictures in almost all his writings. Above all, his writings spring out from life and his characters instill a sense of critical consciousness towards social issues and problems.

A recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award, India’s highest literary award, for his landmark novel, Cuckold and Marathi award winning avant-garde novel, Seven Sixes are Forty-Three (originally written in Marathi (Saat Sakkam Trechailis). He has also written Ravan and Eddie, God’s Little soldier, The Extras (Novels), two plays written in Marathi, Bed Time Story and Kabirache Kay Karaiche, besides Screen-Scripts and film criticism. The thesis, however,
concentrates on his first four novels only, Seven Sixes are Forty Three, Ravan and Eddie, Cuckold and God’s Little Soldier. Very recently published novel, The Extras, by the author, could not be delved into an account of time-constraint.

Here, an attempt has been made to study the novels of Kiran Nagarkar with reference to the discourses of history and subjectivity. In this study, the main emphasis is on the representation of the subjectivities of the characters figuring in the novels. It accounts for how their subjectivities are sites of negotiation between the personal and the social. There is a constant tension between the character and the specific situations they located. It is all about the way they live their live embodied in their historico-cultural situations along with the agential capacity of choice -making and self-determination.

**End Notes:**

1. Discourses are any means by which human meanings, values and beliefs are constituted and communicated “a discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (Burr 1995: 48). Human beings are produced through the circulating discourses of their history and society.

2. Besides, being a product of his/ her history, the human subject is also a critical self-knower that endows him with the capacity to transcend the given, including history. This dimension of human person is known as the ‘transcendence’ and spirituality. Thus, the condition of human beings and their capacities may be understood in terms of the phrase, ‘the historic-transcendent-spiritus’.

3. “The transcendental unity of apperception”, a key phrase in Kant’s philosophy, signifies a ‘unity of consciousness’. Apperception refers to ‘the self conscious experience’. “ ‘The unity of apperception’ consists in the “‘I think” which accompany all my perceptions’… It consists of my immediate awareness that stimulates experiences belonging to me … This apprehension of unity is called ‘transcendental’ because I could never derive it from my experience”… The unity of consciousness ‘precedes’ (Scruton 2001: 44) all the experience.

4. The term “ribald” suggests the use of language or behavior referring to sex in a rude but humorous way. This term came in circulation from the French satirist, Francois Rabelais
(1494-1553) whose works are noted for their humor and parody of medieval learning using sex and body exorbitantly to a fern human values.