Writing the Region, Imagining the Nation: A Reading of Bhalchandra Nemade's *Kosla*

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I

Bhalchandra Nemade (b.1938) is one of the pioneers among the modern Indian novelists of post-1960 period, who marked a departure in the way fiction is used to represent reality. His novel *Kosla* (1963) appeared in the same decade as two well-known novels: Anatha Murthy's *Samskara* (1965) in Kannada and O.V.Vijayan's *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (1969) in Malayalam. While A.K.Ramanujan's translation of *Samskara* that appeared in English translation in 1976 soon became an iconic work of modern Indian fiction, the other two novels did not receive the attention they deserved. O.V.Vijayan's self-translation of *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* was not able to capture the resonance of the dense idiom of the original that had become a cult book for the generation of the late sixties. O.V.Vijayan was a well-known political cartoonist at the national level and had made a name for himself as a political commentator. Besides, his translation was one of the first translations issued by Penguin India. All this ensured a certain visibility for Vijayan's work though it did not receive the attention *Samskara* received. Nemade's novel had established itself as a classic in Marathi by the late 1960s, but the English translation appeared only thirty three years after its publication in Marathi. Perhaps Nemade's novel was the most difficult to translate into English among these three. Sudhakar Marathe's translation has done justice to the original but the linguistic and stylistic complexity of *Kosla* is as much an attribute of its architectural design as its innovative narrative mode and tone. *Kosla* has to be studied as an Indian novel of seminal significance to understand the directions taken by Indian society in the post-colonial period. While we tend to celebrate even minor works of Indian English fiction as 'international literature', works of crucial importance to the study of Indian society are routinely ignored even when translations of the originals exist. Of late, social scientists have made use of Indian fiction in Indian languages to some extent, but no course in Social Sciences in India contains fictional works written in Indian languages.

These three novels merit attention not because they appeared in the same decade, but they take a hard look at Indian modernity and provide us with insights into its moral failures. They do it with involvement and compassion that does not carry the burden of ideological baggage. By the nineteen fifties, the social realist tradition had become moribund and had lost its capacity to develop the narrative apparatus necessary to represent a society caught in moral dilemmas that could not be resolved in terms of simplistic idealistic solutions. The innovative nature of the experimental idiom used in these novels attests to the fact that a critique of society necessarily involves developing a new perspective on society. It is possible to argue that each of these texts has altered the relation between form and content and redefined the very direction of the novel in their respective languages. The new narrative idiom discovers and recovers social and personal spaces that were invisible and intractable to conventions of social realism. This discussion of *Kosala* will focus on its treatment of the moral crisis in the Indian society of the 1960s, the search for the new and emergent social imaginary that is articulated in the novel.

Nemade has been identified with the group of writers in Marathi advocating a 'nativist' approach to literature. Nemade's essay, "The Marathi Novel 1950-1975" outlines a history of Marathi novel tracing it from the colonial times in the 19th century to the present. He talks of three trends in the history of the novel, the *Yamunaparytan* trend, the *Mochangad* trend and the *Muktamala* trend. The *Muktamala* trend gives primacy to convention rather than life and may be termed 'formalistic' in approach. This

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type of novel avoids action and has an affected way of narration. Nemade puts the well-known Marathi novelists like V.S.Khandekar, N.S.Phadke, P.B.Bhave, P.S.Rege and Baba Kadam in this category. The *Mochangad* trend revels in fancy and may be counted as 'popular literature'. The dominant tendency here is to produce a 'non-existent reality'. Eminent writers such as V.S.Khandekar, Ranjit Desai and Haribhau Apte are cited as examples of this category by Nemade. Obviously, he considers the *Yamunaparyatan* trend as central to the history of Marathi novel. He defines this trend in these words: A novelist selects the theme as a verbal action with specific moral angle in the context of the multi-faceted relation between the individual and the community. And in keeping with the theme, the style organizes the form through the medium of language using various techniques.[1]

According to Nemade, the works of novelists such as H.N.Apte, V.M.Joshi, Sane Guruji and Bhau Padhye come under this trend. Nemade believes that this central trend in Marathi novel reflects a response to colonization and modernization. The creation of prose literature was an effective way of countering the oppression created by imperialistic and colonialist forces. The novel of the reformist kind should be seen as part of the organized movements and activities based on reason. It was the expression of a dynamic society which was responding to the new challenges in the wake of the encounter with the superior technology of a dominant culture. The formalist novel of the *Muktamala* type enters a 'mystified world of fantasy' affording escapist routes from the crucial problems of the day. The realist tradition enunciated by *Yamunaparyatan* is notable for its activist role in addressing the larger moral issues of the society. *Yamunaparyatan* talks of the young widow's plight in a convention-bound society. Nemade notes that this tradition subsequently became dormant in Marathi literature as the society lost its larger moral direction. In the post-1960 period in Marathi literature he finds a return to this tradition and feels that it has the vitality to address urgent socio-political and moral issues. Nemade's own novel has to be studied in this context of Marathi novel.

It will be a misnomer to term Nemade as a 'nativist' in the sense of being a 'revivalist' of the obscurantist variety. What he has attempted is to trace a critical tradition in the history of Marathi novel and emphasize its contemporary relevance. He clearly states that: "Culture is not a hot-house, but a soil-bound process; literature is not a theoretical construct but a living phenomenon."[2] A novelist should have 'a nativist awareness' of the roots of a society and its history. Uncritical acceptance of the alien traditions without reference to native histories will result in fraudulent discourses. An uprooted internationalism that parades itself as cosmopolitanism has the effect of disorienting the creative engagement of the artists in pursuit of false goals. The fantasy worlds created by the formalists did not address the living problems of contemporary society and hence Nemade argues for a critical realism that engages the social and the political issues from the perspective of historical awareness. Nativism in this sense, is not a celebration of a 'grand tradition' but an awareness of the socio-political issues that animate the larger moral issues a work of art is derived from. It is an attempt to retrieve and retain a strong sense of community that sustains an ethnic culture.

II

Kosala, seen from this point of view, is the harbinger a critical realism that renovates the mainstream of Marathi novel by interrogating its foundational principles. Though Baba Padamji's social realist tradition could revitalize Marathi society, it had lost its moorings in the twentieth century.

Pandurang Sangvikar is the main character in *Kosala.* The novel traces his journey from childhood to youth. The novel is divided into six sections, each one focusing on a particular phase of his life. Sangvi is a village in the Khandesh region of Maharashtra. Pandurang's father is a rich farmer of the village, and his childhood is spent in the shadow of his disciplinarian ways. The first section deals with his unpleasant childhood and his relations with his family members. He moves out of the village to study in a college in Pune. The second and third sections describe the life in the college for the next four years. He drifts away from his family during this time, with the father's menacing figure lurking in the background. Pandurang fails in the examination and is haunted by a sense of failure. He stays on in Pune to repeat his examination and feels lonely and lost in the big city. Finally he is back in village, with nothing to show to the world after spending long years in Pune. The last two sections deal with his life in the village, alienated from family and community in search of questions he is not equipped to answer.

It must be obvious that the novel is more of a digressive narrative with several episodes loosely connected. The tone is set in the very opening sentence: "Me, Pandurang Sangvikar. Today, for instance, I am twenty five years old. Honestly, there is only this thing worth telling you."[3] The tone is one of irreverence and rejection from the very beginning. Pandurang feels hemmed in by his family and the world around him. The towering image of his father

leaves him no space for asserting his identity. Once Pandurang, along with his friend Eknath sets out to see the hills and comes back late in the evening. He gets punished by his father: " My legs were throbbing. On top of that, of course, Father plied the switch. I may not mind anything else, but I cannot take being struck with a switch. I shouted at him that this was hardly in keeping with our Hindu religion. Damn your daily prayers in the temple."[4] What vexes Pandurang further is father's miserliness and greed for money. He would make Pandurang apply for freeship at the high school by showing low income, though they were quite well off. He would face humiliation in the class for this. Pandurang adds: " Father was most terrifically after money."[5] Pandurang would practice flute but his father hated the idea of his son playing flute. This also can be seen as one of the earliest scenes in the novel where his family would not approve of his artistic inclinations. Pandurang has his problems with some bullies in the school, engages in night-long battles with the rats that damage his books, resolves to put his life in order according to a set time-table, wants to 'do something great' in life. Most of all, he wants to escape from the village, primarily from his father who, he is afraid, will put him on some short agricultural course and force him into the family profession of tending the agricultural farm. He is greatly relieved when he is sent to a college in Pune for study.

Kosla is a *bildungroman* which portrays the struggles of a young man to discover his own identity. The retrospective gaze of the twenty five year old Pandurang Sangvikar documents those incidents and events that have a bearing on what he is now. His fancies, friendships, failures, all become coloured by the larger theme of the quest for an authentic self and a meaningful relationship with the society around him. In his father he confronts patriarchy for the first time in all its ruthlessness. Later, he would realize that all social institutions are built on hierarchy and they are all equally oppressive. The college and its environment have very little to inspire a creatively restless mind like that of Sangvikar's. He has to cross the gulf between the rural and the urban worlds which seem to be miles apart. He disapproves of his Maushi dressing up and going out, and even suspects her morality: " Everybody in Pune dresses up, it is true. But it is not nice for one's own Maushi to dress up and strut about. Ö Ö But even after behavior like Maushi's if a woman's husband calls her his wife, why anyone else say anything about him." (28). Later he discovers how his friend Madhumilind Ichalkaranjikar seduces girls and feels no guilt about abandoning them. The rebel in him cannot approve of the indulgences of his friends. Sangvikar is a victim of his own contradictions.

In every letter from home, his father mentioned the money he was spending on him and urged him to study well. Pandurang was profligate with money and this landed him in quite a few troubles. The boys from Pune with their superior ways would extract tea from him and exploit him. They were full of self-importance and would correct his English pronunciation. Pandurang says: "Heck! These three were crooks. You'd have to call them crooks. Mind you, once I conveyed my intention to go to dine with them at home — saying, I would do one Sunday with each of you in turn —— they even stopped passing by my door" (31). Pandurang is quick to notice that behind the urban sophistication was the same greed and duplicity he had noticed in the village in his father and others. He notices the same shallowness even in matters of art. He found the comic plays that were performed in college that incited virtual laugh-riots extremely disturbing. Pandurang's own sensibility is at a formative stage and his confrontation with the duplicity and philistinism that characterized the elite institution in Pune wakes him to the complexity of his surroundings. Since self-development happens in relation with the environment of one's own being, Sangvikar's self-creation becomes psychologically harrowing. His disillusionment with the 'learned teachers' adds to this state of confusion. He says: "Truth to tell, the notions I used to have before about the erudition of my teachers proved correct in only one or two cases" (p.55). Most of the teachers had nothing new to say. The teachers of Sanskrit and Marathi left him cold. As the Secretary of College Debating Society, his attempts at Public Speaking turn into disasters. Even serious occasions such as a speech by a Gandhian or a debate on "War and World Peace," arouses laughter when handled by Sangvikar. He rarely attended classes and when he did so he and his friends would distribute parodies of famous lines from Marathi poems.

Sangvikar was unable to handle money and this lands him in a series of problems. As Mess Secretary, he discovers that there is a deficit of six hundred rupees at the end of the year. He has been sympathetic to Ramappa, the cook who has spent a lifetime in the hostel's kitchen and is unable to accept that he is telling lies. He had entrusted the job of collecting money to Vaidya and now Vaidya blames Ramappa. Finally, he has to send a letter to his father requesting for money, keeping aside the humiliation it involved. The theme of money is central to the narratives of growing up. In Sangvikar's case, it is his sensitivity and lack of ruthlessness that turns him into a victim. While those who can exploit the system flourish, students like him end up as failures. When he left the course in history and opted for Marathi and English, his father was again furious. He wrote: "You are an ass. If

you must read the *Dnyaneshwari,* why go to college for that? Don't we read it at home too?" (p.122).

After his initial unpleasant experiences as office bearer in the college mess and debating society, he withdraws completely into a cocoon. The novel's title suggests the formative phase of an insect before it emerges fully grown into light. Sangvikar's struggles with his environment bring out the contradictions in himself as well as the system. The middle class of Maharashtra had become self-seeking and consumerist in the post-1947 period. The individual was the measure of all things. This meant that community values or anything that would benefit society at large had very little relevance for the young generation. After withdrawing from public activity, Sangvikar reads recklessly and is plagued by thoughts of all kinds. He even observes silence for eight days in a row. There are times when he walked entire nights through the hills or the streets. Once he even lands up in the police station, along with his friend for wandering in the nights.

He had a Marathi teacher called Gune who had reputation of being a good scholar and writer. He kept a house in Mumbai and another in Pune. This obsession with security in life was at odds with the lofty ideas of modernism he elaborated. Gune would buy the latest books and comment on the latest ideas in his critical works. Sangvikar met many Marathi writers at his place and found most of them pompous and insincere. He has a long argument with an eminent Marathi writer who states that English poets had made greater progress than poets in many other languages. Finally, he parts ways with Gune whose annoyance at Sangvikar's critical tone was reflected in his words, " Your reading is inadequate and your chattering excessive" (p. 189). One of the final arguments they had was over Gune's statement, "literary writers are superior to ordinary human folk" (p.189). Sangvikar's line of thought shows how he was against setting the literary as an insular domain of sanctity cut off from ordinary life: "Now I have myself seen many people who are great and yet haven't written a single line. Only fifteen per cent can read and write, so does that mean there is no greatness in the remainder of humanity?" (Ibid). The larger moral question that *Kosla* raises can be located here. Literature need to be anchored in the ordinary life of the community. The flow of common life that brings out the contradictions in the ideological positions of intellectuals who live a double life, one at the personal level and the other at the intellectual level, bothers Sangvikar. The positions of critics like Gune have something spurious about them. He would rather align with the ordinary and observe life critically, than profess any theory that may sound lofty but contradict the life he lived. In this sense, one of the central themes of *Kosla* is how to bring life and art/ literature in consonance with each other. He finds the fascination with the new or modern inauthentic since it does not enable Indians comprehend life lived around him. The intellectual fascination with the West should not become a narcissistic pursuit for self-importance. Nemade's own nativist position may be read into the text here but, as argued earlier, it is not a celebration of the obscurantist and regressive.

III

Sangvikar suffers a traumatic loss in the death of his sister, Mani. He was very close to his younger sister. When he got the news of her death he could not believe it: "I was so shaken I thought, How can anyone just die like that?" When Mani was ill, his father was busy demolishing their house and rebuilding it. He felt his father had not paid enough attention to her. Only occasionally he would bring a doctor. Sangvikar blazed with rage after hearing the news: "I said, I will murder Father. I'll kill Grandma. Then I will set fire to that whole house. I'll burn all their cadavers in that house. Spare only Mother. O to die thus" (150). Sangvikar could not contain the fury and rage at the death of his sister for many days. He buys a yellow sari such as little girls wear, cuts it into pieces, burns them and burns his own fingers in the blaze. He wanders through the streets of Pune during nights. The anguish he felt at her death was his initiation into the mystery of death. Perhaps Sangvikar had felt such intense pain all his life. His anger against the insensitive father now becomes an awareness about the vulnerability of life itself. He makes a trip to Ajanta around this time. The huge sculptures of Buddha there along with the paintings on his life and philosophy move Sangvikar deeply. His own pain appears small and trivial in comparison with the burden of pain Buddha had internalized in his gestures and visage:

> This suffering at once expansive and infinitesimal cannot be grasped between one's fingertips. It is a sorrow that whirls round and round. Even to drink of sorrow one needs to cup palms of sorrow. It is impossible to measure this desert-vast sorrow by my cowrie-sized sorrow. Mine are circumscribed little woes. How can I perceive this face through the narrow chink of my pain? I crash down into the abysmal sorrow on that stone face. Now the circumference of my pain too becomes immeasurable (153).

The tone of this passage is different from that of earlier passages. The awe inspired by the art of Ajanta is reflected in the dense writing in this section. This becomes an 'intertext' to capture the grief at the bereavement of Mani. Sangvikar's passage through this traumatic experience

amounts to a rite of passage from the innocence of carefree adolescence to a stage of greater maturity. Now he distances himself from the new house built by his father since it signifies his patriarchal arrogance and insensitivity. He sees it as a tomb built on the dead body of his sister. He feels that the old house was better. His lost childhood spent in the open spaces in the company of people comes back to him. The new house was like a fortress, shutting off people from gaining easy access. When he goes to his new room, he finds it isolated and closed to the outside world. He looks for an opportunity to have a showdown with his father. Finally, he talks back to his Father for an hour without pause, addressing him irreverently. Mother had to drag him away from there. The break with his father is now complete.

Pandurang's emergence as a young man is accompanied by a deepening sense of alienation from his family, village and community. It is here that Nemade's ironic comments on the historical discourse become relevant. We have noted earlier that one of the pastimes of Sangvikar and his friends was to parody the famous lines from Marathi poetry. Sureh, a friend of Sangvikar, begins a parody of history textbooks which gradually becomes a way of lampooning nationalist historiography. Once, both of them were locked up in the police station for the night, for wandering in the streets. Here they tried the patience of the policemen by resorting to the discourse of history text-books:

Every government used to have a Police Department.

Now you might ask who is this Government? What does Police mean?

Now, that gentlemen, who in the public street went about openly in a pair of shorts, with a stave in his hand, and caught thieves for you—that was a Policeman.

It appears that Policemen must have been born out of an inherent desire for law and order in the Nation. Because, why else would anyone do the work of catching thieves, in shorts at that, and on a measly income of eighty or ninety rupees a month.

Now what does Government mean? Every nation used to have a Government.

Some eight or ten ancient persons would come together, and for a salary they would look after the balance sheet of the Nation.

Once in a way, two or three governments would come into conflict.

This does not mean the Oldies themselves came to blows. First having created some quarrel out of nothing, the Oldies would send altogether different younger men to their National borders to fight, while they themselves watched the fun from the rooftops. (178)

There are many such passages in the novel that become hilarious interludes in the narrative. The idea of history as a grand narrative documenting the momentous events in the life of the nation is lampooned from the perspective of youth who do not see themselves as part of the nation. Sangvikar's alienation from the family and society assumes a larger political dimension here. In his introduction to the English version of the novel, Chandrasekhar Jahagirdar has noted that the Maharashtrian middle class's shift towards the values of material success, careerism, social status and prestige has created a crisis of values and this results in the alienation of Sangvikar from the larger society. He also adds that Sangvikar is put off by the pervasive 'phoniness' of the system:

What hurts is to find that in the adult world that surrounds him, values are systematically distorted behind facades of social decency and institutional security. The hypocrisy blankets both the rural and urban so that in *Kosla* there is no nostalgia for some kind of rural stability destroyed in the process of social change. The hypocrisy pervades every area of life—from agriculture in the villages to the literary circles in the cities. (p.xi)

Nation as a moral idea has to be anchored in the life of the community. Modernity as it was defined in the colonial context had questioned the unbridled individualism of the Western culture and emphasized the moral values that would enable us to define an inclusive nation. The 'phoniness' that Sangvikar experiences at every stage of his journey, from the village to the city, indicates the failure of the moral imagination that underlies the idea of an Indian nation. In writing the region of Maharashtra, Nemade is pointing to the illegitimacy at the core of the nation and the need to re-imagine it.

In the last two sections of the novel the author points to the resources that may hold out the possibility of such a reimagining. Sangvikar is now back in his village, having failed in the B.A. examination. His days are given to aimless wanderings and reflections. He reads Mahanubhav literature of the eleventh century and finds a kindred soul in the figure of Chakradhar Swami who had preached renunciation as a way of discovering oneself. He quotes the following lines from Chakradhar with approval: "One's own country needs to be forsaken:/ One's own village needs to be forsaken:/ The relation of relations particularly needs to be forsaken." (222). Sangvikar is unable to follow the path of renunciation, caught as he is in moral doubts for which there are no clear answers. His friend Giridhar who shares his alienation and sense of futility still is capable of acting. He chooses to put into practice what he felt was right.

Sangvikar, on the other hand, feels a sense of void, unable to believe in anything. He knows it takes courage to say, "No" and that is what is needed to reconstitute oneself. It is this realization of the need to say 'No' that makes this novel a comment on Indian modernity.

Nemade's linguistic and stylistic experiments merit detailed discussion. But, here, for want of space we can only highlight a few notable features of his language and style.

The use of colloquial speech, particularly the slang of the college youth, gives the novel an expansive rhythm and flow which can absorb a variety of experiences that are comic, gross, profound and sometimes, even sublime. He moves to the densely lyrical passages on Ajanta and the meditative passages of the last two sections without disrupting the energetic tempo of the narrative. Words such as 'for instance' and 'etc.' suddenly crop up and lighten the narrative even as it allows us to see the mind of the narrator in a flash. The subtle humour of the parodic passages mimicking the nationalist historiography must be the first example of post-modernist pastiche in modern Indian fiction. The range of his stylistic variations from rustic humour and folk-tale to Baudelairean wanderings in the city communicate a variety of moods and attitudes that gradually build up the anguish and agony of a generation caught in a moral crisis without easy solutions. It is a novel that needs to be studied deeply for what it offers in terms of style and substance.

Notes

1. See Ganesh Devy, ed., *Indian Literary Criticism: Theory and Interpretation*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010, p. 194.
2. Ibid., p. 193
3. Bhalchandra Nemade, *Cocoon*, translated from Marathi (*Kosla* first published in Marathi in 1965) by Sudhakar Marathe, New Delhi: Macmillan India, 1997, p. 1. (All subsequent page numbers referred to are to this edition.).
4. Ibid., p, 3.
5. Ibid

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