

## Between Tradition and Transformation: Representing Contemporary Indian Youth in Sudeep Nagarkar's *That's the Way We Met*

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### Abstract:

Sudeep Nagarkar's *That's the Way We Met* (2012) offers a significant representation of contemporary Indian youth through its portrayal of love, friendship, family, career aspirations, urban life, emotional vulnerability, and changing social values. The novel centres on young adults whose personal relationships develop within the rapidly changing social environment of urban India. Their experiences reveal a generation that seeks individual freedom and emotional fulfilment while remaining connected to family expectations and traditional responsibilities. This paper examines the representation of Indian youth in Nagarkar's novel with particular attention to the tensions between modernity and tradition. It analyses the characters' understanding of romantic relationships, the importance of friendship, the influence of family, professional aspirations, urban mobility, gender expectations, and emotional maturity. The study argues that Nagarkar presents Indian youth as a transitional generation negotiating inherited cultural values and contemporary aspirations. The novel consequently functions not only as a romantic narrative but also as a representation of changing youth culture in post-liberalisation India.

**Keywords:** youth, culture, contemporary Indian English fiction, modernity, tradition, love, friendship, identity and urban.

### Introduction:

Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly provided literary space for the experiences, aspirations, anxieties, and relationships of young Indians. The emergence and expansion of popular Indian English fiction after economic liberalisation have been closely connected with changes in Indian society, publishing, urban culture, education, employment, consumerism, and the reading habits of younger generations. Young characters have become particularly visible in fiction because they represent a society undergoing rapid transformation. They occupy a transitional position between inherited cultural structures and new forms of individual aspiration. Their experiences of education, employment, love, friendship, family, technology, mobility, and personal freedom provide an important means of understanding contemporary India. Suman Gupta, in his study of Indian commercial fiction in English, connects the growth of this literary field with the changing publishing industry and the emergence of youth culture as an important social and cultural phenomenon. Such fiction has increasingly addressed readers who are educated, urban, mobile, and influenced by both Indian traditions and global cultural developments.

Sudeep Nagarkar is one of the contemporary Indian English writers whose fiction focuses strongly on young people and their emotional and social experiences. His novels generally employ accessible language and familiar situations involving friendship, romance, family, professional life, and personal crisis. *That's the Way We Met*, published in 2012, is particularly useful for examining contemporary Indian youth because it places young adults at the centre of its narrative and explores their attempts to establish meaningful relationships while negotiating social and familial expectations. The novel is connected with Nagarkar's earlier work *Few Things Left Unsaid*, and it continues the story of young characters whose lives are shaped by friendship and romantic relationships. The narrative moves through urban and travel spaces, particularly Mumbai, Delhi, and Manali, creating a cultural environment in which young Indians experience professional aspirations, emotional relationships, mobility, and changing lifestyles.

The representation of youth in the novel cannot, however, be reduced to romance. Love provides an important narrative framework, but the characters' relationships also reveal broader questions concerning individual identity,

family responsibility, economic independence, gender, social expectations, and emotional maturity. The young characters want to make their own choices, especially in matters of love and personal relationships, but they remain deeply connected to family structures. Their lives therefore demonstrate the coexistence of individualism and collectivism in contemporary Indian society. The novel does not represent modernity as a complete rejection of tradition. Instead, it shows how young Indians negotiate between the two. This negotiation is particularly visible when personal desires conflict with family responsibilities.

The concept of youth is therefore understood in this study not merely as an age category but as a social and cultural position. Young people in the novel are becoming independent but have not completely separated themselves from parental and familial structures. They are ambitious but uncertain, emotionally independent but vulnerable, and modern in their attitudes while remaining connected to inherited values. Their identity develops through their relationships with friends, lovers, parents, relatives, workplaces, and urban environments.

The present study examines *That's the Way We Met* as a representation of contemporary Indian youth in Indian English fiction. The analysis focuses on five major areas: the construction of youth identity and the tension between modernity and tradition; love and friendship as important aspects of youth culture; family expectations and individual freedom; urban life, career aspirations, and economic independence; and emotional vulnerability, gender, and the process of becoming mature. The study argues that Nagarkar's novel represents Indian youth as a generation situated between tradition and transformation. The characters do not completely reject inherited cultural values, nor do they accept them without questioning. Instead, they continuously negotiate their personal aspirations with social responsibilities. In this sense, the novel reflects the changing cultural imagination of young urban Indians in the post-liberalisation period.

### **Literature Review:**

The academic study of contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly examined popular literature in relation to social change, globalisation, urbanisation, consumer culture, youth aspirations, and changing forms of identity. Suman Gupta's work on Indian commercial fiction in English is particularly relevant because it connects the growth of popular fiction with the development of the publishing industry and the emergence of a significant youth readership. Gupta argues that commercial Indian English fiction should be understood within the wider cultural and economic changes that have transformed Indian society since the 1990s. The popularity of fiction centred on young people, relationships, professional aspirations, and urban lifestyles indicates that literature can function as a cultural representation of changing social attitudes.

Ananya Roy Pratihara's discussion of contemporary popular fiction in India is also useful for the present study. She identifies popular fiction as an important aesthetic space in which Indian youth, urban relationships, entrepreneurship, consumer culture, and contemporary aspirations are represented. Her discussion demonstrates that the emergence of new forms of Indian popular fiction is connected with the changing experiences of younger generations. Such fiction often uses accessible narrative styles and familiar social situations, allowing young readers to recognise their own experiences in literary representations.

Craig Jeffrey's *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* provides a significant sociological context for understanding Indian youth. Jeffrey examines the aspirations, educational experiences, unemployment, social relationships, and uncertainties of young Indians. Although his study is not literary criticism, it provides an important framework for understanding the social conditions that contemporary Indian fiction frequently represents. The desire for education, employment, social mobility, and economic independence is also visible in the lives of young characters in Nagarkar's fiction.

Arun Saldanha's study of youth culture in Bangalore further demonstrates the importance of urban space, globalisation, music, media, and identity in the formation of contemporary Indian youth culture. His argument that young Indians negotiate global cultural influences rather than simply copying Western models is particularly relevant to *That's the Way We Met*. Nagarkar's characters participate in modern romantic and urban lifestyles while remaining connected to Indian family structures and cultural expectations. Their identities therefore emerge through a combination of local and global influences.

Studies of Indian popular fiction have frequently concentrated on writers such as Chetan Bhagat because of their representation of youth, education, employment, relationships, aspiration, and middle-class life. However, comparatively less sustained critical attention has been devoted to Sudeep Nagarkar's fiction as a representation of youth culture. Existing discussions of Nagarkar's novels often focus on romance, friendship, emotional relationships, and popular appeal rather than examining the novels as cultural texts representing broader changes in Indian youth identity.

This study seeks to address this critical space by examining *That's the Way We Met* beyond its romantic plot. The paper reads the novel as a representation of contemporary Indian youth and investigates how its characters negotiate individual desire, family responsibility, professional aspiration, gender expectations, emotional vulnerability, and modernity. The study also recognises that Nagarkar's representation largely focuses on urban, educated, middle-class youth and therefore does not claim to represent the entire diversity of Indian youth. Within this specific social context, however, the novel provides useful material for understanding the aspirations and anxieties associated with contemporary young adulthood in India.

### **Youth Identity and the Negotiation between Modernity and Tradition:**

The most significant aspect of *That's the Way We Met* is its representation of youth as a transitional social and cultural identity. Nagarkar's young characters are neither completely dependent upon traditional family structures nor entirely independent from them. They desire freedom in making decisions about love, friendship, career, and lifestyle, yet their choices continue to be influenced by family expectations and social responsibilities. This condition reflects an important feature of contemporary Indian youth culture: the coexistence of individual aspirations with collective family values. The characters live in a society that has been significantly influenced by globalisation, urbanisation, consumer culture, and changing attitudes towards relationships, but they remain connected to cultural expectations concerning family, marriage, responsibility, and social respectability.

Aditya and Riya represent young adults attempting to construct identities through personal choice. Their relationship is based on emotional attachment rather than an arranged understanding of marriage, demonstrating a modern approach to romantic relationships. Yet their personal choices are repeatedly influenced by circumstances beyond the relationship itself. Family responsibilities and unexpected events affect their ability to determine their own futures. Riya's situation particularly reveals the complexity of Indian youth identity. She is emotionally attached to Aditya and values personal happiness, but she also recognises responsibilities towards her family. Her decisions therefore cannot be understood simply as either traditional or modern. She represents a young Indian woman negotiating both positions simultaneously.

The novel consequently challenges the binary opposition between tradition and modernity. Modern Indian youth are not shown as rejecting their families or inherited values. Instead, they reinterpret those values according to new circumstances. This creates what may be described as a negotiated form of modernity. Young people seek individual freedom, but they also value emotional bonds with parents and relatives. They want romantic relationships based on personal choice, but marriage and family approval continue to matter. They seek professional independence, but career success is also connected with their responsibility towards family. The novel's youth identity therefore emerges from negotiation rather than complete cultural rupture.

This representation is particularly significant in the context of post-liberalisation India. Young Indians increasingly have access to global media, new forms of communication, consumer goods, travel, professional opportunities, and alternative ideas about relationships. Nevertheless, the family continues to remain an important institution. Nagarkar captures this transitional cultural condition by constructing characters who are modern in lifestyle and aspiration but deeply connected to family. Their modernity is therefore specifically Indian rather than simply an imitation of Western individualism. The characters adopt new possibilities while adapting them to the social environment in which they live.

The novel also represents youth as a period of uncertainty. The characters are making decisions about their future but cannot fully predict the consequences of those decisions. Their relationships, careers, and family circumstances remain unstable. Youth is consequently presented as a stage of possibility as well as anxiety. The

characters have the freedom to imagine different futures, but they also face emotional, financial, and social pressures. Their identity develops through the process of responding to these pressures.

### **Love, Friendship, and the Emotional World of Indian Youth:**

Love and friendship form the emotional centre of *That's the Way We Met*. Nagarkar's representation of romantic relationships reflects changing attitudes among contemporary Indian youth, particularly the increasing importance of emotional compatibility and personal choice. Aditya and Riya's relationship is not presented merely as a step towards marriage. It develops through companionship, attraction, shared experiences, emotional dependence, and mutual understanding. Love becomes an important part of how the characters understand themselves and their future. This reflects a broader shift in Indian youth culture, in which romantic relationships have become increasingly visible within urban middle-class life.

However, the novel does not represent love as simple or entirely liberating. The relationship between Aditya and Riya is affected by family responsibilities, social circumstances, emotional uncertainty, and unexpected tragedy. The characters discover that personal commitment does not give them complete control over their lives. Love can provide emotional strength, but it can also create vulnerability. This complexity makes the romantic relationship important for understanding youth rather than treating it merely as a plot device.

Friendship is equally significant because it provides a social space in which young people can express themselves outside the immediate authority of their families. Aditya, Mohit, Riya, and Sonam form a network of relationships through which they share experiences, discuss personal problems, provide emotional support, and negotiate their understanding of love. Friendship gives the characters a sense of belonging and allows them to construct a social identity among their peers. In contemporary youth culture, peer relationships frequently become important because young adults are simultaneously moving away from childhood dependence and not yet fully established within adult institutions.

The relationship between love and friendship also demonstrates the social nature of youth identity. Romantic relationships do not develop in isolation; they exist within friendship networks. Friends influence decisions, provide advice, and help characters deal with emotional difficulties. This demonstrates that young people's identities are constructed through multiple relationships rather than through romantic love alone.

The novel also presents emotional vulnerability as an important part of youth. Contemporary young adults are sometimes represented as confident, independent, ambitious, and technologically connected, but Nagarkar gives considerable attention to fear, insecurity, emotional dependence, separation, grief, and uncertainty. Aditya's attachment to Riya demonstrates how deeply romantic relationships can influence individual identity. The possibility of separation creates emotional instability and forces the characters to confront the limits of their control.

The unexpected tragedy in the narrative further transforms the meaning of love and friendship. The characters are forced to recognise that life cannot always be organised according to personal expectations. Their emotional development therefore occurs through both happiness and suffering. Love becomes not only a source of pleasure but also an experience through which the characters learn responsibility, loss, patience, and emotional maturity.

### **Family, Individual Freedom, and Changing Social Values:**

Family is one of the strongest social forces shaping the young characters in the novel. Although they seek individual freedom, they remain emotionally and morally connected to their families. This relationship between individual desire and family responsibility is one of the most important aspects of Nagarkar's representation of Indian youth. The novel suggests that the younger generation is not simply abandoning traditional family structures. Instead, young people are attempting to create space for personal choice within those structures.

Riya's circumstances provide a particularly significant example. Her relationship with Aditya represents personal choice and emotional independence, but family circumstances create responsibilities that cannot easily be ignored. The death of her father changes the balance between personal desire and family duty. Her decisions are influenced

by her concern for her family and by the expectations associated with responsibility. The resulting conflict illustrates how young Indian women may experience modernity within continuing familial structures.

The novel therefore presents family pressure as more complicated than simple oppression. Family relationships can restrict individual choices, but they can also provide security, emotional belonging, and moral support. The characters may disagree with their families, but they do not necessarily reject them. This distinction is important because it prevents the novel from creating a simplistic opposition between young people and older generations.

The family also influences the characters' understanding of adulthood. Becoming an adult is not represented simply as achieving personal freedom. It involves accepting responsibility towards others. The characters gradually learn that their decisions have consequences for their parents, partners, friends, and relatives. This recognition is central to their emotional development.

Marriage is particularly important in this context. The young characters increasingly value love and emotional compatibility, but marriage remains connected to family approval, social expectations, and financial stability. The novel therefore represents contemporary Indian marriage as a changing institution. Romantic choice is increasingly important, but family remains influential. This creates a space of negotiation in which young people attempt to combine personal happiness with collective expectations.

Gender further complicates this negotiation. Riya's experiences demonstrate that young women may face particular expectations concerning family, marriage, and responsibility. While she possesses emotional agency and personal aspirations, her decisions are influenced by circumstances that place greater responsibility upon her. The novel therefore reveals that modernity is experienced differently according to gender.

At the same time, the female character is not presented simply as powerless. Riya participates in decision-making and expresses her emotional desires. Her struggle lies in balancing those desires with family obligations. This makes her representative of a generation of Indian women who increasingly seek personal independence while continuing to negotiate social and familial expectations.

### **Urban Life, Career Aspirations, and Economic Independence:**

Urban India provides the social background against which the young characters construct their identities. Mumbai and Delhi represent spaces of education, employment, professional ambition, relationships, entertainment, and mobility. These cities are not simply geographical settings; they represent the opportunities and pressures associated with contemporary urban youth culture.

The characters' movement through urban spaces reflects the increasing mobility of young Indians. Young adults increasingly travel between cities for education, employment, relationships, and leisure. Such mobility creates opportunities for independence and self-discovery. At the same time, it can produce uncertainty because young people must continually adapt to new social and professional environments.

Mumbai is especially important as a representation of modern urban life. It is associated with professional opportunities and a fast-paced environment. The city provides the characters with a degree of independence from traditional community structures. However, the city does not eliminate social pressures. Family, career, money, and relationships remain important aspects of their lives.

Career is closely connected with youth identity in the novel. Economic independence is necessary for personal freedom, particularly when young people wish to make decisions about relationships and marriage. Professional success provides not only financial security but also social confidence and a sense of adulthood. The characters therefore live within a culture in which career achievement is strongly connected with personal identity.

This aspect of the novel reflects the aspirations of India's expanding urban middle class. Education and employment are often understood as routes towards social mobility and independence. Young people are encouraged to become professionally successful before taking major decisions concerning marriage and family. The novel demonstrates that romantic freedom is therefore partly dependent on economic stability.

At the same time, professional ambition creates pressure. Young people must succeed within competitive urban environments, and failure can produce uncertainty about the future. The novel's characters experience a combination of aspiration and insecurity. They want successful careers, but they also want meaningful relationships and emotional happiness.

Manali provides a contrast to the metropolitan spaces of Mumbai and Delhi. It becomes a space associated with travel, leisure, emotional experience, and temporary escape from routine. The movement from the city to a different environment allows the characters to experience another dimension of youth culture. Travel becomes connected with freedom, friendship, romance, and self-discovery.

The importance of travel also reflects the changing lifestyle of sections of contemporary Indian youth. Increased mobility and changing attitudes towards leisure have made travel an important part of middle-class youth culture. In the novel, travel is therefore both a narrative device and a representation of social change.

### **Emotional Maturity, Gender, and the Formation of Youth Identity:**

The final major dimension of the novel is the process through which young people develop emotional maturity. At the beginning of the narrative, relationships are strongly associated with excitement, attraction, friendship, and personal happiness. As the story progresses, the characters confront circumstances that force them to reconsider their assumptions about love and life. They learn that adulthood involves responsibility, uncertainty, sacrifice, and the ability to cope with loss.

Emotional maturity is particularly visible in Aditya's experience. His relationship with Riya initially provides a strong sense of happiness and identity, but circumstances beyond his control challenge his expectations. He must learn that love does not guarantee permanence and that personal desire cannot control every aspect of life. His emotional development therefore involves accepting uncertainty.

Riya's experience is similarly complex. She is required to balance her personal desires with family responsibility. Her identity as a young woman is shaped by competing expectations concerning love, family, marriage, and independence. She therefore represents the changing position of young Indian women who are increasingly conscious of personal choice but continue to encounter social expectations.

The novel's treatment of gender demonstrates that youth is not a uniform experience. Young men and women may share aspirations concerning education, careers, friendship, and relationships, but they can experience family expectations differently. Women may face stronger pressures related to marriage, family honour, caregiving, and social responsibility.

Nagarkar's representation of youth is consequently based on emotional complexity rather than simple rebellion. His characters do not become mature by rejecting family or tradition. They mature by learning to negotiate competing responsibilities. Their development involves understanding that individual freedom must coexist with consideration for others.

The novel's treatment of tragedy strengthens this process of maturation. The characters are forced to confront the unpredictability of life and the fragility of relationships. Their experiences demonstrate that youth is not only a period of aspiration but also a period in which individuals learn how to respond to circumstances they cannot control.

This process can be understood as the formation of a contemporary Indian youth identity. The young characters are influenced by global ideas about love and individuality, but they remain connected to Indian family structures. They are urban and mobile but emotionally attached to home. They seek professional independence but recognise economic and familial responsibilities. They desire romantic freedom but remain conscious of marriage and social expectations.

Nagarkar therefore presents youth as a space between inherited and emerging identities. The characters do not simply choose between tradition and modernity. Instead, they create identities through continuous negotiation. Their experiences reveal the changing cultural landscape of contemporary India, in which modern lifestyles coexist with strong family values.

The present study finds that *That's the Way We Met* provides a significant representation of contemporary Indian youth by placing young adults within a social environment shaped by modernity, family responsibility, urbanisation, professional aspiration, romantic relationships, and emotional uncertainty. The novel's significance does not depend only upon its romantic storyline. Its representation of young characters provides insight into the aspirations and anxieties of a particular section of contemporary urban Indian society.

The first major finding is that Nagarkar represents youth as a transitional identity. The young characters are in the process of becoming independent adults, but they remain connected to family and social structures. Their identity is therefore neither completely traditional nor completely individualistic. They seek freedom in matters of love, career, and personal choice while continuing to value family relationships and responsibility.

The second finding is that love and friendship are central to youth identity. Romantic love provides emotional companionship and becomes an important part of personal identity, while friendship creates a support system outside the family. The novel demonstrates that contemporary young adults construct their identities through networks of romantic and peer relationships. At the same time, the narrative presents emotional vulnerability, showing that love can create both happiness and insecurity. The third finding concerns the continuing influence of family and traditional values. Despite their modern attitudes, the characters do not completely reject family authority. Riya's experiences demonstrate that family responsibilities can significantly influence personal decisions. The novel therefore presents Indian modernity as a process of negotiation rather than cultural replacement. Individual freedom exists alongside family obligation. The fourth finding is that urbanisation, career aspirations, and economic independence are central to the representation of contemporary youth. Mumbai and Delhi represent opportunities for employment, professional development, social mobility, and personal independence. Career success is connected with adulthood and the ability to make independent decisions. However, professional aspirations also produce uncertainty and pressure.

The fifth finding is that the novel presents emotional maturity as an essential part of becoming an adult. The characters develop through experiences of love, responsibility, separation, grief, and unexpected circumstances. Youth is therefore not represented simply as a period of enjoyment and freedom. It is also a period of emotional learning in which individuals gradually understand responsibility and the limits of personal control. The study also finds that gender significantly influences the experience of youth. Riya's position demonstrates that young women negotiate personal aspirations within particular expectations concerning family, marriage, and responsibility. Her experience reveals that the transition towards modernity is not identical for young men and women. Another important finding is that the novel represents a hybrid form of Indian modernity. The characters are influenced by global cultural ideas, particularly regarding romance, individual choice, urban lifestyles, and mobility, but they continue to participate in Indian family structures. This coexistence demonstrates that globalisation does not simply replace local culture. Instead, young people reinterpret global influences within their own social environment.

The study further finds that Nagarkar's representation is primarily focused on urban, educated, middle-class youth. The novel therefore cannot be considered a complete representation of India's diverse youth population. Rural youth, economically disadvantaged young people, and many regional and linguistic communities remain outside its narrative focus. Nevertheless, within its selected social environment, the novel offers useful insight into the cultural imagination of contemporary urban Indian youth.

Finally, the study concludes that *That's the Way We Met* should be understood as more than a popular romance. It functions as a cultural representation of a generation negotiating between inherited values and changing aspirations. Through love, friendship, family, career, travel, and emotional crisis, Nagarkar presents young Indians as individuals attempting to create independent identities while remaining connected to their cultural and familial backgrounds.

### **Conclusion:**

Sudeep Nagarkar's *That's the Way We Met* provides a significant representation of contemporary Indian youth by examining the experiences of young people who are negotiating love, friendship, family, career, modernity, and emotional responsibility. The novel presents youth as a transitional stage in which individuals seek greater

personal freedom while continuing to remain connected with family and social expectations. The study demonstrates that the novel's representation of Indian youth is shaped by the tension between individual aspirations and collective responsibilities. The characters desire romantic choice and professional independence, yet family continues to influence their decisions. Their experiences therefore reflect a specifically Indian form of modernity in which traditional values and contemporary aspirations coexist.

The novel also shows that youth involves emotional vulnerability and growth. Love and friendship provide happiness and belonging, but separation, family pressure, and unexpected tragedy reveal the uncertainty of young adulthood. Through these experiences, the characters gradually develop greater emotional maturity. *That's the Way We Met* can consequently be read as a cultural representation of urban Indian youth in the post-liberalisation period. Its characters reflect a generation influenced by globalisation and modern lifestyles but still deeply connected to family and cultural values. Nagarkar's novel ultimately portrays Indian youth not as a generation that has abandoned tradition, but as one that continuously negotiates, modifies, and reinterprets tradition in response to changing social realities.<sup>a</sup>

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