

Gita Mehta's A River Sutra - A new direction in her writing

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Abstract

The novel A River Sutra, written by Gita Mehta, consists of a collection of independent short stories, which are connected by the narrator. The stories are set by India's holiest river, the Narmada, which is an important place for pilgrims and is worshipped as the daughter of the God Shiva. My attempt in this paper would be to study how in A River Sutra, Gita Mehta took a new direction in her writing. In her preceding works, Karma Cola (1979) and Raj (1989), Mehta had focused on the communications between India and the Western world. In A River Sutra (1993), Mehta changes focus and explores the diversity of cultures with in India. To accomplish this, Mehta presents seemingly unrelated stories in her novel, stories about Hindu and Jain ascetics, courtesans and minstrels, diamond merchants and tea executives, Muslim clerics and music teachers, tribal folk beliefs and anthropologists who study them.

Keywords: collection, independent, diversity, cultures, pilgrims, direction

History of Indian English Literature throws light on the various aspects of Indian English Literature. From the very beginning of Indian English Literature, it is easy to trace that the prose writings revolve around various subjects but the society, the culture and the politics in India hold the centre place among all of them. All major prose writers and novelists such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tagore, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, M. Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, G.V.Desani etc. were involved in social, cultural and political activities in one way or other and had written on the related issues.

If we begin to focus on culture or cultural representation, we start confronting with a number of issues. On one hand the cultural boundaries are dissipating and therefore it has become impossible to talk of cultures as self-contained and authentic wholes. On the other hand the Post-colonial discourse has put this liberal concept into a margin and postulated a new paradigm on cultural encounters. At present we are witnessing a time in which we are neither able to uphold our own culture nor to

compromise with the western culture. Right from the beginning, the British had uprooted our sound cultural heritage. We have gone to the extent of being ignorant of the things Indian. It is high time for us to stop and look back at the cultural heritage. At such juncture, literature can and has come to the rescue. There is a band of writers who incorporate Indian culture, history and Indian way of life into their literary works. Such works put things Indian on the universal platform.

Gita Mehta squarely fits into this frame of mind. Her works are woven around Indian themes and Indian way of life. Her birth in a family dedicated to the freedom movement has rooted her deeply as well as firmly in the Indian soil. In any role, whether it is a novelist or journalist, she tries to uphold India and Indian culture. She tries to weave the essence of Indian culture and traditions.

A River Sutra is a collection of stories written by Gita Mehta and published in 1993. The book's stories are connected by both a geographical reference (the Narmada River), and by the theme of diversity within Indian society, both present and past. The narrator in the book is introduced as the manager of the Narmada rest-house and he reproduces the stories of the people who goes on pilgrimage to this holy river.. The first story describes the life of a man who becomes a Jain Monk. His father is a wealthy owner of the diamond company. As a result of this there life was carefree. The Jains' cardinal doctrine teaches them the highest rule, the practice of non-violence. Wealth excised the father's emotions and he does not comply with this rule, which disappoints her son, who then wishes to renounce the world and decides to become a monk by the act of renunciation. In "The Teacher's Story" the narrator has been woken up by a man who is accused of murder and who tells him a story. Although the music teacher, called Master Mohan, is unhappy about his life, he has a gentle nature disposing him to small acts of kindness. He has been engaged in marriage to a rich woman by his father because he has lost his money. During a Quawwali concert with the singers from Nizamuddin he meets the blind boy Imrat, who has a voice like an angel, with his Islamic sister. Because his sister has to go to North India the boy has to stay with Master Mohan

and signs a recording contract. The offer to sing for a rich man has been rejected by Master Mohan but in the end he is forced to sing for him by Mohan's wife. The man is jealous because "such a voice is not human" and he cuts out Imrat's tongue. At the end of the story Master Mohan commits suicide.

The "Executive Story" begins by introducing a young executive in Calcutta's oldest tea company, called Nitin Bose, who is a rich and well- educated man. The narrator has his diary and is reading the story. A description of his popular life follows. On the plantations he insults the workers and calls them "creatures" because he has invented a persona to conserve his image. He falls in love with the woman Rima. Nitin Bose can no longer resist his unilateral life because it seems primitive. The woman has taken possession of him by magic and only the Narmada River has been given the power to cure him. After the pilgrimage to the river and making a ritual, he recovers and regains his sanity.

In the next story, "The Courtesan's Story", a woman is searching for her daughter, who was kidnapped two years earlier. After her seventeen -year old daughter has been asked by the Member of the Parliament to perform at the election meeting in the capital and returning back to the bazaar, machine-gun fire bursts through the bazaar and she is kidnapped by Rahul Singh, the most wanted bandit. The narrator meets the daughter in the street and she tells him the rest of the story. The bandit asks for forgiveness for what he has made her suffer and they marry. While buying something for her to remind her of her childhood he is killed at the bazaar. The woman leaves with her daughter and the narrator lies to the police about the daughter saying that she drowned in the Narmada River for salvation.

The "Musician Story" is told by an ugly woman at the rest-house, who is genius in playing veena like her father. The pilgrimage to this river is part of her musical education to see the beauty of the world in the music. At home she is hatred by her mother but loved by her father. Her father is only willing to continue teaching her if she is prepared to be a bride. A pupil wants to be his student but he will only teach him if he agrees to the condition of taking his daughter as his wife. After a while the father gives his daughter in marriage to the music and frees this young man from their bargain. After a messenger has delivered the message that the young man is betrothed in marriage to another woman, the daughter never touches the instrument again. Her father takes her to the river to meditate on the waters of the Narmada as a symbol of penance until she will have cured herself.

The last two stories "The Minstrel's Story" and "The Song of the Narmada" are connected. Naga Baba, a martial ascetic minstrel, buys a young girl by rescuing her from a brothel and gives her a name "Uma", which is another word of goddess. The child is taken to the river to become a daughter of the Narmada. Professor V.V.Shankar, a foremost archaeological authority on the Narmada, appears criticizing the river for being "not a sacred river". At the end of the story it is pointed out that the professor is Naga Baba, who has re-entered the world and explains that the soul must travel through eighty-four thousand births in order to become a man. The novel ends with the narrator leaning over the parapet of the rest-house's terrace, looking at the river.

The narrative perspective changes during the novel. The book begins with a first person narrator, commenting on the events that happen. The reader can identify with the narrator because his thoughts and opinions are shown. The point of view in the novel always changes when the stories are told by the pilgrims. When the stories are either in a spoken form, like meeting the pilgrims and talking with them or in a written form, like a diary, the narrative perspective changes into the protagonist of the stories. The reader can see that this novel is a story within a story because the collections of short stories are told in some kind of a frame given by the narrator. All the stories are connected by the Narmada river, which is the central point for all of the stories. Because the stories are based on the river, the Narmada could be seen as a leitmotif through the novel. The name of the river is not mentioned at the beginning of the book in the title. It is only mentioned that a river, aphoristic in nature, is an important place. The image of the river could be seen as the journey of life. It represents the idea of death which can be connected to the stories where pilgrims commit suicide to surrender to God. The beginning of life is also represented by this because a river has a source where it rises. In the Hindu religion it is believed that the river has been created by the god Shiva, who is also the Creator and Destroyer of the world, which fits into the representation of the river for life and death. On the one hand it is ironic that "Narmada" means a "whore" in Sanskrit, the classical language of India, because the river is one of the holiest rivers in India but on the other hand the river may perhaps be seen as a whore because so many people go on pilgrimage to it. The book criticizes India by showing the reader the "fatal Indian disease of making everything holy". In the centre of the criticism there is the Narmada river because it has too many sacred spots. The book questions the holiness of the river and the extreme belief in religion because people commit religious suicides, fast to death or drown

in the Narmada in order to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth. The reader can infer that the people who suffer and harm themselves are going too far in their religious belief. The narrator's newly chosen life as the manager of the rest-house could be seen as a contrast to the pilgrims who meet him. His life is compared to the pilgrims' lives, rather boring and is only going to be interesting because of the stories. While meeting many different types of people, the narrator learns what the river means to each of them. The people's diversity provides the narrator with a constant source of interest and he falls into conversation with the pilgrims. While talking to a pilgrim on the steps of his house he discovers things about the river that he has never known before. The stories are connected by the theme of love. Every main character is interested in the beauty of love. The people give up the status they have achieved and live with all the material conveniences in order to live their dream of better life like in the first story about the man who gives up his wealth to become a monk. In the first two stories the reader can infer that love of religion and love of music is more important than wealth because the aspiration to success and money change people. This change has the effect that people turn away from the rest of the world because they are afraid of losing their wealth and they are isolated from society.

The theme of love could also be seen in the next story about Nitin Bose, a rich man, who has everything to live his life apart from a woman and is searching for her love instead of setting his focus on making more money. In this story the gap between rich and poor is mentioned because the woman he falls in love with has a coolie as husband who contrasts with his wealth. The cultural diversity and different races can be seen because Nitin Bose is probably a citizen of a Western European state who has come to India. In contrast to him there is a black Indian coolie and who lives in his own country as a coolie who does not earn as much money as a white person.

Mehta's unconnected stories bind together two things in her novel: the Narmada River and a "Sutra." "Sutra" as Mehta explains in the glossary to her novel, means "literally, a thread or string." In the case of her novel, the "sutra" is the theme of love that runs through all the stories, threading them loosely together. The Narmada River stands for another type of "sutra." This river, known as the holiest in India, threads together the diverse people who live on its shores or who come to worship as its waters. The term "sutra" also refers to an Indian literary form, so in the novel, each story is in itself a "sutra" that presents a message. Every time the nameless narrator tries to tease out the meaning of one "sutra," he encounters another pilgrim or lost soul with another story to tell.

Critics have responded positively to *A River Sutra*. They remark on both the simplicity of the storytelling style - a style as old as India - and the complexity of the themes the novel explores. As the reviewer from the Washington Post Book World noted, the stories leave the reader with "the sense that things are richer and more meaningful than they seem, that life is both clear and mysterious, that the beauty and the horror of this world is both irreducible and inexplicable." Critics further praise how Mehta introduces Western readers to a world they have not fathomed. *A River Sutra*, however, suggests that the "sutra" or the theme of love, running through the stories can connect all people together.

Gita Mehta as a novelist shades different from other women writers. Her work do possess polysemic layers and meaning whereby one gets to discover her whole lot of women characters, as placed in her novels, show various facets of realities they live in. In her exegesis and plot exploration, mostly women characters tend to differ from one another. It is not that the sketched women characters, rooted to many topologies, are the result of emotional vagaries; they are the off-shoots of the natural sites as they are born, grow, mature into age and walk the passage of work culture and social macaroni. Their brew or weaving necessarily does not converge on singular-affiliation-view but parades heterodoxy of life rhythm while maintaining a common thread of existence.

Gita Mehta's serious characters are envisaged exclusively in their moral and amoral aspect. They are the portraits of the inner beings, but portraits not designed to exhibit the hue of their temperament. Such a portrait inevitably omits many of those features of men and women, their manner, mood, face - which make living most of the great figures of fiction. Incidentally, Gita Mehta's concentration on moral and amoral side of human nature is the cardinal source of her peculiar glory and despondence, the kernel of her modest contribution of our literature. Yes, at points, her imagination looks distorting glass, vitalizing her figures by emphasizing their odd capers. In the process, the total impact and upshot of her work fails to paint a window suffusing them with the hue of her own touching temperament. It is often found her characters act with outrageous inconsistency; her sense of probability often falls short of the sublime. And it needs to be pronounced that they always do not act inevitably. Yet it seems, the characters of Gita Mehta ring true or false to them, marked by irony. Thus through every turn of events, every variety of circumstance, they remain somewhat clear recognizable individual moral entities.

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