

REIMAGINING IDENTITY: A STUDY OF GITA MEHTA'S NOVELS *RAJ* AND *A RIVER SUTRA*

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Abstract

One of the prominent themes of women writers in the contemporary Indian Writing in English is the quest for identity. The writers try to focus on selfhood, independence, dignity, and recognition of their female protagonists beyond their traditional in the domestic life. At the same time, they try to overcome social restrictions, patriarchal norms, and gender discrimination to prove their self-identity. The present paper tries to examine the quest for identity in Gita Mehta's two popular novels *Raj* and *A River Sutra*. The novelist strongly believes that identity is being shaped by history, culture, gender, personal experience and many more issues. In *Raj*, the protagonist Jaya Singh struggles to establish her individuality within the rigid structures of patriarchy and colonial rule. By performing all her legitimate roles, she confronts social expectations while seeking self-respect and dignity in the society. The paper further focuses on the protagonist's skill in balancing tradition and her personal freedom. Gita Mehta in her another novel *A River Sutra*, the search for identity is explored through a series of interconnected narratives set along the sacred Narmada River. The novel is full of different characters and everyone tries to continue their journey of self-discovery. The present paper proclaims that the characters are striving to have emotional and spiritual identity. They don't simply expect social or political identity in the society. The River Narmada is portrayed as a powerful symbol of continuity and transformation. The paper further tries to analyze how the novelist combines history with myth and also portray the complexities of Indian society and culture. The paper also highlights Gita Mehta's mastery in creating works resilient characters and her exploration of India's cultural and spiritual heritage.

Keywords: Quest for Identity, selfhood, patriarchal norms, gender discrimination,

Introduction

Indian writing in English produced by women writers is a wonderful contribution to the cannon of Indian literature. It reflects the experiences, aspirations, struggles, troubles and tribulations of women in the current society. The writers are fighting against gender discrimination and social injustice and proving themselves to self-dependent in their life and career. The fiction produced by them has attracted a widespread interest in India and abroad. They distinguish themselves

with the depiction of social evils, societal realities, women empowerment and feminine sensibilities. Their women protagonists try to come out of traditional norms and redefine their own identities. They protest against the marginalization, exploitation and cruelty meted out to them in the society. They want to be assertive and independent in the male chauvinistic society. They try to destroy the traditional image and rebuild the modern image of an autonomous and self-willed woman. They try to create their own space much away from the conditions, humiliations and undue interferences of men. They challenge the oppressive patriarchal norms and fight for their autonomy and self-hood. The post-independent writers like Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee and Gita Mehta have been successful in proving the women protagonist as independent, resilient and self-reliant.

Gita Mehta was an accomplished novelist in Indian Writing in English. She wrote extensively about Indian history, culture, politics, mythology, and spirituality. Her novels reflect the historical insight, and vivid portrayal of India's diverse traditions. Her two novels, *Raj* (1989) and *A River Sutra* (1993), are widely acclaimed among the literary circles in India. She also wrote non-fictional writings like *Karma Cola*, *Snakes and Ladders*, and *Eternal Ganesha*. Her writings successfully introduced global readers to the complexities and richness of Indian life and culture. The novel *Raj* explores the problems of Jaya; the protagonist of the novel is a traditional girl. She expects some sort of dignity in her life from the society. She was treated equally like her brother and even taught riding and hunting. There were differences of opinions between her parents. Her father Maharaja Jaisingh (King of Balmer) wanted to rear his daughter Jaya like a modern girl but her mother wanted to be brought in the tradition of the *zanana*. He usually tells his wife and Jaya: "you must break *purdah*, followed by his assertion, *Savege times require savage measures*" (31). She learns administrative skills which are useful to govern the people. "Rulers are men and men are always frightened. A man cannot govern unless he confronts his own fear" (5) was the opinion of Maharaja Jaisingh.

Maharaja Jaisingh appoints two tutors for his children. Tikka the brother of Jaya was taught by Captain Osborne and Mrs. Roy, an Indian governess taught English language for Jaya. When Tikka was absent to the class, Jaya and James Osborne used to go for hunting. In the course of time, she has developed infatuation for James Osborne. She suffers like an ordinary woman under the male psyche from the society. She disappoints and frustrates soon as she raises her voice against injustice, she is declared as the Regent Maharani of Sirpur. Jaya's mother was much against to the education of her daughter, she said, "Who will marry such an overeducated girl? Her in-laws will resent her. Her husband will be insulted when she flaunts her learning in front of him," (94). Unfortunately Jaya's brother Tikka dies in the World War I. Jaisingh too dies with the tragedy. Before he dies, he declares Jaya the future ruler of Balmer. But the British Empire made John the ruler of Balmer by dethroning her. She marries Prince Pratap's sword and arrives at Sirpur in her bridal conveyance. There are many similarities between the kingdom of Sirpur and Balmer in culture, rituals and traditions.

The British sent Prince Pratap to England where he spent two years and comes back to India. He rejects Jaya as she is old fashioned. He has confessed it and says that he married her for the sake of convenience: "The Empire has instructed me to stay in India. If I am permitted to travel abroad again, I shall have to be accompanied by a wife. That's why I agreed to our marriage. So, here we are, Jaya Devi. You cannot eat quail or wear a sari. You know no languages. Yet through you I must out maneuver the empire which forced me into this marriage" (191). Pratap likes European life style and wants his wife to be a European. When an Indian lives in a foreign country, he thinks his wife must be like a foreign lady. Pratap thinks that all Indian

women are disgusting and not beautiful as the cuteness of foreign girls. He always ponders on Jaya with critical words and develops emotional attachment on Esme Moore, a dancer from the Globe Theatre. He spends with her in a summer. Like many husbands, he too wants money from her maternal house and demands Jaya to get some money and gold. As a frustrated woman, Jaya reacts, "I want my status to be regularly defined. I want to fight for the many voiceless women who are being ill-treated. We have no rights. I want my rights." (238).

Jaya gives birth to a baby, Arjun. Her husband has robbed her of dignity of being a wife. She becomes a victim of Pratap's "inebriated nocturnal assaults" (287) of being an object of his consumption. She is angry at Pratap's decree that she should not breast feed her child. Since Esme Moore blackmails Pratap, Jaya suggests him to announce Esme's name as the Regent Maharani of Sirpur. Meanwhile Pratap dies in a plane crash. Jaya becomes a widow. "Jaya's toilette had taken only a moment. There were no glass bangles to be slipped onto her wrists; no long minutes spent combing the thick hair that had once fallen to her knees, no sindoor to mark the circle of matrimony on her forehead. She did not even have to cover her shaved head. A widow was not considered desirable, only unlucky." (355). Jaya very quickly reminds a declining tradition and how it humiliated her mother when the Maharajah of Balmer died. The Maharani had her bared head, shorn of its hair and people screamed at the Maharani: 'Unfortunate woman, your life has ended!' Widow! You are unclean! Widow!' (159). People scream that she is unclean and unholy. Why not a husband unholy if his wife dies? It shows that generations are crossed but out dated and old beliefs are not polished. In spite of her royal status, Jaya suffers from the same thing. When her hair is removed, she is prohibited from entering the temple as the Raj Guru leads Arjun into the temple: 'Come, Maharajah-sahib. Your mother cannot be with you at this time. She is unclean.' (355).

Jaya patiently bore these blind beliefs and cruel humiliations for the coronation of Maharajah Arjun: "The roar of voices had risen above the hundred and one salvos announcing the coronation of Maharajah Arjun of Sirpur. Rolling thunder had drowned the bursts of cannon fire and Jaya visualized the child alone in a sea prostrated bodies, mounting the ancient Sirpur gaddi" (356). Soon she gets another blow. Arjun is killed in a Hindu-Muslim riot. Thus Jaya faced all the problems that a common woman has. She has uncaring husband and insecurity. She has lost her father, her husband and son. *Raj* is a historical fiction that represents Jaya's fight with the society for dignity. The novel portrays the theme of struggle of the protagonist Jaya from the beginning to the end. Though she is from the royal family, she suffers like an ordinary woman in the contemporary society. She never gave up the battle till she get the proper identify. She was helped by her childhood orientation by her father about the modern and advanced way of life during the times of difficulty. The childhood lessons helped her to raise her voice against injustice and emerge as an independent woman. So the novel is not only a historical fiction but also a story of woman's struggle for individuality and identity.

A River Sutra tries to combine the Indian mythology, Indian history and contemporary social issues together as a fine fabric in reality. The novel focuses on a disillusioned bureaucrat who was vexed with worldly life and to follow the spiritual path by taking the journey into the sacred river Narmada as a pilgrim. In his spiritual journey he discovers the true emotions of human beings and complexity of human existence. The novelist made the river Narmada as the protagonist in the beginning of the novel but later she made the bureaucrat as the narrator and the storyteller who connects the different narratives that flow around the river. The novelist exhibits her talent in linking the emotions and experiences of pilgrims with the timeless presence of the sacred river Narmada. In the novel *A River Sutra*, the novelist describes the river The

Narmada more than a geographical entity but portrays as a living symbol of India's cultural continuity and spiritual heritage

The novel has different shades and the novelist Gita Mehta was successful in narrating the spiritual awakening of the protagonist, who believes that renunciation means withdrawing from worldly life in the beginning of the novel but later experiences Indian metaphysical ideology. The novel is described as pseudo-philosophical with spiritual themes by some critics of literature. The novel also reflects the novelist's search for roots in India's cultural and spiritual past and her fight against emotional emptiness in the contemporary material world. The novelist has developed the central character as complex individual, whose journey symbolizes the human quest for self-realization. She has not given any name to the central character to give a universal appeal with so many enduring qualities and priceless emotions. His spiritual journey and transformation was influenced by the sacred river Narmada. On the banks of the Narmada, the narrator was told some stories which are harsh and portray the tragic dimensions of human existence and emotions. The stories have philosophical features concerning human life and compel readers to have a clear choice between worldly and spiritual life. They examine the nature of reality, the purpose of human existence, and the possibility of transcending the limitations imposed by the self. The stories display a sensitive engagement with questions of morality, emotion, and spiritual awareness; finally they show a path to the readers toward a deeper understanding of essential human values.

The novel *A River Sutra* employs the traditional narrative technique, in which diverse stories are held together by a unifying narrator and setting. The prose is simple, clear and rich in description. It can be compared to the eternal flow of the sacred river Narmada. Gita Mehta was meticulous in maintaining and adopting the tone and style of every story. As part of the renunciation of a Jain monk, she used the images of wealth, jewels, and splendour, creating an atmosphere that is at once exotic and unsettling. In contrast, the stories of Master Mohan and the Musician's Daughter are infused with pathos and lyrical beauty. Throughout the novel, Mehta employs richly descriptive passages that often evoke the diction and sensibility associated with the English Romantic poets like William Wordsworth.

A River Sutra reflects a diasporic longing of the principal characters that are both retrospective and prospective. The characters try to travel to the past to recover what has been lost while simultaneously looking towards the future with renewed possibilities. This type of mental journey makes them emotional. Gita Mehta herself acknowledges the privilege of moving freely across countries and cultures and her characters negotiate cultural identity, challenging marginality, and repositioning oneself at the centre of one's creative and intellectual discourse. The novel covers wide variety of themes such as renunciation, love, desire, ego, attachment, and human relationships. The novel has different characters who try to establish a meaningful dialogue between spirituality and materialism at the same time between modernity and tradition.

The narrative technique was traditional in its nature and the stories narrated by characters like bureaucrat, Tariq Mia, Mr. Chagla, and the diary entries of Nitin Bose all try to prove their identity amalgamated with culture and individual talent. The observation that "Too many lives converge on these banks" captures the essence of the novel, prompting readers to question whether the narrator's desire for renunciation arises from genuine spiritual aspiration or merely from an attempt to escape the monotony of familiar existence. The novel communicates the delicate nuances of Indian culture through the experiences of her characters. At times, however, her diasporic position enables Gita Mehta to speak from the margins rather than from the centre. Her perspective is shaped by temporal and spatial distance, allowing her to view her homeland

through the lens of memory and reflection through her characters. Through her literary explorations, Gita Mehta successfully mediates between diverse cultural traditions, presenting herself as a thoughtful interpreter of both through her protagonists. The act of writing thus becomes a means of affirming cultural identity and reconciling the tensions inherent in diasporic existence.

In *A River Sutra* many characters struggle to realize their identity. They feel tension between two different poles viz material requirements and spiritual aspirations. The holy river Narmada symbolizes a journey of self-discovery. The principal narrator, a retired bureaucrat transforms from a rationalist to spiritual person. Many characters escape from their previous preoccupied identities. The characters like the musician and the courtesan wanted to have social identity and pride. The novel presents people belonging to different religious and philosophical backgrounds. Their experiences show that identity can be shaped by faith, belief, and spiritual traditions.

Works Cited

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