

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN GITA MEHTA'S A RIVER SUTRA AND RAJ

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Indian writing in English is considered as a major contemporary current in English language-literature. Writing in English has come to get a respectable position and the credit for it goes to a good number of women authors. Indian writing is a distinguishing literature. Indian writing is a relatively new experience, as far as literature concerns. Though one can trace such authors in India to a century back, Indian writing in English has come into force only in the last couple of decades. Indian authors have achieved wide-reaching celebrity; some national and other have to be content with a more constricted circle.

Traditionally, the works of Indian Women Authors has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. The factors contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women writers have observed no domestic space. The Indian women's perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitments. Indian women authors have started questioning the important old patriarchal domination. They are no longer puppets in the hands of man. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Indian women writers are Kamala Markandaya, NayantaraSahgal, Anita Desai, Shobha De, GithaHariharan, ShashiDeshpande, Kiran Desai, Ruth PraverJhabvala, JhumpaLahiri and ManjuKapur and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English. A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist centered approach that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away From traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status.

Gita Mehta features as a feminist writer in her novels however her literate style and pervasive analysis of various social environments make her the most sophisticated and stimulating woman author of the early twentieth century. She deals with women situation from the view of social, economic, cultural and psychological relationships. She criticizes the social conventions typical of the time of her life, all the taboos related to the women's position in the society. She criticizes hypocrisy, smugness, double standards, the status of women, the inertia of men, the cold cultural atmosphere, the rigid code of life, and the victimization of individuals. She contrasts Old Indian society with its cold and stiff lifestyle with more freed New Indian society.

The author in her novels was concerned with social mores and social reform, which reflected the extremes and anxieties of the Indian society. For that reason Gita Mehta's use of material culture also reveals the social and psychological realities of her female characters. She was writing about the world that had undergone significant changes and transformations. Likewise, she gives much detail about Indian psyche and common day-to-day socio-cultural problems. She was interested in the characteristics of human being and how they connect and

react to certain situations, including effects of class on the behavior and the consciousness. The author examines Indian society in all their convention and tradition, rigidity and hypocrisy, often with delicate sarcasm and humor.

Gita Mehta's writing centre on authentically human women characters who seek their happiness through marriage and family. Women characters in Gita Mehta's novels have to cope with complications and endure unhappiness resulting from the inadequacy of their respective marriages and from their limited positions in society. The author was deeply connected to her characters and, she wanted readers to feel and sense the emotions inside each of her characters. She succeeded in that efforts by offering her readers detail insights and feelings of her main proponents by presenting them as visible and real. Gita Mehta's characters are entrapped in their social roles, their marriages, moral obligations and other circumstances.

The symbolic approach achieves reconciliation between myth and science. Through her insistence on the poetry of the Narmada, she tells that positivistic language is incomplete and feeling carries meaning when reason guides the imagination. Symbolism is a valid expression of rational human energies when myth is no longer apprehended as factual truth. Gita Mehta provides glimpses suggesting that her ideal of reconciliation and humanism makes sense in real India. The stories build up a meaningful background to the quest pursued by the various protagonists. Gita Mehta's purpose of multiplicity and unity reconcile the rich diversity of doctrines in the symbolic flow of the river and the spirit of sutra. Her use of images also permits an integration of Western and Indian approaches of the world and man as projected by their projective arts. While the literal images fulfill a role of sensuous evocation of cosmic and human life, the simile and metaphors open out on the imaginary world of secret relationship.

Feminist perspectives are primarily concerned with the representation of women in colonized countries and in western locations. Women suffer from 'double colonization' as they simultaneously experience the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. They have to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. It concentrates on construction of gender difference in colonial discourses, representation of women with particular references to the women writers. The postcolonial feminist critics raise a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in the study of representation of gender.

Mehta makes the narrator retire from active life in order to enable him to find the meaning of life through six stories. The title *A River Sutra* reflects biculturalism combining the English word 'River' with the Sanskrit word 'Sutra' and linking the two cultures—the east and west. The multiple narrative techniques lend color, vigor, variety and vitality of the novel. Besides the chief narrator, there are many other narrators like Ashok, Master Mohan, Nitin Bose, Tariq Mia, Naga Baba (Professor. Shankar), Old musician and Rahul Singh. In the manner of Panchatantra,

Narmada, the holiest of rivers after the Ganges, which runs from one end of the country to the other, dividing it into two halves—North and south—carries an aura of mystery as it flows down. Shiva, she is the creator, preserver and destroyer. So is the woman. If a woman creates by giving birth, preserves by fulfilling desires, she can be a destroyer too. In the myth about Narmada it is said: The stream took on the form of a woman—the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl at another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose limbed with the lassitude of desire. Her inventive variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada. She is a symbol of desire and fulfillment and in between there is a whole spectrum of different moods of a woman in relationships.

A River Sutra reveals social status of contemporary society in different ways. ‘The Monk’, without thinking of his wife gets ready to give up his wife with wealth; children and all the comforts only taking for granted the worthlessness of life without thinking about his wife’s feelings. The orphan boy’s story reveals the tragedy of such children’s life. He is offered to sing songs at the cost of a very nominal amount of five thousand rupees to the Great Sahib. Later on the boy is forced to sing and he sings such notes that they spoil his voice. Suddenly the Great Sahib slits the throat of the boy, kills him as the boy seems unworldly to him. Generally women are considered merciful & kind but here the boy is forcefully offered to the inhuman character by the wife of Master Mohan. ‘The Executive’s story’ shows the modern attitude of lustful eyes to use and throw women as they wish. ‘The story of the courtesan’ reveals the current situation of male-dominated society- unsocial men’s kidnapping of girls and their emotional blackmailing. ‘The story of the Musician’s daughter’ describes the reality that how any female of the society is exploited as a daughter in the hand of own father and as a beloved in the hand of her lover.

The novel *A River Sutra* is a novel of pilgrimage or of people who have strong quest for some power or peace in nature. They are attracted towards the Mother Nature to lead their life peacefully. It shows importance of mother, a woman who can guide the one who comes to their shelter with tender love, if she is respected whole- heartedly. Otherwise she can be like a demon, which can ruin the unsocial elements. In the novel, many social evils are described directly. But it’s deep reading lead towards the social condition of the women of the contemporary society, before twenty seven years when the novel was published in 1993 and its relevance to the present society.

It is the Goddess River Narmada to which various shorts of suffering people or questing could get themselves related in meaningful ways. In this novel, six stories are described to depict the potentiality of the river Narmada. When the Monk realizes the hypocrisy of his father while giving answer to his question regarding pitiful condition of the diamond minors, he decides to live a hermit’s life by renunciation of his father’s property alongside the holy river. Thus the monk surrenders himself to the river mother. When the Music Teacher sees that the murder of the innocent orphan blind child, Imrat, the Great Sahib goes unpunished because of his money-power, Master Mohan soon on his way back to Calcutta commits suicide in the River water to get free from the grief. To get back his manliness, Nitin Bose performs the rites at the shrine, which is on a big Banyan tree on the river bank and he comes back cured.

Rahul Singh was caught by the police, he accepted as his wife. She ends her life in the Narmada. The minstrel story is about one Naga Monk. When he came to the Narmada, he begged a child from a brothel and saved her from a miserable life of violence and corruption in a society. She is taught that the Narmada is her home and mother. She was renamed as Uma and brought to the river bank to plunge in the cold water. Then after, she is supposed to become the daughter of Narmada. It is significant that as she later chants her hymns to the river.

Woman has been bearing male dominance as part of her lot. For long, she has mutely suffered ineffable trials and tribulations perpetrated by man. The concept of inequality between man and woman has been so deeply rooted in the lesser educated people and also in the highly educated people as well as in women themselves. Women are treated as having full equality with men; this is attributed to men’s weakness and impotency. Women have been influenced by the development of cultural awareness at global level. Most of the women writers of India have and taken up the cudgels against women’s exploitation and suppression of nature genetics, racial, social and cultural. They feel that women have to be made aware of powers endowed upon them by nature.

Raj highlights the issues of Hindu women in pre-independent and post-independent India in the very realistic way. *Raj* is about the story of Jaya, the princess of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur. It is intricately interwoven with the political events but it has the tears and romance of a woman's existence in India which saves the work from being a mere record of the all-too-well known history of our freedom struggle, or a racy account of the grandeur and frivolity of the exorbitant life-style of the princes.

Raj represents Jaya's constant struggle to live with dignity. She learns the lesson from the Renaissance in her childhood. After marriage she struggles very hard as her husband does not treat her as a genuine life-partner. Eventually she loses her husband and her son also. But she is not disappointed. Ultimately she identifies her identity as a human being in the 'New India'.

In *Balmer*, the first book of the novel, Maharaja Jai Singh is the ruler of Balmer, the small state of Rajasthan. Jaya Singh is the intelligent, beautiful, and compassionate daughter of Maharaja Jai Singh and Maharani of Balmer. When Jaya was born, her birth was not celebrated in a traditional way as her brother Tikka. As a matter of fact the birth of girl is not celebrated due to orthodoxy. But Maharaja Jay Singh has different opinion on female-child birth. When Tikka, Jaya's brother was tickling with a long peacock feather the baby cries but Jaya Singh says that is not the sound of a crying baby. That is a battle cry. Maharani has different approach regarding her girl-child, Jaya. As a mother, she thought and insisted that Jaya should be educated in the traditional manner of the princesses of Balmer. She thought that the princess should be brought up in a traditional way so she could adjust in her married-life.

Maharaja wants to break the traditional ways of following purdah. He thinks that Purdah is like an imprisonment in a beautiful veil, like a nightingale in the golden cage. So he wanted that his daughter, Jaya, was not to be raised in purdah. As a result of maharaja's order, Mrs. Roy taught Jaya English language. Jaya also learnt polo and shooting. Maharaja could see the future of his state and daughter in danger, so he wished Jaya must learn Rajniti, the lesson of Saam, Daam, Dand and Bhed. On the other hand Maharani wished Jaya must learn the knowledge of Solah Shringar, the sixteen arts of being a woman, as Jaya was at her twelve. The concubine taught Jaya about the status of woman in man and woman relationship. No one understands how the attraction between a man and a woman is born. Even worse, no one understands why it suddenly dies. Women must use every aid to keep a man's affections constant.

Thus Jaya is taught that she is a woman and woman's duty is to please her man. As the time passes, very drastic changes occur in Jaya's life. Her brother, Tikka, and her father, Maharaja Jai Singh, died and Maharani became widow. It is a harsh reality of the Indian tradition that the widow is not treated with honour. Soon after Jaya's marriage was arranged by Raja Man Singh with Prince Pratap, and thus Jaya is removed from her birth-place, Balmer in helpless condition. Maharaja's extreme wish to train his daughter as a modern woman is not materialized.

The second book of the novel *Sirpuris* about the marital life of Jaya and her husband, Prince Pratap, in Sirpur, a small state in Assam. In this book it is understood that the shifting of Jaya from a dry and dead land of Balmer to a fertile land of Brahmaputra. In Sirpur, Jaya felt various dreadful experiences from her husband as well as from the Maharani of Sirpur. She realized about her status in her husband's heart. Many times she was treated without human dignity by her husband. When Prince Pratap meets her first time after his arrival in Sirpur, he walked slowly around her looking at her breasts and says her that she has to wash all that nonsense off her hands and feet and change out of those Christmas decorations.

Jaya could also understand about the place of woman in society when Maharani brought her to the Kamini Temple and also asked that; "May your homage to the Goddess bring fruit to

your womb and May you enrich our house with son” (10). Jaya as a devoted wife obeys everything whatever told by her husband. She started to learn the art of living life in a western way to please her husband. Pratap was allowed to go to England along with Jaya. In England Jaya was known as the ‘Black Lotus’ who has rare smile on her face. Meanwhile, Victor, the elder brother of Pratap committed suicide and Prince Pratap has to return to India. At the end of the book, Pratap is declared the king of Sirpur and Jaya becomes Maharani.

In the third book ‘Maharani’, Jaya became the Maharani of the state Sirpur. In spite of being Maharani Jaya does not remove her pains. She expects eternal love, satisfaction of life, and human dignity from her husband. She realized the bitter truth that her husband only touches her when he is in drunken state. For Pratap Jaya’s love and status are no more important than a concubine. With the hope of love Jaya convinced the child and became a mother of a male-child. But her maternal rights are not allowed to her.

Pratap exploits her and prevents her to feed her son, Arjun. Jaya tells her condition to lady Modi who taught her the art of living life in a western way. She questions he can’t touch his own wife until she is turned into a toy that no longer represents a woman. Or until he himself is so drunk he can no longer pass for man. He shrinks from the sight of his wife giving breast to his son, but not from wearing his ancient crest on his feet to visit a brothel. It is not the conduct of a husband or a king.

Jaya passes her life miserably. Her son is the only hope of her pleasure. Soon after, Pratap’s extramarital affair with the dancer became scandal. Jaya also realized that this is the time to demand her rights as the regent Maharani of Sirpur. Pratap also realized and he gives it in written. In due course, the freedom movement led by the Nationalists was going in full swing. The Britishers and their policy were strongly opposed. The worst situations emerged for the royal family of the state due to their favour to British. Meanwhile, Pratap met an accidental death and Jaya became widow. To follow the custom she broke her bangles for the acceptance of widowhood. Four years old Arjun is officially declared as the king of Sirpur and Jaya as the Regent Maharani of Sirpur.

The title of the forth book of the novel is ‘Regent’. It is a tragic time for Jaya because Raj Guru of Sirpur tries to keep Jaya away from the administration and from her son, Arjun declaring her as an unclean. Her widowhood was the curse on her. She was treated thus: “There were no 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 shaven head. A widow was not considered desirable, only unlucky (12). Jaya knows very well that she is not accepted as Maharani but she taught of her son who was child-Maharaja of the state. She purifies herself in Holy River at Banaras. When she met her mother, after ten years, her mother cannot tolerate the widowhood of her daughter. She conveyed her daughter to be strong and reminded the words of Sati Mata of Balmer.

The National Congress of India launched ‘Quit India Movement’. It was the tough time for Sirpur and Jaya. Arjun, the Maharaja of Sirpur became victim of the riot and lost his life. It was a great loss of Jaya. She lost everything and became lonely. When she went to meet Raj Guru of Balmer to get advice, Raj Guru reminded the lesson of Rajniti, the wish of her father, Maharaja Jai Singh. Jaya followed the advice of Raj Guru and by taking the leadership of Sirpur, she allowed Sirpur State to merge with the United States of the Republic of India. In the Republic India, She contested as the representative of her state as an independent candidate.

Right from the Beginning to the end of the novel, Jaya suffers a lot. She struggles constantly throughout the whole novel. Gita Mehta portrayed Jaya as a woman with resources

and education raised half in and half out of the traditions of purdah and Hindu ritual that reigned unchanging for generations before her. In her childhood her father trained her in such a way so that she can overcome the crises. Many times she became the victim of injustice due to male dominant and orthodox society.

Jaya cannot oppose her husband Pratap even if he indulges in extramarital affair with another woman. She cannot resist Raj Guru of Sirpur when he declared her unclean due to her widowhood and kept apart from her son. But gradually, her education, lessons on modernity strengthen her to overcome each and every divert circumstances and make her able to raise her voice against injustice. As a result she is declared as the Regent Maharani of Sirpur. At last she emerges as an independent woman of the Republic of India whom the Hindu orthodoxy cannot unjust. The novel is a story of woman's struggle to set her identity as a human being.

In these two novels *A River Sutra* and *Raj*, It is the female character around which all the sub plots are woven. Any virtuous women can be proved pain-killer to anyone, may be in the form of a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother or a regent. Any sufferer can have shelter in their heart. In the novel, it is depicted that almost all the people find relief by surrendering themselves at the Mother Nature's lap, River Narmada. Likewise, in the kingdom, Jaya solves the problems of the people. They get relief by telling their needs, problems to the regent. They are depicted as empowered women who can contribute a lot in creating healthy society. They are depicted with motherly love who always welcomes her children to relieve them from mental and physical sorrows or disorder.

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