

# Search for Cultural Identity in Gita Mehta's

## *Raj and A River Sutra*

**M.Sri Vidhya @Thangalakshmi**

Research Scholar

M.S.University

Tirunelveli

[sriselsui@gmail.com](mailto:sriselsui@gmail.com)

One can interpret the concept of Across Culture in the aspect of *Diaspora*. By that one can analyse the usage of language to reveal Gita Mehta's concept of literature with diaspora in one's consciousness.

Gita Mehta is a diasporic writer settled in America at present. She is a writer, inhabiting two worlds with equal ease. Here we can identify that she has experienced cultural difference by living in two different cultures. Gita Mehta is the daughter of the well-known freedom fighter Biju Patnaik of Orissa. She was born in Delhi.

The reading of diaspora often reveals the author's subversive agenda as the narratives both reflect and create ways of seeing and modes of articulation that reinforce dispossession and dislocation and the dichotomy of living astride two cultures.

Theoretically, women experience diaspora under three conditions – first, when they grow up in a foreign land with their migrant parents; secondly, by virtue of their marriage when they are uprooted from their parental home and then from their homeland; and thirdly, when they exercise their concise choice to go to some western Metropolitan centre in pursuance of their ambition, higher education or some lucrative job. Whatever be the broad categorization, in real-life experience, they are caught between all the psychological problems of the diaspora, such as dislocation, unbelonging, marginalization, and cultural dissonance that are common also to men, and also a variety of oppressive conditions and discriminatory practices peculiar to gender both inside and outside the community.

Gita Mehta's two novels *Raj* (1989) and *A River Sutra* (1993) cannot be immediately slotted within the diasporic discourse and yet they are diasporic in many ways. They are innovative in their approach to diaspora, in that instead of weaving the usual patterns of marginalization or the gendered nature of identity politics and ethnicity, they evolve different narrational strategies to convey the notion of 'otherness' through soft irony directed at the peculiarities of both the motherland and the adopted culture in some works, and in others, through the dialectic of self-appraisal. Her works struggle to re-discover the past but the re-visioning is not in the form of longing or in the shape of synthesis; it manifests in the effort to preserve the individual identity of home culture and to show the meaning of India.

In the novel *A River Sutra*, the focus is on India that was and that still is, within the contemporary India. In the novel *Raj*, the view is at the native princely India within the Imperial British India. The first mentioned novel looks at the homeland from a distance in time and space. It creates myths and an exotic ambience and it can be categorized as exotica as well as fantasy whereas *Raj* is a re-visioning of history.

The indication of forward movement in all her works gives sufficient clue to assume that the author is not caught between the two opposed worlds but is living in a dynamic world where inter-relationship and intra-relationships among apparently opposing forces produce a satisfactory self-image.

Gita Mehta's attempt to come back to the cultural folds, to understand the intricacies of her shared past with her community and to transmit part of her vision to the people in her *second home* has been discussed in the following chapters. In the level of Indian basis, as we all know home stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for pleasure. In these two selected novels Gita Mehta explains herself to the west with a cultural difference and also with a diasporic consciousness.

This concept forms the basis of regulated desire to move in and out of the oppositional cultures, to mythologize the ancient past and to recover and affirm an authentic culture of a lost home; this position is intrinsic to the diasporic condition and also to the postcolonial situation. In all her works we can identify the ambivalence of a diasporic consciousness and the patterns of affliction in a postcolonial situation. Diaspora is a reality mediated upon by multiple factors.

*Raj* explores the postcolonial perspectives in the novel; the novel is also called the 're-writing of history'. Gita Mehta's *Raj* also highlights the issues of Hindu women in pre-independent India in a very realistic manner. With the first reading of the novel it seems that it presents a re-reading of a significant chapter of Indian history, dealing with human relationships in a colonial society. *Raj* is the first genuine counterpoint to the imperial clichés of the popular British view of the Raj.

*Raj* is a historical fiction under the veil of historical event. It represents a woman's, Jaya's, constant struggle to live with dignity. Her struggle begins with her birth. It is a time of Indian renaissance. She struggles very hard. At last she sets her identity as a human being in the 'New India'. Right from the beginning to the end, the novel presents the constant struggle and crises in the life of Jaya. She is a child of Indian Renaissance so she is trained and taught in such a way, that she may come out of the crises.

She is from the royal family yet she suffers like an ordinary woman. She sometimes disappoints, frustrates but she does not lose the battle. The lessons of modernity which she learnt from her childhood strengthen her in the critical times. Modernity allows her to overcome all the obstacles. Gradually, she raises her voice against injustice. As a result, she is declared as the Regent Maharani of Sirpur. At the end of the novel, she emerges as an independent woman. Thus it is not only a historical fiction but a story of woman's struggle to set her identity as a human being.

*A River Sutra* explores the postcolonial perspectives. *A River Sutra* blends Indian mythology with a simple storyline concerning a disenchanted bureaucrat learning about life, while attempting to escape from it, from six pilgrims travelling to the Narmada, a sacred river. Initially the river was conceived as the protagonist but later Mehta put in the bureaucrat narrator as the 'sutradhaar' who becomes the 'sutra' or the thread who binds the stories round the 'dhar' or the river. In this novel she tries to bring mythological time, historical time, contemporary time and narrative time all together in the flow of the waters.

*A River Sutra* is a simple story of the narrator – protagonist's vindication who thinks renunciation is all about withdrawal from the world and staying away from it; from another angle, it is an elucidation of Indian metaphysics presented in the traditional Indian narrative style; and yet from another perspective, it is an effort of the author to expound India specifically to the western reader with the result that it has often been critiqued as a pseudo-philosophical rendering of a sublime theme. In short, it is an 'erotica' manifesting the authorial assertion of cultural identity through a recognizable ethno poetic discourse; a search of the diasporic writer to find moorings in the past so as to resist the present albeit comfortable however emotionally null and void.

Predictably enough, the novelist does not give an identity to the central figure by giving him a name. He remains nameless, and the process is not a complex psychological entity, but an ethical archetype, and in him only centres the quest for redemption. The great aid to his meditation is apparently the beauty of the location in which he had settled.

The stories as told to the bureaucrat on the banks of the Narmada were not stories about fairies or dormice; they tended to be quite savage. The quest for the personal and social meanings based on the structure of tragedy and frustration are the interacting fields of human awareness that give a cohesive structure to *A River Sutra*. Each tale is a major enquiry into the tragic reality of life and brings with it a critical problem. These problems confront us with certain choices – either metaphysical or otherwise. They deal with the nature of the world in which man has his being, with the meaning of human existence, and whether it is possible for man to transcend the limitations of his own self. The philosophy that evolves is based on the element of self-criticism. It does not postulate a denial of life, but, instead reaffirms that there is a greater reality beyond the reality of man himself. There is a sensitized openness towards the analysis of the concept of morality and emotion leading to an orientation towards essential human experience.

The narrative technique of *A River Sutra* follows the 'framed narrative' style which is traditional. The descriptions are rich and though the flow remains steady like the flow of Narmada, the expressions vary with the requirement of the story. Thus, the Jain monk's description of his renunciation ceremony has the glitter of money and the sparkle of diamonds but is exotic and sickening. The stories of Master Mohan and the Musician's daughter have a touch of pathos and the depictions are rhythmic. In the former, however, the presence of the sinister in the dark room where Imrat gives his first and last performance puncture the purity of little Imrat's musical voice. Similarly, the opening sentence of "The Story of the Musician's Daughter", 'It is hard to be the child of genius' (201), appears foreboding. All through the novel, there are a number of descriptive passages that read like Wordsworthian diction with too palpable an effect of the English Romantics. This is probably because the author is consciously trying to create a romantic India that is remarkable and uncanny.

Gita Mehta has attempted to bring out the turbulence and aspirations of the erstwhile ruling community of India, through Jaya Devi, her protagonist in the novel *Raj*. In spite of being grounded in traditional values, Jaya responds to the changes in her personal and political life, with surprising openness and resilience and manages to hold her own in the male-dominated world, when relentless fate snatches away her loved ones, and leaves her

alone to face the realities. In this background, the novelist picks up all the threads of Indian history between 1857 and 1950 and has attempted to rewrite the political and marginalized history of the royals.

There is no denying the fact that colonial discourse is ‘an apparatus of power’ (Bhabha 293), and that it tends to impose its own culture on indigenous one, thus distorting the native history. According to a Chilean poet – composer, “the cultural invasion is like a leafy tree which prevents us from seeing our sun, sky and stars. Therefore, in order to be able to see the sky above our heads our task is to cut this tree off at the roots” (Jain 121). Obviously, it is not possible to cut the tree at its roots but it is possible to negotiate a dialogue with history through revaluation of the local past.

Gita Mehta is restructuring here the historical data and ordering it to a design, plot and sequence. The process requires re–visioning and re–writing the past ‘to make a story’, situate it within the socio–cultural context and discover meaning and a sense of belonging in her own history. This is a postcolonial position in which the author is granting equivalence and importance to what the ‘centre’ once called ‘margin’, and what colonialism called ‘native’ and hence ‘the other’. As a postcolonial writer, writing in a decolonized period, the author has undertaken to re–inscribe her country’s past. In *Raj*, Gita Mehta draws our attention to one of the most distressing experiences of cultural violence of colonialism.

The important points of the analyses of *Raj* can be resulted in Feminization of history means (i) giving voice to the marginalized; (ii) freeing history from ideology; (iii) taking it out of hegemonic control; (iv) generating a new awareness of power relationships; and (v) understanding the social dislocation of social relationships.

In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta draws heavily from her culture’s metaphysics, history, geography, the arts, mythology and identity, to provoke us to rethink, through the migrant’s experience, the structure of nostalgia and resolve the tension between ‘home’ and ‘not home’. The diasporic longing in both retrospective and prospective reaching deeper into the past and looking forward into the future to retrieve a time that is lost but still has a perennial hold and also innumerable possibilities. The two aspects of diaspora here are psychologically emotional and physical. Physical aspect relates to the inability to travel to the homeland or communicate with one’s people, which generates a feeling of being trapped; however, it is much lessened in the present scenario. With communication technologies bringing remarkable changes in the global perspective, the diasporic experience is no longer what it used to be. But for a metropolitan professional in particular since there is no monetary stringency mobility is not a problem.

Gita Mehta categorically mentions the advantage she enjoys in moving about countries and cities. In short, diaspora does not connote for her the earlier, colonial migrant’s is an impossible nostalgia for home, but only the need to appropriate a subject position, challenge marginality and re–present the centre of her creative structure.

Thematically, the novel has many focal points – renunciation, love, lust, ego and involvement and a number of others. It contains an eloquent commentary on Hindu myths, rituals and beliefs; it is an exposition of contemporary Indian psyche, it provides a useful dialogue on spiritualism vs. materialism, detachment vs. attachment, love vs. its various shades, and modernity vs. tradition, but finally and significantly, it eulogizes Narmada. The

narrative technique is traditionally Indian in style with story within the story told by the narrators – the bureaucrat, Tariq Mia, Mr.Chagla and Nitin Bose’s diary entries. Too many lives converge on these banks’ (268), set us thinking if the narrator really wanted to renounce the world or he was merely fleeing the monotony of the familiar.

Renunciation has always been an ideal in Indian metaphysics, culture, life and literature. Since Gita Mehta has influenced the psycho–socio–cultural matrix of India, its philosophy is instinctively followed by the people. It is all pervasive and it runs through Indian literature as a recurrent motif. One renounces material possessions, emotional bondage, love, lust, ego, desire, anger and passion.

It may be noted that in the novel *A River Sutra* Mehta tries to impart the subtle nuances of the culture through her stories, she somehow seems to be speaking from the periphery. It is generated because of the diasporic situation in which she tends to look at the land and look at it from distance of time and space. It could be because she reflects on the issue of identity when confronted with otherness and the process of reflection-evocation, using the support of memory, helps in visualizing the beauty and richness in retrospect.

As a postcolonial, diasporic writer, Gita Mehta reveals an overt attempt to assume the central position. Her works with their fine incursions into both negotiate her position between two cultures. The process of writing is a means for Mehta to articulate her role as the spokesperson of the two diverse cultures and also her analyses is successful in finding the cultural identity.

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