Gita Mehta as a Writer of Indian Diaspora

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Gita Mehta is one of the eminent writers of Indian diaspora. At a time when it has become a general trend to look for feminist leanings in any work written by women, and for the sense of loss and rootlessness in any work coming from the diaspora, it is delectably a different experience to read Gita Mehta who looks at life from refreshingly new perspectives. Not that she is unaware of women's problems or that she is impervious to the diasporic displacement, only she finds many more interesting themes to write about. Her first book Karma Cola (1979), attracted critical attention for the satirical treatment given to the hippie influx in India and its repercussions on both Western and Indian societies, while her two succeeding novels Raj (1993), and A River Sutra (1993) were specially acclaimed for the novelty of approach with which familiar themes are tackled. The issues raised are recognizable: issues of identity, exile and diaspora, and of history and postcolonial politics, but she manages to give them a pleasant spin with the skilful handling of the narrative technique, keeping these concerns crucial to the text, yet making them interactive participatory exercises.

Migrations, across borders- geographical or otherwise – can be willful or forced. 'Expatriates' and 'Immigrants' belong to the former category and 'Exiles' and 'Refugees' belong to the latter one. Such migrations have resulted in building up a diasporic community who share a common sense of rootlessness, pain and agony of homelessness, experience the anxiety and turmoil in a new land and the nostalgia for their homeland. The ambience and milieu of the adopted nation co-mingles with historical and cultural conditions of homeland. As one migrates from one country to another, so do the writing of the diasporic writers shift from native lands to adopted nations and in this inevitable process of exchange of thoughts and ideas, social culture and individual identities also change. The characters of these writers transpose from one nation to another. For them, the landscape of memory and imaginary homelands are more significant. A diasporic person lives in two lives simultaneously; he/she lives in two cultures at the same time. Cultural interactions have led to growth and transformation giving birth to multicultural societies.

All diasporic deliberations as also reading of diasporic fiction come to be shaded by the ideology of post colonialism. The reasons are not far seek. By and large, diasporic fiction is replete with issues related to locations, movements, crossing borders, identities, original home and adopted home etc. The settler societies like the U.S.A. and Canada come to examine the culture onslaught resulting from waves after waves of settlers after settlers. Obviously, the power to regulate and govern culture, political, and social relationships emerges. The diasporic fiction is thus required to be sponsored, validated, and interpreted across borders. Homi Bhabha argues that migrant subjects are constituted by cultural indeterminacy and hybridity which reject fixed identity and reveal the difference, which is vital in constructing it.

Diasporic situation involves relocation not in terms of geography alone. Perhaps the more significant aspect of such moment is the social culture and psychological relocation. In the

universe as well as groups of people belonging to particular nation communities in diasporic situation oscillate between two identities, two culture value systems and even two mind sets-one belonging to the nation and the community they are migrating from and the other the nation and the community they are migrating into.

Gita Mehta was born in Delhi in 1943, a daughter of the well known freedom fighter Biju Patnaik of Orissa. She received her early education in India; graduated from Bombay University, and thereafter complete her Masters in English Literature from Cambridge University. She got married with Ajai Mehta and settled in London and divides her time between Delhi, New York and London.

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Thematically, Gita Mehta's works are varied, dealing with subjects such as experience of ennui, nostalgia, historical and political changes in India and the perennial theme of East-West encounter. India is at the center of each work and the author takes care not to allow any of the themes to be overriding as to shift the focus from India. Usually it is alleged that the migrant writers create 'imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind' and that their representation of India and Indianness is hybrid, meant for the western readers and Gita Mehta is no exception. Her literary and cultural allusions to India's geography, mysticism, religions, history and the existing political situations are substantial and candid but they are at times too romanticized and eroticized to be acceptable to the indigenous readers. Between 'real' India, and India of the 'mind' there is but a thin line. Her works have a living immediacy that creates an authentic, recognizable milieu but when she depicts 'high culture' and traditions of the land as in *A River Sutra,* she slides into pseudo-philosophy, in trying to keep its contemporary relevance intact.

The theme of *Karma Cola* is the inflow of thousands of questing westerners 'clashing cymbals and ringing bells' in search of the mystic India, ready to gulp down her philosophy, appropriate her 'shakti' and delve into her esoteric realms. Places like Haridwar, Banaras, Manali and beaches of Goa were flooded with these so-called seekers, who seemed gullible enough to imagine that Karma is an all-inclusive panacea for the ills of the world. When a wave like this spreads in a land, it also has its ramifications on the local population. The influx gave rise to dubious ashrams selling hallucinatory drugs and bartering their superficial spirituality for material gains. Most of the western 'instant spiritualists' were duped by the opportunists, thus creating an atmosphere of distrust and conflict, tarnishing the image of the country. Not that the west lacks genuine scholars and intellectuals seeking to understand Indian philosophy; nor does

India lack really profound scholars and real philosophers who could expound the tenets of Indian thought to the satisfaction of rational seekers. But the trendy seekers who came with the waves of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Hippie movement were here for instant kicks and more often than not ended in clinics.

Raj is a historical novel dealing with the turbulent period in Indian history from 1897 to 1947. Starting with 1897, the novel concludes with the end of an epoch when India attained freedom and the princely states were merged with the Indian Union – some willingly, others unwillingly. The novel maps and dramatizes within its narrative framework the important events with which the century set in – the famine of 1898, the ever increasing British interference in the affairs of the native rulers, emergence of Gandhi and other national leaders, their clarion call to the nation, the two wars, awakening of the democratic spirit among the masses and finally Independence. Apart from history, the novel presents the story of a woman- Jaya, the princess of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur – her awareness, her fight and her victory.

In many ways *Raj*, can be termed 'just one more novel on the much-explored theme' of the princes and colonial India. It has all the ingredients and stock themes – court intrigues, life in the harems, the tiger hunts, the neglected Rains and the glamorous mistresses. There are also elaborate descriptions of the exotic life styles of the Indian princes: eccentric, decadent and extravagant. Despite these, *Raj* is the saga of triumph – the triumph of 'the people', of democratic principles and of a woman who accepts the political changes gracefully.

The novelist has skillfully used her historical material to carve out convincing and real characters in their strength and weaknesses, whims and fancies, and pride and prejudices. Without being involved in their world, Mehta lets them expose themselves by the roles assigned to them rather than letting the rhetoric tilt in favor of one or the other. It is for the reader to judge whether the British were oppressive or the Nationalists were a 'boring lot'; whether the rules were effeminate, inefficient; or the manner in which the British succeeded in their game of giving the rulers a long rope and then strangulating them with the same rope, accusing them of excesses and moral laxity and then using it against them as an excuse to annex their kingdoms.

A River Sutra creates many Indias but it is the perennial India that holds the interest of the writer and the reader. The theme of integration of various religions and philosophies with the geography of the river, which symbolizes the culture of oneness, becomes prominent with each story. It explores the problem of identity through the narrator; he is significant to the story though not its hero, because it is Narmada who is the main motivator and the protagonist. The bureaucrat- narrator's desire is simple: he has fulfilled his worldly obligations and wishes to lead a life of 'real' retirement, but as the narrative advances he logically realizes that retirement is not as unproblematic as he construed it to be. All human experience is subject to speculation and question and there is no end to these. Each episode leads him to an awareness of man's limitations and the inscrutable nature of reality that is beyond human comprehension. The novel thus becomes a record of the bureaucrat's awareness that there can be no renunciation without proper involvement. The perennial flow of the river is like the perennial flow of time. The river becomes a symbol of the eternal time and her minstrel becomes her representative. Hers is a song of love, suggestive of the multi-pronged and multifaceted concept of love. Between Shiva (the Cosmic Ascetic) and his Daughter (River Narmada) on one side, and the narrator and his quest on

the other, there is the vast tapestry of life – life in its different settings, life with its many meanings. And this trajectory is representative of existence.

Thus Gita Mehta attempts to come back to 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'. Dorinne Kondo affirms 'Home stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders: it stands for community' (Kondo, 1996: 97). That Gita Mehta should feel the need to explicate and explain herself to the west is in itself an acknowledgement of cultural difference felt by a diasporic consciousness. This cultural difference that has become the site of production is regulated by the 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. An argument can be made that Gita Mehta's works foreground the diasporic consciousness with memory and experience affording grounds for constructing agency and registering resistance to the logic of 'othering' by 'positionality'. Re-visioning and mapping this 'identity politics' into a national-cultural space imply a sense of belonging and connectedness. This connectedness is strengthened because of Gita Mehta's yearly visits to India when she relaxes, interacts with friends and relatives and imbibes the changed/changing ethos. Gita Mehta's vision of India is not remote as is Jhumpa Lahiri's who admits that hers is a 'tunnel vision'. Not so with Gita Mehta. This provides us the starting point to understand Mehta's work vis-à-vis the ambivalence of a diasporic consciousness in a postcolonial situation and the patterns of affliction in diaspora. Thus by blending the subjective experience with observation and imagination, Gita Mehta creates her narratives out of diasporic and heterogeneous material.

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