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Narmada River: An Abstergent Refuge for Corrupted and Distraught Souls in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to explain how Narmada River is an abstergent refuge for a corrupted and distraught soul in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*. The setting of the novel is on the banks of India's holy river—the Narmada as the manager of a small guest house. The river is associated with the religious faiths and beliefs of Indian people. The river becomes a symbol of the immortality of love and its huge capacity to give life. It is a study of the conundrum of life through expedition stories entwined with a worldly humanistic approach. It offers authentic interpretations of Indian cultural values, music, art forms and heritage and especially her major involvement with human subsistence in modern times.

Key words: Indian culture, materialistic love and Narmada River

The Growth of Indian Novel in English

The steady growth of the Indian novel in English has been seen only after independence. Although there are some works in ancient era, the modern period has changed the shape of Indian English fiction. Today's Indian English novel is not only marked for creative genius but also natural realism, fertility of thought and imagination. The early Indian English novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and a host of others worked on themes related to Nationalist consciousness besides reformist causes against superstitious beliefs and practices. Regarding the tradition, modernity and socio-historical realism in the novels, Verma (2000: 2) comments "while the general impact of European intellectual thought over the years cannot be denied and while the matter of India's inheritance from the British Empire is still being debated by historians, one cannot help noting the emergence of two seemingly contradictory cultural

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phenomena: the revolutionary nationalism that had unequivocally rejected the idea of the empire, and cultural pluralism that made the idea of progress rationally acceptable.” Socio-historic, critical social realism, love, sex, and modernism are the present themes of the Indian English novelists. Ongoing history—its shade, complexity, and contradiction are clearly pasteurized in Gita Mehta’s works. She is one of the well-known contributors in Indian English Literature and famous Indian English novelists, essayist, documentary filmmaker and journalist. She occupies a distinctive position as a women writer with her contemporary women novelists Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. She elucidates uniquely Indian experience in a clear and intelligent voice. Her writing distinguishes itself by freshness as much as by a cosmopolitan outlook. She writes with certainty, love and understanding but never manages to break out of metropolitan limits. Even though she has little patience with cowardice, corruption and hypocrisy, her prose exposes rather than sermonizes, leaving the reader amused and feeling superior. Analysing the style of Gita Mehta, Pradhymna (2003: 150) writes “She scrupulously keeps to the role of the artist, casting prejudice and anger aside; the emotions that might well interfere with her observations or distort her perceptions.”

Gita Mehta’s Works

Gita Mehta’s previous works *Karma Cola* (1979) and *Raj* (1989) focus on the interactions between India and the Western world. With *A River Sutra*, she changes focus and explores the diversity of cultures within India. She presents many unconnected 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 the anthropologists who study them but the rules or *Sutra* or the theme of love, running through the stories can connect all people together. These stories are bounded with three things: love, death and the Narmada River. We find reflection and reiteration of Classical Sanskrit drama and Hindu mythology in the novel. The novel acts as a “mirror of modern India culture” (Ramachandran, 1994: 1) One recurring motif playing through the novel is that of the raga of Indian classical music. Another is that of Kama, god of love, and the passions and mysteries of the human heart. For all its substance of ancient Indian tradition and thought, *A River Sutra* is a modern work that acknowledges the difficulties facing modern India at the same time as it takes the reader on a skilfully realized journey into a reverberating culture.

A River Sutra

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. The novel is a study of the riddles of life through quest stories entangled with a secular humanistic approach. There are six stories: *The Monk’s*, *The Teacher’s*, *The Executive’s*, *The Courtesan’s*, *The Musician’s*, and *The Minstrel’s*. Mehta felt she created compulsion to disclose something of her personal history as she inspected her native land. She thought that the novel would be the most difficult to understand to Western readers prompted the warmest reaction. She says: “I wrote *A River Sutra* privately; I didn't tell anyone I was doing it, and I genuinely didn't think it would get published outside of India. It astonishes me that that's the one people have responded to most.” (Smith, 1997: 1)

Interpretation of Indian Cultural Values

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A River Sutra offers interpretations of Indian cultural values, music, art forms and heritage. Almost all characters in different stories converge for one or the other reason on the banks of the river for renunciation, tranquillity and breathe repeated motifs of love and rebirth. Mehta presents love as the dominant motive force in the stories. The narrator collects during his tenure as the manager of a government rest house on the banks of the Narmada River. The progress of the six stories can be seen as variations on the theme of love and the secret of the human heart. Commenting about the uniqueness of the stories of the unsettled nature of man, swinging between happiness and despair, Chandmal (1993: 30-31) points out: "There are stories of obsession and renunciation, desperation, and destruction, desire and death. Above all there are stories of sexual, sensual and spiritual longings and love."

The Stories

Monk Story

The novel begins with the words of a 14th-Century Indian poet: "Listen, O brother. Man is the greatest truth. Nothing beyond." The *Monk story* begins with Ashok who is the first of many people to tell the narrator his story of love. The monk is probably only thirty years old and he has already tired of a world that has offered him anything he has wanted: extreme wealth, a loving family, and the opportunity to better other people's lives through charity. The monk has decided himself to become a monk in a religion where, as other monks tell him, he will suffer almost constant pain. Ashok believes these sacrifices are worthwhile because in his renunciation, as the same monks tell him, he "will be free from doubt." The narrator cannot understand Ashok's adherence to a religious order where the highest level of enlightenment will probably come, as Ashok's father says, from "starving himself to death." The narrator shudders to think that one day he will see Ashok's body, just as he has seen so many other priests' bodies, as a corpse floating down the Narmada River. After listening to the monk's story, the story's meaning is still a mystery to the narrator. The old Muslim mullah Tariq Mia must finally explain that the Jain monk's story was about "The human heart...Its secrets."

The bureaucrat's rest house is situated halfway up a hill of the Vindhya Range. It is a double storied building with three spacious upper floor suites, which overlook the gardens. To one side of the gardens is a small cottage hidden by mango trees in which he lives. He frequently hears the river's heart beats deep in meditation around the holy tank at Amarkantak. The bureaucrat leaves the bungalow, after issuing instructions to the staff, by the northern gate for his morning walk. He meets brawny tribal women from the nearby village, Vano. One day he encounters a Jain monk which is the first story in the novel. The young monk is the son of a wealthy diamond merchant. The bureaucrat pretends ignorance to know why Jain monks must shave their heads and cover their mouths. The monk admits that the masks prevent them from killing some blameless insects.

The monk says that non-violence is very tiring and most difficult for a man to practise and keep. Moved by the bureaucrat's curiosity, the monk discloses his past life. He said that when he was a child, his father taught him the fundamental principle of the Jains, the practice of non-violence. Growing up, he came to know his father's dignity as a merchant and his private adherence to the principle of non-violence. He admired his father more than anything alive for distributing his company's profits in charitable trusts. Later, he noticed a change in his attitude towards the poor. So

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one day he asked his father why he could worry about a dead insect more than a human being. A close look at the stories of the bureaucrat and the monk becomes evident that the bureaucrat retires from his active life hoping to find the meaning of life, as he lost his wife and had no children. So, he chose going into the forest by preferring a less important job on the banks of the Narmada. But indifference to it, the monk suddenly decides to give up wealth, wife, children, friends and all the comforts of luxurious living. Commenting on his decision, Ramamoorthi (1999: 146) writes “His decision is based on intuition and faith whereas the narrator's life is one pursuit guided by reason.”

Teacher's Story

In the *Teacher's Story* the narrator meets a man who accuses himself of being a murderer. It tells about a man called Master Mohan who now gives music lessons. His wife has always taunted him continually for his weaknesses and inability to make money. She also accuses him of the fact that he is the reason she had lost her rich inheritance. Although he leads an unhappy life, his gentle nature always ushers him to small acts of kindness. Master Mohan's father developed a great love to listen his son sing in recording studios. One day Master Mohan gets the chance to listen to a group of travelling Quawali singers from Nizamuddin, who are famous for their *Sufi* traditional songs. He stood spellbound to the voice of a young blind Muslim boy, Imrat. The singers have prodded him and started two musical lines “*I prostrate my head to the blade of Your Sword. O, the wonder of my submission. O, the wonder of Your protection.*” (61) Imrat's sister requests Mohan to take care of her brother for a while. Mohan's wife and children treat Imrat in a dreadful manner. He sings some beautiful devotional songs to the joy of all the people around. Mohan knows that the singing of these songs will give him the endurance he needs to confront the indignities of his life. He grooms him in music and discovers that the boy to be a prodigy. He instructs Imrat to sing songs of Kabir, Mirabai, Khusrau, Tulasidas, Chisti and Chandidas. His singing becomes so popular and attracts the attention of a music records company. Unable to bear the rude behaviour of his wife, Master Mohan leaves the house for Imrat to continue his practice: “Master Mohan explained the significance of the raga, initiating Imrat into the mystery of the world's rebirth, when light disperses darkness and Vishnu rises from his slumbers to re-dream the universe.” (70)

It is Master Mohan's wife, who wants to make some money out of the Imrat, accepts the offer and receives five thousand rupees for a programme. The boy is forced to sing and his singing fills the hall with ecstasy and mystic raptures. When the great Sahib rises, Master Mohan thinks the Sahib is going to dance to the music of the boy. The gruesome incidence the death of the boy drives the Master to the verge of madness. He comes to the banks of the Narmada in search of peace. He does not get peace because the story leaves him with many questions unanswered. Tariq Mia's explanation is that he does not know answer and it is a story about the human heart. The bureaucrat questions himself whether police catch him or not and why the Sahib kills the boy. Unable to come to a conclusion, Master Mohan commits suicide on his way back. In this context, Pradeep Trikha (1994: 176) comments: “The story indicates distrust in the goodness of human beings. It has a sensitive emotional unfolding, which consequently mark the ways of the world and generates tolerance.”

Executive

The *Executive's* story speaks about Nitin Bose, a young executive, works in a tea company in Calcutta. He is a well-educated orthodox and committed to duty. Though his companions have dreadful predictions, he opts for the tea estates as he could feel the monotonous of Calcutta and begins to live a self-disciplined life until a young tribal woman, Rima, arrives while he is asleep. He

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falls in love with her. Although he avoids women from him, he likes her and experiences her body. He does not like to lose the new experience that awakens the sensuous man in him "...Maddened by the fragile barrier of her ornaments, I crushed her in my embrace. Her body encircled mine like a flowering creeper grips a tree." (124) Nearly for a year she comes to Bose every night to give her body to him. His tranquil mind is coiled by the voluptuous tribal woman. Even though he returns to the city on the command of the chairman's telegram, he does not come out of Rima's dreams. Responding to the woman possessed Nitin Bose, Ramamoorthi (1999: 147) writes "When he returns to the city and gets lost in the glitter of society ladies, he still is haunted by the love song of that tribal woman, Rima."

When Nitin revisits the tea estate, he encounters Rima and is subjected to some kind of tribal magic. It is believed that he is possessed. The tribal priest explains someone has taken possession. He predicts that worshipping the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River will cure him. He has been told that "river has been given the power to cure him." (137) As the tribal priest said, Nitin Bose takes refuge on the banks of the river to immerse the figure of a goddess to weaken his possession. When the bureaucrat finishes the diary, Tariq Mia struggles to understand the power of the tribal woman and it made no sense to him. But his assistant Chagla understands it intuitively and explains "It is Mr. Bose who is making no sense, pretending desire is some kind of magic performed with black arts...." (143)

The relation between Nitin and Rima is immoral so that he is afraid of the regulations of the society because according to the society his act is a sin which is not excused by the people. Therefore he buried his immoral act in his mind and the effect of his suppression resulted in his utter madness. Afraid of society's regulations he cannot admit his immoral act to anybody else so he confesses it in his diary. Diary is one of the means of confession through which one can get mental relief. Nitin Bose after writing his diary gets mental relief and is cured from amnesia. The story reflects the Indian psyche and tradition in which these kinds of acts are not allowed and if someone did it unconsciously then he is afraid to confess it. Nitin Bose as belongs to the same tradition suppresses his desire and wants to hide the truth from people. The writer, before telling the story, describes the myth of Kama, God of Love which is very helpful to create a suitable atmosphere. Through diary Nitin Bose narrates his story in the first person point of view and makes the narration reliable. Analysing the story, Pradeep (1994: 176) sagely comments "The story suggests that man suffers from emotional and spiritual limitations but despite these there is a realization of achievement."

The Courtesan's Story

The Courtesan's Story is a tale of the love of flesh recounted by the courtesan's mother and herself. The Courtesan represents the particular group of courtesans which is neglected by the society. The courtesans are not considered as human beings but they are used for entertainment only. Courtesan's daughter is another narrator. The bureaucrat happens to meet her as she came for a night's shelter to the rest house. The curious bureaucrat is enthusiastic to know regarding her. As she admitted, they belonged to a small state of Shahbag. He kept a number of courtesans who were even wealthier than his wives. These courtesans were highly skilled in many different accomplishments. In those days, courtesans used to educate the noblemen, because they were not only famous for their beauty but also education of sixty four arts. One of them had a daughter who was very beautiful. As she had the astringent experience of the royal people, she took a great care in shaping her daughter a genuine courtesan. She rarely permits her to appear only at weddings or birth celebrations. Pathak

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(1997: 114) rightly feels when he analyses the story “We meet the courtesan's daughter, beautiful, and vivacious, who is compared by her mother to an angel.”

The courtesan's daughter got a chance to perform at a large political gathering. Her tender voice soothed the crowd into silence. The crowd not only applauded but also encouraged her performance. Her mother felt happy as if her daughter had conquered all sixty four arts. The happiness was shattered as her daughter was kidnapped by a bandit of Vindhya, Rahul Singh, who has a notorious standing for robbing, kidnaps her because he thinks that she has been his wife in so many lives before that one and keeps her in captivity in a cave and forces her to yield, but she refuses to surrender to him. He uses to stand outside the cave, watching her as if trying to prove there is a greater art than all her arts “.....the ability to love someone as he loved me, while I danced as if to amuse myself but really to taunt him.” (184)

Rahul Singh tells her that she has been his wife in many births before this one, but she does not believe him. He endures her hatred and insults. But one night, when he touches her, she realizes that he is speaking truth “Guided by his touch, I learned I had known his body in a hundred life times before he took me again a virgin on the thin cotton quilt which was all that shielded our bodies from the ground” (184). She spends with him happily for a few days. She too falls in love with him and became pregnant. He was so much in love with her that he became reformed but died trying to steal something for her from the bazaar. It is her love that risks his life: “...I knew he was dying. He never once opened his eyes, even to bid me farewell.” (186) She can't survive without him, so she dies by drowning in the waters of the Narmada. Her mother feels happy that her daughter died in the Narmada because she would be purified of all her sins. In this context, Pathak (1997: 114) aptly points out “The effect of love is so pervasive that even Rahul Singh, the most dreaded and wanted bandit in the Vindhya, is not unaffected by it.”

The Musician's Story

The Musician's Story describes an ugly female musician, who learns to perfect her singing all her life. Her father, who has a musical outstanding ability, taught her how to play music. In this context, Pradeep (1994: 176) writes “There is a purpose in teaching music to his ugly daughter; through music, he tries to free her from her own image so that she could love beauty wherever she finds it.” A young man arrives and wants to be a student of music with him as a tutor. As she loves him at first sight, she tells “When I opened my eyes I still saw him, and it was as if ten thousand honey bees had stung my heart at once.” (217) Her father requests him to marry his daughter and says “Remember, If I teach you the *Ragini* I will be giving you as wife to my gods, the gods of music. Such a contract cannot be broken. It will be a marriage sealed by Shiva himself.” (214) The disciple also promises him to marry his daughter after learning the art of music. But the man delays the marriage till he completes the *Bhairav*, the raga of Shiva. After completing the last music performance, the pupil leaves for his family and sends thanks to the music teacher for teaching him. Later, it is revealed that the young man gets married to someone else. The musician's daughter is ugly that's why he rejects her. His love is a materialistic love which gives importance only to external beauty. The musician's daughter cannot tolerate his rejection but he convinces her that beauty is a passing thing and it lies in the eyes of the beholder. In her narration she describes the details of every raga which can be told only by a person who has knowledge of music so the writer chooses her as a narrator of this story. He tells “Of course not. The beauty of the Narmada makes it a perfect retreat for anyone like myself wishing to withdraw from the world. But how can it exorcise a lover's grief?” (227) Gita Mehta with the help of this narrator describes the selfish and

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materialistic world. She sketches that the river is a perennial source of life, so it has become immortal.

The Minstrel's Story

Tariq Mia tells *The Minstrel's Story* to understand the bureaucrat about the Naga Babas. It is about the Naga Baba, who rescued a girl of eight years old from the clutches of a prostitute and who later became a minstrel. One day by chance, Tariq Mia meets a martial ascetic shortly after he became a priest. To become Nagas, the martial ascetics should overcome human limitations. His teacher tells "You can not be a Naga without overcoming human limitations.....Learn to survive without water. If I find you here when I return, I will take you to our academy." (239) After a few days, the Naga Baba sits in the cremation ground without food and water for nine days. The people, who cross the road, fear the Naga's sight as his skin is grey, matted hair and the human skull from which he eats and drinks and also believe the Nagas possess super human powers, the ability to levitate and curse anyone who displeases him. The Naga Baba clears all his distractions and prepares to meditate on the God of death. On the night of Shiva, the Nagas are supposed to beg at unclean, untouchable or blasphemous houses so Naga Baba sets out to beg alms from a third untidy house. He chooses a brothel house and accepts a child as alms. The woman tells she is not responsible for the trouble the child brings. He names her Uma which means peace in the night, and they live in caves where he nurtures her and teaches her to sing the song of the Narmada. They live on the river bank for nearly three years. Uma can sing more songs about the river. He encourages her to sing at temple festivals travelling from temple to temple and leaves the singer-saint to follow the next stage of his enlightenment. Leaving Uma is a foolish deed of Naga Baba because the Narmada is born from Shiva's penance; Uma is born of the Naga Baba's penance. The bureaucrat is too eager to find them. At this point of view, Indira Bhatt (1995: 75) writes "It is the active life, the life of Karma and not a passive renunciation that brings not only knowledge but also enlightenment."

Ramamoorthi (1999: 153) writes "*A River Sutra* is an attempt to subversive ness to present the river as an eternal source of the flow of life." In each story, Narmada River is used as the abstergent refuge for corrupted and distraught people. It is a symbol of immortality and honesty. It is the heaven for the people those suffering from any kind of reason. It keeps suppressed souls peacefully. The characters purify their body as well as soul by drowning in the river. The writer might want to say Narmada River indicates India and its culture in which the people survive with so many hurdles. She used it as a character in this novel. The Narmada River purifies the soul of people who are swindled and deceived by cunning human nature and materialistic love.

Conclusion

This novel is a series of short stories, which are all linked by the same themes of love, repentance and suffering. Each story is given a different title and they are linked by sustained commentary from the narrator. The stories are told by an unnamed narrator, and they are all centred on the theme of the river Narmada which is used as an abstergent refuge for corrupted and distraught souls. It symbolizes the immortality of love. The power of love to heal and also to cause tragedy forms the main theme in every story told to the narrator in this novel. There is a great deal of tragedy associated with the theme of love in the stories. All of the stories speak about the quenchless quest for intensive love in the lives of very different types of people. Some of these people find true love, while other stories paint a tragic picture of how people let themselves be

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destroyed by love. They finally reach the Narmada River to purify their souls by downing in it.

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