



LYRICS OF LOST SOULS, A STUDY OF GITA MEHTA'S A RIVER SUTRA

Flora & Fauna

**Mamata Rani
Subudhi**

Lecturer in English, KBDV College, Nirakarpur, Khordha, Odisha, India

ABSTRACT

Gita Mehta is a well known name among South Asian writers. Her artistic laurels includes Karma Cola, Raj and A River Sutra. Snake and Ladder which are rooted on Indian culture, religion and mysticism. A River Sutra is a series of stories on the pilgrims who has come to the holy river Narmada to have a bath to wash away the evils. The river is the linking agents between seemingly individual stories in to a whole. The stories of different pilgrims to the river are linked with the vein of Indian myths and mythology as well as the artistic tradition that anchored upon the secular humanist tradition. In this paper I want to show, Love in any form is the essential driving force of life, but when it's dead, life turns to desert and man turns into a walking shadow in search of solace in the novel, A River Sutra.

KEYWORDS

Mystic, Sorrow, Meditation, Sin, Spirituality, Music, Songs, Soul, Salvation.

A River Sutra (1993) by international acclaimed writer Gita Mehta is a fictional work that records Indian history and culture published in 1993. It is a lyrical series of interconnected stories about mysteries and myths of east along with the ultimate realisation of truth and reality. Unlike her previous two books Karma Cola and Raj, Mrs Mehta's narrative skill has reached at the brilliant highest in the book. With imaginative powers and narrative efficiency she has gifted this work blending Indian story telling tradition with modern outlook for love-which is both spiritual and sensual and radical and redemptive simultaneously. Sometimes it strikes affinity with Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales and The Vanity Fair of William Makepeace Thackeray that "Conveys a world that is spiritual foreign and entirely accessible."

A River Sutra, is a garland of stories taking the thread or sutra of river Narmada and its valleys. The pious river is at the under current that unifies the novel that shows the unity in diversity from the perspective of culture, music and religion, and love. Each character here represented here has the religious umbilical cords connected to any particular religion, thus writer gets enough scope to focus on many religious cults of Hinduism, Sufi Islam, Jainism, Tribal religion. In Post colonial context, it salvages the lost tradition of rich religious heritage and it deep studies to find new identities from among different religious communities in India and their influence on young generation. Here we have six stories interconnected with each other taking the place near the river Narmada. The river serves the role of sutra or thread and the unnamed narrator as the sutradhara, as classical Indian drama calls or chorus in Ancient Greek dramatic ways which connects the loose episode. Placed among the five sacred rivers as Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Kaveri and Narmada, this one is considered as most sacred because the Hinduism believes that it sprang from the lord Shiva. As the name "Narmada" is originated from Sanskrit which means "giver of pleasure", thousands of pilgrims visited to worship the river as goddess. As the daughter of lord Shiva, she is called "her holiness", as a mother, she nourishes the human civilisation standing on both the sides. It is a spiritual hub for the people from far and wide.

Apart from the river, there is an unnamed man who quits his bureaucrat job after his wife's death and to spend his twilight years becomes manager in a rest house, a Mughal vintage building deep inside the forest on the bank of the Narmada story is told in mid to late 20th century Indian life through a series of vignettes. The beginning of the book reminds the Tabard inn in Southwark across the Thames river of London in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. The unnamed bureaucrat or manager of Mrs Mehta comes close to the host of the inn named Harry Baile. He is a symbolic character of the third stage of man's life as suggested in ancient Vedic scriptures, namely vanaprastha, among the four ashrams of human life such as Brahmacharya, Grhastha, Vanaprastha and Sannyasa. He declares "I am now a Vanaprasthi". Wife is the binding thread of worldly life as the wife dies, this man feels alienated among material pleasures, so to seek spiritual solace, he leaves a prestigious job and prefers to spend the rest of his life among pilgrims coming to the holy river. His "destiny had brought" to "understand the world" (268-69). But with

every pilgrim in the inn he encounters a new slice of worldly problem. He feels helpless to release himself from material turmoils as professor Shankar comments, "You have chosen the wrong place to flee the world my friend...too many lives converge on these banks" (268). Still he is in love with the river, as he says:

"In the silence of the ebbing night I sometimes think I can hear the river's heartbeat pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at least to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank of Amrkantak." (4-5)

The narrator has chosen the wrong place for his spiritual pilgrimage, as he is more entangled with worldly issues than his previous life. Each story has the distinctiveness and divinity to stand alone but Mehta garlanded each of them into one unit and filled the gap by use of the river as well as the unnamed narrator. So different cultures, religions, traditions are placed in specific scope in a broad panorama. There's a unit in diversity. Everyday the bureaucrat comes the bank of river to get peace for what he has abandoned his worldly pleasures, but he comes in contact with a new character with new problem. He sees people are sick with desires, frustration, pain and suffering, seriously in need of redemption. Having a sympathetic heart, he tries to share their sorrows, because he knows sharing sorrows with other one would diminish the intensity of suffering. Automatically he is entangled with a broad family, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbaka". The stories are narrated to him by other characters of the novel. The major stories are about the Hindu, Jain ascetics, ministers, diamond merchant, courtesan, tea executives, music teacher, Muslim clerics and tribal folk. These characters are sick people, who are wounded in life, so come to the river to get peace. Narmada is the river of peace, solace and consolation, has wide open her arms to embrace any sufferer. People try to wash away their problem by taking bath in the holy water refreshing body and soul. The narrator and Tariq Mia are the two characters, before whom, these recorded characters get chance to explain their problem and open their hearts. Both are not directly experienced what they narrated, but active involvement in different issues of life through the pilgrim's explanation of their problem as Mrs Mehta wants to presents. The first person narrator in each story help us to get into the very skin of the characters as, Nityanandam points out, "from the Jain Monk seeking to free himself of the fetters of the worldly desire through the vows of poverty, celibacy and non violence to musician who learnt about the soul of the ragas, of its rasa which give it life and the melodies of the six ragas that sustain the harmonies of living things." (144)

The multiple use of myths and symbols enrich the religious values of the work. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1973) stresses Levi Strauss's meaning of myth-"myth is a kind of collective dream expressing unconscious wishes" (pp.14). Myth is considered as an ideal model or a pattern which pertains to the material as a whole. The traditional Hindu myths of Shiva and Narmada, as symbolic blueprint of the work. So myth is used here as a weapon to connect past with present, conscious with unconscious in an easy way..

The first story is about Ashok, a thirty year old Jain Monk who has

renounced the family and worldly pleasures and luxury being obsessed with it. Mrs Mehta has a mature selection in taking an outbox character in her first story, because an affluent young man fed up with material pleasures is very uncommon in real life. His father is a prosperous diamond businessman with plenty of money, gold, power and prestige but poor in morality and humanity. He is a great businessman, but not a good employer to his labourers of diamonds mines. As he thinks, "I don't mind if people die while extracting diamonds, but I believe in non-violence, so I'm a trader". He realises the value of money not man. Ashok has been blessed with a different mind, a sensible heart, opposite to his father's thoughts. He has roamed extensively, seen the poverty, suffering and starvation of common men. He is highly influenced by morals of Jainism like, love, sympathy pity and fellow feelings. He is the Prahalada, the son of father king Hiranyakasipu in Hindu mythology. In coming to the marriage age, Ashok faces a situation, and being told that, "flirt around with whomsoever or how many as you may like, but get married to a girl of our choice". Then Ashok decides to renounce everything, be free from the shackle of mundane world. The ritual of renunciation in Jain religion is vividly observed and narrated by the novelist. The lavish arrangements of the ritual is remarkable with expenditure of sixty two million rupees. The chaotic conditions created by worldly passion and attractions before being cut down altogether in Ashok's character is symbolised by the stampede in the ritual to collect the money thrown to people to show affluence. Ashok is a small character in Mehta's catalogue of characters, but he comes close sometimes to the unnamed narrator. His extreme practice of non violence even dusting the path while walking makes him a prototype of Lord Mahavir in modern sense. The ending of Ashok story is quite mysterious, as he hints about a mystery deep buried in his heart, but never revealed. As Tariq Mia, the Muslim mulla explains before the manager, it is the unfathomed depth of human heart and the helplessness that resides in it.

In the second, the novelist focuses her attention on the pious relationship between teachers and his disciple. A teacher is next to God, as Indian ancient culture honours him, "Guru Brahm, Guru Vishnu, Gurudev Maheswara". Master Mohan is a struggling music teacher who thinks himself as a failed man, as he couldn't achieve his dreams in the music. He comes in contact with a divine gifted child Imrat, who is blind but blessed with an exceptional singing talent. Mohan's dying dreams gets west wind with Imrat. Mrs Mehta's description of the intense bond between this duo is so heart rendering that sometimes it creates doubts, can a teacher love a student so deeply. Mohan nourishes the boy's talent despite his wife's unwillingness. He is determined to go any extent for Imrat. Perhaps it is not God's will, the budding star is killed out of jealousy in an incident. Terribly shocked by the incident, Mohan takes own life by jumping before a running train. Tariq Mia explains before the narrator, "Perhaps he couldn't exist without loving someone as he has loved blind child. I don't know the answer, little brother. It is only a story about the human heart" (91). A unique love story between teacher and student ends there. The narrator couldn't understand the chemistry of love, hate and jealousy. Is jealousy, the shadow of love....the question remains unsolved. Man is hungry for love by nature, Mohan has family love and social bondages, but his love for the blind boy surpasses other relationships even his own life. As the Vano tribes believe, the river can cure from "power of desire". "A mere glimpse of the Narmada's water is supposed to clean a human being of generations of sinful births" (151). Mohan's dream to pay a musical homage at the pious tomb of Amir Rumi, the great Sufi saint that stands on the bank of Narmada, remained unfulfilled. The next on is on an executive under the spell of black magic. He represents a broad section of population in modern time as described in T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* "fear in a handful of dust". The adulterous lifestyle of the protagonist in a tea firm poisoned his life as he thinks, the tribal people shoot the arrows of black magic. So has come running the river to save life. Here he worships in a tribal manner and saved. Mrs Mehta tries to show, what a person shows to the outer world is not the transparent picture of his inner self, or hypocrisy is at the root of sophisticated people in modern society. But the writer is with her solution for any human sin, that's the holy river, like other stories. The fourth story runs with a transcendental thought of rebirth. A dreadful criminal who lives on the bank of Narmada believes that a young sophisticated virgin courtesan was his wife in his previous birth. He abducts the girl and eventually, she accepts the criminal as husband. But she could not maintain the relationship long enough, as the man is killed by police encounter when courtesan is in her pregnancy stage. The baby is spoiled, but she fails to return to her home, where she was abducted once. It is a social stigma to keep relationships with a

criminal or dacoit. So she has nowhere to go...lost from the heavens but no space to anchor her foot on earth. Like goddess Sita in Ramayan as asking a place in Mother Earth, she seeks shelter in the lap of river Narmada. The river is the redeemer from all suffering in the life. In the fifth story, Mrs Mehta uplifts the story from physical to metaphysical level through music by a Veena player. The writer introduces readers with seven notes of Indian (sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni) and Western (do, re, mi, fa, so, la, te) in an artistic way. There is music in emotion, in manifest world and gases in the ether...from grass to galaxy shows the brilliance of the author. The musician gives half notes and micro notes in bird's chirping, the single note of the bird's settling down on the trees at sunset links the reader with ethereal. Mrs Mehta shows her mastery over music by comparison with sounds of birds and animals with seven notes of scale:

sa -cry of peacock
re -calf calling it's mother.
ga -goat's bleating
ma -cry of the Heron
pa -song of Nightingales
dha - Neighing of Horses
ni -Elephant's trumpet

Again, about raga of music, he says each raga is associated with a particular season of the year suggesting a particular emotion. The music teacher also seen discussing about rasa or Navarasa which is part of dance and music with beautiful comparisons move the mind of readers. All the musical teachings are before the youth, who promised to marry the ugly daughter of the musician. "If I teach you will you take my daughter as your wife" (218). As a father, the musician donates his whole knowledge almost he emptied himself for the would be son in law. But the youth bitterly betrayed the father and daughter after getting everything for which he had come. Human evil has got a perfect picture by Mrs Mehta and the poor father says his daughter to have a bath in the holy river to make penance to free her from the thought of the boy. As he announces before the public: "Tonight I gave your daughter in marriage to music. I have fulfilled my duties as a father. Now I free this young man from our bargain. But if he still wishes to marry my child, the wedding can take place whenever my wife wishes." (218)

The last story of the series is quite allegorical with theme of birth and rebirth, assumption and redemption. An archeologist turned Nagababa is at the center. Unlike other Naga saints, life is very challenging and troublesome. In order to satisfy Lord Shiva, the baba keeps fasting for nine days and meditate in a crematorium without taking food and water, just before Shivaratri. The hardcore life style of Naga saints as the writer narrates, raises the ethical question about salvation, can anyone attend the highest state of redemption after severe physical torture. Perhaps this is Indian mysticism, on which Mrs Mehta is brooding over throughout this book. The Nagababa rescues a girl from a person of ill-repute and takes her to Amarkantak. That girl takes a new birth and named as Uma as the daughter of Narmada, who spends her rest life singing songs in praising the river. The baba has completed his eight four births, as proclaimed in Hindu scriptures, before the soul taking another human birth, is on his eternal sojourn like the river running towards ocean. There's a lot of mystical allusions and deep philosophical undercurrent in this story, and the writer tries hard to find the key to the release of the soul from the cycle of birth and death.

The Hindu culture and mythology is the focus of the writer interwoven with secular standpoint and tuned with Sufi poetry. Imrat's singing of Sufi saint Kabir's hymns: "some seek god in Mecca / Some seek God in Benares" (74). create a mystic air in the environment to which Tariq Mia reacts as, "made a bridge between your faith (Hinduism) and mine". The river is the linking agent between different religions, but she is in isolated darkness running towards ocean like: "a woman painting her palm and soles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover or indolently stretching her limb as she oiled herself with scented oils, her long black hair loosened, her eyes outlined in collyrium." (139)

The river is in search of love an eternal search...which is the only thrust of all the characters in Mrs Mehta's galaxy. Each character is trying to wash the unfulfilled wishes in the water of Narmada, thus making the water impure but carried to the ocean only to attain salvation. Both love and desire as Mr Mehta shows, are noble and

savage, inseparable from our existence, both the driving forces of life but sometimes beyond our control. This basic instinct of man served between the ancient sacred and contemporary secular world, combining the ancient legends in old Sanskrit with current social changing ethos. As Salman Rushdie says, "Gita Mehta's A River Sutra is an important attempt by a thoroughly modern Indian to make her reckoning with the Hindu culture from which she emerged." (XXI)

REFERENCES

1. Mehta, Gita (1993). A River Sutra. New Delhi: Penguin Indian.
2. Nityanand, Indira "Gita Mehta's A River Sutra :The Thread of Life" . Indian Woman Novelist. Set III, Vol. 4, Ed, R K Dhawan. New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1995. Print.
3. Rushdie Salman and West, Elizabeth (1997). The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997. (Ed) West Elizabeth. Great Britain: Vintage, ix -xx (Introduction).
4. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1973) Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva, Oxford and IBH, New Delhi. Pp.1-14.