

Indian Sensibility in *A River Sutra*

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Abstract

The novel, *A River Sutra*, by Gita Mehta is very much about India and Indian sensibility. It talks only about the responsiveness of India. The soul and body of the novel are imbued with native color. Be it the myths, philosophy, classical Sanskrit drama, Hindu mythology, Sufi poetry and religion in India—all are woven in the novel. In addition to it, even the theme as well as the medium both is Indian. From the beginning to the end it deals with distant Indian tradition and contemporary indigenous issues the country facing. In this way, one observes the tradition and modernity simultaneously.

KEYWORDS: sensibility, myths, philosophy, sutradhaar, pilgrimage, salvation, and Indian music

This novel by Gita Mehta talks about the myths, philosophy and religion in India. “Mehta’s subject matter here is as rich as the tradition she taps. Classical Sanskrit drama, Hindu mythology, and Sufi poetry all play an important role in the novel. Recurring motifs playing through the novel are that of the raga of Indian classical music, karma, 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 skillfully realized journey into a resonate culture” (Riesman 02). Moreover, by talking such differences this novel has again presented that in India there is unity in diversity. This multiplicity has not affected the integrity rather has added colors to the beauty of rich culture of the country. Along with this variety, the novelist has dealt with the importance of spirituality in India. The novel deals with contemporary India and its social, cultural and spiritual issues. Mrs. Mehta has done a great job in introducing the reader to rich old heritage of India. *A River Sutra* talks about renunciation, salvation, and human love. Usha Bande says: “What I find interesting about Gita Mehta is the newness of her approach, simplicity and the variety of her themes. After a long stint at reading and writing on feminism, the open sky and the serene river looked refreshing” (Preface, xi). Windy Smith writes: “The content dictated the book’s form, she [the novelist] explains. “India is a place where worlds and times are colliding with huge velocity: we’re putting satellites into space, and we have bullock carts; there’s that constant tension and contradiction of immense sophistication and an almost pre-medieval way of life. I thought the only way I could describe that collision was anecdotally, by taking snapshots, as it were” (03). Gita Mehta has discussed some familial and social sagas, and there are some points in disguise form and needs to be dissected. It is only in India where people renounce the world and all the worldly things to achieve salvation

The novelist has very aptly chosen the very own Indian method to articulate the theme and stories of her novel. Here Indian method is being used to express Indian content- means both medium and substance are Indian in their spirit. The novel starts

with the introduction of the narrator, a retired bureaucrat who has left the world in search of renunciation. Now he has become *vanaprasthi*- “someone who has retired to the forest to reflect”. It is one of the “stages of life prescribed by Hindu scriptures- the infant, the student, the householder- and who have now entered the stage of the *vanaprasthi*, to seek personal enlightenment” (07). Since he had no duties to perform so, he decided to go in search of salvation.

He plays the role of *sutradhaar* or a storyteller and tells us stories and experiences of different people whom he meets. Storytelling is also an oral tradition in India. “In the course of the work [he] meet[s] people of many different religions—Hindu, Muslim, Jain—and a broad spectrum of social and class backgrounds, from the most learned and wealthy to the least educated and poor, and gain at least a glimpse into the complex society that makes up India” (Hedgie 02). While going through his daily routine he is being inspired with six stories, which constructs the novel. These stories present some characteristics of Indian sensibility. Each story embodies a unique face of India. On the other hand, the river Narmada plays a very important part in the novel and can be considered as main protagonist of the novel. It functions as a *sutra* which simple means a thread– that binds things together. It is also a traditional narrative term in India that teachers were using in the ancient times to teach their students. Since there were no books at that time, which can help them (students) in learning things taught to them, teachers used this technique. It has been very useful practice and has helped in the novel too.

There is a story of a Jain Muni “a slender figure robbed in white muslin” with saved head and holding a wooden begging bowl and a stick tied with woolen tufts-- forbidden to speak. He has shaved his head to avoid human vanity. He further tells the reason of covering his mouth so that he would not kill some blameless insect by sudden inhalation. According to him, non-violence is the most difficult vow for a man to keep. An elderly monk and his attitude towards life and teachings of Mahavira impressed him. But what overwhelmed him more was monk’s air of contentment. From here, the seed of his becoming a monk was sown. He wanted that satisfaction and moral peace in his life that led him to decide to leave the world like a monk. Hence, he chose the path of renunciation.

His father’s wish to duplicate Mahavira’s departure is the indication of man’ pride and hypocrisy as Surendran says, “There is no dearth of hypocrisy and the rich exploit the poor. To show their vanity people never hesitate to spend even millions” (40). Ashok, in reality, has “no urge for salvation or to get rid of doubt, delusion and extremes, but it is merely a passing whim, a psychological imbalance” (Sharama 124). Thus, this particular incident provides the truth of human nature, especially present in India.

The other story, which he comes across, is the story of a music teacher, “Master Mohan [is] not a bitter man. Although he [leads] an unhappy life, his gentle nature dispose[s] him to small acts of kindness-helping a stranger to dismount from a rickshaw, reaching into his pockets to find a boiled sweet for a child” (53). The novel tells that he was an excellent singer from his childhood. He was praised for his voice in concert halls filled with his admirers. But his life throws light on the poor condition of unfortunate people and difficulties they face to achieve their goal. He too was unfortunate and “when the recording contract was finally offered, only weeks before the record was to be made, Master Mohan’s voice had broken” (56). While he was spending a monotonous life, one day he met a nine-year old poor blind boy with such voice must only be used to praise

God, lest fate exact a second revenge by robbing him of it (72). He decided to teach that poor child. The other reason to help him was he wanted to fulfilled or live his dreams through the boy's dream that he himself could not attain. He wished to live his childhood life again.

He began to teach the child in the park of the vicinity. One day a man came to him with a singing contract and offered him a good amount of money in this behalf. Everything was going well and it seemed that Mohan and pupil's dream was going to be true. One of them was two people of criminal background. They went to meet him on the behalf of an influential man-- a great lover of music. They made every effort to persuade him. They expressed the possibility that Imrat could sing in the Calcutta Music Festival. However, in the meantime a tragedy took place. The poor blind boy was killed by Sahib saying, "such a voice is not human. What will happen to music if this is the standard by which God judged us" (89). Tariq Mia answers the protagonist's question of why Sahib killed the boy. He said that it was like stealing something, "steal[ing] an object of worship so no one but himself can enjoy it". He wanted to enjoy it alone so he killed the boy. Perhaps Sahib thought that good things belong to him only and to nobody else. Therefore, he killed the boy. Thus, like other part of the world, people of hypocritical and materialistic nature are present in India also.

The next story is of Nitin Bose, nephew of his friend, an executive in a tea company of Calcutta. He was sent to the guesthouse to recover as he was possessed and wanted to be cured. He came there to perform some rituals at some shrine near Narmada. He told the narrator that to learn about him, read his diary in which he has written everything. Thus, he started reading his diary. It begins with full of hustle and bustle of Calcutta's daily life. Nitin's company was situated in the middle of the city. All this led them to drinking and adultery. Later he was transferred to "the solitude of the tea estate..." (114) and he felt that "life on the tea states seemed a real man's life." He started taking pleasure in his new work and place and used to read his grandfather's books of Indian philosophy and mythology in the night and "viewed the legends through the prism of anthropology" (119). He felt a change in him and "begun to exhibit the mannerism of an elder." He says: "the dreams I remembered were linked to my grandfather's library" (118-19)

While working he did not realize that two years had passed. But after sometime he thought everything was mocking him. Whatever he did irritated him. Things that were giving him pleasure now annoyed him. Days were passing so and one day while he was asleep, a woman came to him. He was compelled by his need and got what the subtle desire he had to have. It continued for many nights and during their lovemaking she told that her name was Rima. His decision made Rima sad but Nitin could not help her. Gaining his previous life and decided not to go back to tea estate-god forbidden place, and to Rima. All the arrangements were made for him and what he had to do was to go back to the tea estate to organize things for his successor. On his return Rima did not come to meet him. So one night he followed her in the forest. At dawn, the guard found him unconscious calling Rima repeatedly. The guard said he was absolutely fine but the priest said that someone had taken possession of him. He advised him to worship the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River. For this reason he came to Narmada. Nitin Bose's story is a story of a modern city brought up youth of India who believes in epicurism and has no control over sensuality. While asked whether a man can

be possessed, Dr. Mitra replies, “if a man believes strongly enough that he is possessed only then I suppose you could say he is possessed. The young man has imagined his sickness. Let him imagine his cure.” (107-08)

Nitin Bose’s story is followed by the story of a courtesan who comes there for her daughter. Her daughter was kidnapped by a notorious robber called Rahul Sing. It is evident from Vatsayan’s seminal work the *Kama Sutra* that a courtesan must possess “sixty-four arts she must be mistress of, from architecture to zoology. Painting, flower arrangement, music, languages, philosophy, jewelry, literature, even mathematics” (164-65). Nevertheless, their condition is pathetic now. She discovers a shift and says that while in ancient time people gave them respect and admiration for their talent, now they criticize for that talent. They consider them an object. They regard them as someone who uses its talent to earn money by pleasing people. So, it is noticeable here that there was a time when even courtesan were respected but in contemporary scenario Indian women are deprived of esteem. The story reveals the changing and pitiable condition of women in India.

Now the narrator turns to the next story that is of a popular musician and his daughter. He makes his daughter to sit next to him and observe how birds sing at dawn and sunset “because of the changing light. Their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is truly music” (203) and expresses his resentment on men for assuming that only they respond to beauty. He says that according to Vedas, power of music is so great that even with the help of music salvation can be obtained. Here we can see that perhaps the author wants to enlighten the reader with the richness of Indian music. He wishes to point out that the Indian music is a great amalgam of sound and melody. Unlike modern music, which is full of sound but without soul, it has depth and soul. One day a boy comes to him and is accepted as a student only on the condition that he would marry his daughter. But he was shocked and understood it when he saw her. Though he did not say anything yet the girl read his apprehension in his eyes. After their introduction their music classes started.

Nevertheless, despite all there is something cryptic between the lines in the musician’s story, which captures attention. Though primarily it deals with the enrichment of music, yet it also treats with human desires. The story is of a girl who has a grotesque feature because of which she is ashamed of her appearance. She is the cause of her mother’s trouble. It is a trouble of a mother’s concern for her daughter. A girl with an unattractive feature suffers a lot, especially in India. She is humiliated outside her home by her friends and relatives. And at the age of marriage she gets no marriage proposal. She is deprived of all the natural affections which a child has. She craves for mother’s care and father’s affection but finds no moorings. All this leads her to learn music so that with the help of it she can forget her anguish for some time.

Thus, Gita Mehta has taken very appropriate scenario which comprises indigenous issues. While talking about it she presents before us the vibrancy of India and Indian cultures she shows that in some part of the country people are very stick to its traditions. The reason for their stickiness to it is that these places are associated with pilgrimages. One of such pilgrimages is the Narmada River where people come with

different purposes of pilgrimage. The people who come here are not only old and retired people rather many of them are young and sophisticated. Therefore, the novel *A River Sutra* deals with ancient and modern India. An India which has not forgotten its history and still trying to make a balance between ancient and modernity. Despite all Gita Mehta does not forget to illustrate the modern development and demonstrate it simultaneously. She also depicts modern circumstances and complications aroused from it. One of the complexities of modern time is people have lost their mental peace and are in search of restore it. It can be seen in the story of bureaucrat and Nitin Bose. Both suffer from mental disturbance and come to the bank of Narmada River. While the former is fed up with the monotony of his life, the other is victim of his desire-desire of material pleasures. Master Mohan's story raises the question of man's hypocrisy. Society is full of hypocrite people who use and kill other people in jealousy. He is not happy with what he has rather wants more. In order to gain more he chooses wrong ways. Man has forgotten the teaching that contentment is the best happiness. He teaches it to others but he himself does not follow it. Such tendency is also present in the Courtesan's story which informs that her daughter was kidnapped by an infamous bandit Rahul Singh. We are moved by his story that he was a government servant but injustice against him and his family left him with no way but to become a bandit. His story points out to the social reality where powerful people misuse their power and compel innocent people to become robbers and thieves. Exploitation of poor people is also visible in Minstrel's story where Uma's father sells her to a woman for five hundred rupees. The woman is a prostitute who runs this business and for this purpose, she needs girls. She searches such families who are poor and badly want money. The story also deals with pathetic condition of untouchables. Perhaps the author wants to point out that after many years of independence India is still struggling with casteism. Hence, Gita Mehta has dealt with India's cultural as well as social issues.

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