

Gita Mehta's A River Sutra: A Manifestation of the Wisdom of Oriental Philosophy

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Abstract

The novel is an artistic embodiment of the affirmative vision of life. In this novel the novelist expresses a positive philosophy of life that guides and controls the thematic and technical aspects. The belief in the possibility of man's attainment of 'highest bliss' or 'enlightenment' through a humble return to nature is very common in Indian literature and Gita Mehta, too, believes in this possibility. So she employs the symbol of 'river' in her novel. The river symbolizes moral and spiritual superiority. The people in the novel attain the absolute peace and the 'miraculous spiritual power' at the Narmada. Mehta accepts here the philosophy of Vedanta and Upanishada with all its charm, glory and forcefulness. In her novel A River Sutra Gita Mehta gives poetic expression to Indian philosophy. Thus the whole book has symbolic undertone that provides the novel its final meaning.

KEYWORDS: the Narmada River, pilgrimage, myth of the Narmada, sin, rebirth, etc

Gita Mehta, an emerging personality in the sphere of Indian English Literature, seems to have an innate zeal to help ordinary people move towards some awareness of the depths of spiritual knowledge which forms the central symbolic theme of the novel A River Sutra. Mehta's perception of Oriental philosophy, her perceptions of the gospel of Gita, Vedanta and Upanishadas are presented in A River Sutra symbolically and methodically. Mehta seems to convey here that bliss can be achieved by those who discard the physical attainments of the world, and enter into the cosmic world of the natural elements. The belief in the possibility of man's attainment of 'highest bliss' or 'enlightenment' through a humble return to nature is very common in Indian literature and Gita Mehta, too, believes in this possibility. So she employs the symbol of 'river' in her novel. The river symbolizes moral and spiritual superiority. The people in the novel attain the absolute peace and the 'miraculous spiritual power' at the Narmada. In her A River Sutra Gita Mehta gives poetic expression to Indian philosophy. Thus the whole book has symbolic undertone that provides the novel its final meaning.

In A River Sutra Gita Mehta presents a very profound Vedantic philosophy of the unfathomable knowledge of Nature. In the novel Mehta suggests that the meaning of God and the purpose of life rest ultimately in the mission of universal love. In A River Sutra, Mehta explores the diversity of cultures within India. To accomplish this, Mehta, presents seemingly unconnected stories in her novel, stories about Hindu and Jain ascetics, courtesans and minstrels, diamond merchants and tea executives, Muslim clerics and music teacher, tribal folk beliefs and the anthropologists who study them. What bind these stories together are two things: the Narmada River and a Sutra. 'Sutra' as Mehta explains in the glossary to her novel means literally, 'a thread or string'. In the case of her novel, the 'sutra' is the theme of love that runs through all the stories, threading them

loosely together. The symbolic title suggests the search for the fundamental truth of life, the Reality embedded in the complex fabric of existence.

The novel is an artistic embodiment of the affirmative vision of life. In the novel she expresses, a positive philosophy of life that guides and controls the thematic and technical aspects. The central philosophy of the novel is an affirmation of transcendental principles like Truth, Beauty and Goodness through a delineation of pursuit and practice of higher values like love, compassion and the concurrent negation of lower material values. Thus, the acceptance of higher values and the concurrent negation or rejection of lower values naturally pave the way for the attainment of the highest 'joy' or 'bliss'.

The true success of Mehta's symbolic presentation of ideas is that it stimulates the unconscious or sub-conscious apprehension of ideas. It takes us to different heights and depths of meanings. Mehta has used the image of journey to present the higher vision of human life. In the context of 'Journey' Gangeshwar Rai's observation is significant. He observes "Journey has been used right from the days of Homer to symbolize man's spiritual quest"(Rai,1983:98). The symbol of 'river' is always found in the sacred Hindu, Buddhist and Christian literatures. The symbol of river suggests purity and perfection. Symbolism in one form or another has been used by nearly every great novelist and poet. According to W.H. Auden, "A Symbol is felt to be much more before any possible meaning is consciously recognized, i.e. an object or event which is felt to be more important than reason can immediately explain" (Auden,1950: 21). This is true with Gita Mehta. In the novel the 'river' is the symbol of that unfailing beacon which eternally calls man to wander to be in quest of spiritual truth, heart's truth, a quest for reaching one's homeland, his inner self.

The major characters in the novel are on pilgrimage to the river Narmada, one of the holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva. The present welfare system can not give spiritual peace to man, So Gita Mehta, like Greene, Conrad and Anita Desai (in Journey to Ithaca) pleads for a return to bareness simplicity of Nature. A River Sutra, thus, dramatizes the dilemma of its protagonists who strive to find a higher meaning in a strange world.

Gita Mehta has written this book by clothing the body of Indian philosophy. Through the journey of many of her protagonists, Mehta makes us have an overview of both the cultural and religious codes of our land. They symbolically re-enact the spiritual adventure of the ancients in their quest for peace. Mehta reflects the depths and complexity of India's spirituality. Gita Mehta's A River Sutra is in a sense a novel of pilgrimage of people's quest for some sustained power or place in Nature. In A River Sutra a whole range of the philosophy and thought of the East is explored as a way of life, as a breath of existence by Mehta. The mysteries of the East have been skillfully depicted in the novel through a series of interlocking stories those flow with the flow of sacred Narmada. Mehta accepts here the philosophy of Vedanta and Upnishada with all its charm, glory and forcefulness. The 'Vanaprasthi story' is fused into the development of the plot and it determines the character of the novel. Her characters attain spiritual peace and balance of mind only after self-examination, self-exploitation and heart searching which is very similar to the Hindu belief in Patanjali's Yogasutra.

The journey undertaken by the different characters at different planes of existence with an intention in search of the root of spirituality is highly symbolic. It is symbolic because while depicting the conflict-ridden existence of these characters, Gita Mehta is

dealing with the predicament of the modern man caught in the contrived dialectical opposition between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'. The disintegration and fragmented being, in the novel endeavor all thought to attain integration of being and wholeness of personality. In the novel Narmada emerges to be a religious 'space' capable of offering some positive message in spite of all its ambiguities. It has been an old tradition in India to regard Nature as symbol where the motif of journey comes to operate. The present novel is the best example of this belief.

Thus, in the novel Mehta symbolically occupies with the individual's pursuit for spiritual love that provide spiritual sustenance to the split self.

The novel is made up of a series of different stories which the narrator hears from the different people who come to the Narmada on pilgrimage. Various pilgrims of different religious beliefs and customs undertook the arduous pilgrimage to visit the river Narmada. There are a lot of superstitious practices and rituals associated with this pilgrimage. Many of the stories deal with ordinary people who become intoxicated with riches or overcome by lust and who try to regain their peace and solace through making pilgrimage to the river Narmada. These people find forgiveness and absolution from their sins because they possess a sincere belief in the power of this river to heal and cure. Thus, the river Narmada is presented in the novel as a symbol of the immortality of love.

In the novel, Mehta seems to convey here that 'bliss' can be achieved by those who discard the physical attainments of the world, and enter into the cosmic world of the natural elements. In *A River Sutra* we are given many insights into different types of people who undergo physical and moral suffering in order to become spiritually purified. The novel opens with the protagonist's narration of his life. The narrator is now a quite elderly person who has completed the first stages of life prescribed by our Hindu scriptures- the infant, the student, the householder- and who has now entered the stage of the *vanaprasthi*, to seek personal enlightenment"(7). He has fulfilled his worldly obligations, and becoming *vanaprasthi* "has retired to the forest to reflect" (1). This involves an alienation from mundane society, since the purpose of the journey is to attain a new relationship with nature as the springhead of energy that takes the human being to the realization of spiritual enlightenment. The conscious act of getting cut off from society helps the narrator to get related to the cosmic power of nature and get regenerated through it with reinforced life.

The Monk's Story tells about a man who renounced the world and the elaborate ceremony that was involved in this. His father was extremely rich and had become profoundly changed because of his wealth. For many years the son had led an idle and hedonistic lifestyle. He longed for something more from life and became determined not to follow in his father's footsteps.

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. He had married a wife who taunted him continually for his weaknesses and inability to make money. She also accused him of the fact that he was the reason she had lost her rich inheritance. Mohan begins to lose his capacity to understand and listen to music until one day he hears the *Quawwali* singers. He slips away and stays listening to them one night. He is enraptured. He meets a lady there whose young brother can sing beautifully. She begs Mohan to take care of her brother for a while, as she needs to work and cannot manage to look after him. Mohan and Imrat go to the park early in the morning and Imrat

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. Imrat is engaged by a rich recording company and offered one thousand rupees. But Mohan meets two men in the park who want Imrat to sing for their master. Mohan refuses but they convince his wife and offer her five thousand rupees. Imrat is taken to sing for this man. His singing is something divine. But the man slits the young boy's throat because of jealousy, the fact that he himself would never be able to sing like that. Imrat sings for him in a voice which was not 'human' (89), and surprising enough the great sahib kills the boy "so no one but (he) himself can enjoy it" (90). The story concludes tragically as Mohan later on commits suicide.

Nitin Bose experiences a 'bliss' when he is reunited with the cosmic elements. In the novel there is an experience of ultimate joy of life (bliss) preached by all the saints; prophets, philosophers and mystics of the world. In the novel Mehta suggests that the meaning of God and the purpose of life rest ultimately in the mission of universal love. The executive, Nitin Bose ignores "the power of desire"(143), and "the power of woman"(139) and "without desire the play of his world ceases"(97). He undergoes severe emotional stain- caused due to his love affair with Ram- and suffers from momentary amnesia. He believes "strongly enough that he is possessed"(108), and to recover his mind, he comes to the Narmada River feeling "only that river has given the power to cure him"(137). Nitin Bose could not withstand the weapons unleashed from Kama's sugarcane bow strung with honeybees. Kama's arrows pierce him with enchantment, inflame him with lust, parch him with desire, render him helpless with the paroxysms of his own longing and leave him "wounded with that fifth and fatal arrow, the Career of Death"(140). Strongly believing in the great spiritual power of the Narmada river, Nitin Bose prays the river "Defend me from the serpents' poison"(1445). Here the serpent is the desire and its poison is the harm a man does when he is ignoring the power of desire. Though Nitin Bose's story Gita Mehta has explained the spiritual power of love. Here one reminds Freud's view about sex and love where he states that neurosis can be cured by finding out the sexual instincts of men, Mehta has successfully presented Indian cultural ethos with the help of myth of the Narmada.

In A River Sutra the basic spiritual perception of Mehta is the process of losing the self or ego in order to qualify oneself and then experience the 'spiritual bliss' by merging the ego with the spirit. Mehta indicates that the blissful spiritual experience is to be acquired by the individual concern with special efforts and for that the individual has to qualify himself or herself for that spiritual fulfillment. The Narmada is the holiest river in India and most of the Indians believe its "water is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births"(151). People commit religious suicide in the Narmada "in order to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth"(152). The courtesan's daughter commits suicide in the Narmada believing "she would be purified of all her sins"(190). Here the basic spiritual perception of Mehta is the process of losing the self or ego in order to qualify oneself and then experience the 'spiritual bliss' by merging the ego with the spirit. Mehta indicates that the blissful spiritual experience is to be acquired by the individual concern with special efforts and for that the individual has to qualify himself or herself for that spiritual fulfillment. Through the novel A River Sutra Mehta tries to convey the ancient Indian doctrine of surrendering one's own ego to the elements of nature and becoming one with the cosmic elements i.e. the spirit of the god.

Thus, in *A River Sutra* Mehta presents a transcendental vision where Prof. Shankar's and Naga Baba's journey acquires a symbolic undertone and the spiritual quest theme culminates into a transcendental experience. Thus, as Mehta turns to Vedanta and Upanishads, *A River Sutra* encapsulates the wisdom of Oriental philosophy. In *A River Sutra* Mehta, a philosophically inclined novelist, attempts to explore the meaning and nature of reality and also of illusion as two contrasted worlds of ideas and beliefs. Through the spiritual journey of the characters depicted in the novel a whole range of the philosophy and thought of the East is subtly explored as a way of life, as a breath of existence. In the novel the major characters are presented as intellectual pilgrims in the quest for reality, the quest for truth, the search for the eternal verities implicit in India's great spiritual heritage. They, thus, dramatically and symbolically re-enact the spiritual adventures of the ancients in their quests for truth.

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