



THE INTRICATE NARRATIVE STYLE OF GITA MEHTA IN THE NOVEL A RIVER SUTRA

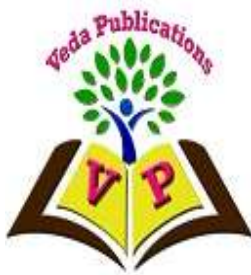
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ABSTRACT



Human mind can easily be influenced by the accomplishments of the society and the people around them. As the thoughts of the people sway away from the effect of the external world, they try different strategies to understand the meaning of salvation and desire to attain it. This impression can be noticed in the novel *A River Sutra*, written by the Indian novelist Gita Mehta. Gita Mehta, a renowned Indian novelist in Indian Writing in English occupies a unique place as a writer with her clear and intelligent voice through her works of literature. In the novel *A River Sutra*, the author lacks the complexity and passionately shifts her concern to Indian sensibility, in which she interprets Indian culture, values, music, art and myth. The protagonist and narrator retires from the world to run a government rest house on the banks of river Narmada. He is the thread loosely weaving the stories together—along with the River Narmada itself. The characters have a belief that they can resolve their problems in the bank of River Narmada, as they believe that River Narmada is eternal. To make the readers identify the essence of the novel, the author has used an Indian style of story-telling which helps to explore the psyche of the characters. This paper intends to examine the intricate narrative style of the author which gives a new insight to comprehend the world of spirituality. It also proposes to analyze the inner psyche of the characters which is confined in the world of *maya*.

Keywords: *Salvation, Insight, Spirituality, Maya.*

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In India, our ancestors have the habit of storytelling through which they have transferred the moral lessons to the world. Gita Mehta, one of the renowned novelists of India, has used the intricate narrative style in her novel, *A River Sutra* (1993) to remind the world about the salvation. In this novel she talks through the nameless narrator who interfaces many people and has interaction with them to make the readers to understand the reality of life. The proposed paper focuses on a character in Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra* who moves from one character to another to understand the meaning of life. The author adopted the intricate narrative technique to show the readers how people are influenced by the world and finally they move to the River Narmada in the hope to find solution for their problems.

In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta takes a new direction in her writing. She changes the focus and explores the diversity of cultures within three things: the Narmada River, the theme of life and the narrator's inability to understand the various tales of human heart that he hears. Mehta gives very little information about the narrator. The reader never knows his name, much less the secrets of his heart. The reader will learn the stories of uncommon pain and joy through the nameless narrator during his tenure as the manager of a government rest-house on the banks of the river, Narmada.

Gita Mehta presents the interestingly narrated stories which the protagonist learns second hand. The novel, which is about the narrator and his enlightenment does not carve out a full-dimensional character. Both the narrator and Tariq Mia remain cardboard figures. The novel is episodic and has the extra dimension which turns a simple story into an artistic novel. Mehta presents the different fragments of the Indian society through many eyes, allowing herself to make acerbic moral points and judgments.

The story revolves around a retired bureaucrat, who is the central character in the novel. He is a manager, who is alone, withdrawn from the turmoil of life like Vanaprasti, of the Narmada Rest House on the bank of the river, Narmada. The manager hopes to live a life of tranquility and peace on the bank of the River. There he confronts a

variety of people and hears their stories and he is caught in their experiences. Mehta brilliantly portrays the characters with vivid language well suited for the setting. Each story brings new insights about life to the reader. The novelist has brought together characters from different fields representing all those not so-common class of people. She has used the device of the grandmother's style of telling stories of life's experiences which pass by the narrator.

The self contained yet inter connected characters and stories fit Mehta's purpose of multiplicity and unity which reconciles the rich diversity of doctrines in the symbolic flow of the River and the spirit of Sutra. The narrative techniques combine continuity and discontinuity in dialogue and the first person narrative as the nearly exclusive instruments of presentation. The narrator appears first and last and in a large number of occurrences, acting as esthetic unifier as much as psychological centre for the reader. He is always seen from his own point of view in the first person narrative. He is first introduced in the vividness of the present tense occasionally to state habits, recurrent behavior and even narration of action. The rest of stories are then presented, from his view point, as the evocation of memories.

Human mind is often trapped or by the happenings in the society and people around them. The effect of such entrapment would always create an isolation and depression which lead the human mind towards salvation. In such cases mankind tries different methodologies to achieve salvation by relieving from their desires. Mehta in her novel involves herself in bringing out the complexities of human mind from the background of River Narmada where her characters move towards it to attain salvation. She also gives authentic interpretation for Indian culture and heritage. The characters of the novel strongly believe that River Narmada is eternal. In the novel the author uses intricate narrative technique to explore the minds of various characters which we may come across in our day to day life. Such narrative technique reminds the narrative technique of Mahabharata.

Mehta's novel entangles many characters to depict the complexity of human emotions with a



bureaucrat who retires to the sacred river as a manager of a small guest house on the bank of River Narmada. The narrator has come to the river bank in search of peace, but the scenario changes in the other way. He meets out different characters such as the Monk, the Musician, the Teacher, the Executive, the Courtesan and the Minstrel and patiently listens to their stories which illuminate the paradoxes of Indian culture. Mehta unravels deep feelings of mankind especially in an era of growing fretfulness over issues of faith and value.

In each story the point of concentration is the theme of survival. The narrator narrates the dangerous lives of the character objectively to his assistant Chagla, his friend Tariq Mia, an eighty-year-old-Mullah, and Dr. Mitra, a local doctor. Almost all the characters in different stories converge for one or the other reasons near the banks of the river to attain renunciation and tranquility.

The first story is of a Jain Muni whom the bureaucrat meets perchance near the guest-house and questions the monk about his past life. The monk reluctantly confesses about his multimillion dollar international empire, which his family took centuries to build. He had relinquished it to seek the ultimate truth. He is now free from doubt, delusion and extremes. He promotes stability and protects life around him. The narrator is impressed by Jain muni's story, goes to meet Tariq Mia and tell him the story. Mia extends his point of view: to have complete self-realization man ought to experience life himself and should not escape from it by just renouncing the worldly things, because one knows only a little. Then he plays an old record for the bureaucrat to listen:

The turn-table revolves, then a high voice pierces the morning silence.

I prostrate my head to your drawn sword.
O, the wonder of Your kindness.
O, the wonder of my submission."

The clarity of the voice, even through the hissing of the old record, is so extraordinary, each note hanging in the stillness like a drop of water that it is sometime before I decipher the savagery of lyrics. (ARS: 49)

In the six independent stories, the first person narrative is a rule, with a few variations and exceptions. In the Monk's story, present tense

description of the renunciation ceremony alternates with flash backs, providing explanations for it, extending it into the past, which, in its turn, gains immediacy from the current event.

Mia tells the story of a Teacher to make the narrator understand the ways of human heart. Master Mohan, the teacher, leads an unhappy life but still he does small acts of kindness. As a music teacher he wants to become a successful singer but it becomes an unfulfilled ambition. He meets an orphan named Imrat who has a beautiful voice and so he decides to train him. Master Mohan makes him to sing songs of Kabir, Mirabai, Tulsidas and so on. Imrat attracts so many audience and even the recording companies. He is invited by a recording company to sing in front of the owner. The owner's jealous makes him to slit the throat of Imrat as he starts singing which is not expected by both the teacher and the disciple. This act drives Master Mohan to lose his mental stability so he moves towards River Narmada hoping that the river would give him solace to his mind. He stays with Tariq Mia for a few months and again moves away to commit suicide as he feels that he cannot live without loving someone i.e., Imrat. This story clearly indicates the insensitivity of the society towards the goodness in the human hearts. It also clearly exhibits the tolerance level of human hearts to the inhuman behaviours. The story is told by Tariq Mia, in third person narration touched up with dialogues. The impression is that an independent short story has been embedded in the text on which it radiates a retaining a separate quality that can be felt as damaging the continuity and unity of the novel, even though, it serves the multiplicity of purpose, while the end of the preceding chapter and the beginning of the following one manage to establish the fluidity of the text.

In the Executive's story, Nitin Bose, the executive takes refuge in the River Narmada, as he is struck with his past life and loses his mental balance in a tea estate, with the hope that he would find solace in the river bank. Nitin Bose becomes incapable to balance the busy lifestyle in the city and so he wants to take up a field job in his company. Being a voracious reader, Nitin Bose has a sound knowledge about legends, myths and anthropology



of tribals but still he could not overcome his loneliness. When he reads Rig Veda his state is clearly described:

At first was Death
That which did mean an utter emptiness
And emptiness, mark, thou, is Hunger's Self.
(ARS: 123)

Then as a step forward of his loneliness a tribal woman comes forward to offer herself to Bose. He breaks up his isolation and bravely enters the new world of sensual pleasures: "As that musky fragrance enveloped me, calming me and exciting me at the same time Stretching out my hands, I grasped the swelling firmness of a woman's breast.... Maddened by the fragile barrier of her ornaments, I crushed her in my embrace" (ARS: 124). For Nitin Bose it is the first time to embrace a woman and gets mesmerized with the whole concept. Unfortunately, he is called back by his company to the city. Being engulfed with the dreams of the tribal woman, he could not lead a normal life and so he retreats in the bank of River Narmada. Here the author draws an interesting archetypal parallel from Indian mythology i.e., through this story the author suggests that the sufferings of mankind will always lead to the realization of the reality of soul purpose.

In the Courtesan's story, the Courtesan's daughter is young, beautiful and veracious and compared to the angel because of the love that she shows innocently towards others. Bandit Rahul Singh abducts her and keeps her in captivity but patiently endures all her cruelty of her. He proves his love for the Courtesan's daughter by his endurance and patience. She, in turn, proves her love for her husband, Rahul Singh. She commits suicide after the death of the one who loved her more than anyone else in the world.

The Executive's story keeps to the first person narrative, in the form of a diary supplemented with the head-bearer's account. The Courtesan's story uses yet another variation. Words and formulas such as Vatsayana's classic, Kamasutra, remind the reader that it is addressed to the rest-house manager, while others, surreptitiously extend it to an imaginary audience. Then the Courtesan's daughter's narrative starts from a dialogue and flows

on, interspersed with descriptions and comments by the main narrator.

Simultaneously, the same theme can be seen in the story of the Musician's story which is both dramatic and tragic. It also gives the great knowledge to the music of India. The narration of this story creates astonishment among the readers. The musician teaches his ugly daughter music seeing that he wants his daughter to observe the happenings around her and listen to the voice of birds, song of dawn and sunset etc.,. He explains that the arts are the gifts of Lord Shiva and he wants to free her daughter from her own perception of herself. He also makes her look for the intricacies of music so that she would concentrate in music and get distracted from her thought of her physical appearance. In this story there is a blending of humane and compassionate qualities in a man. This story flows out of a dialogue, itself born of the description of the encounter at the Mahadeo bazaar. The story is itself fed with dialogues, mostly between the musician and her father, whose answers may be extended into didactic passages.

Next is the Minstrel's story and the interesting story which is about Naga Baba who saves a girl from a prostitute. He meditates in the cave with her and makes her sing the song in praise of Narmada. Baba renames her as Uma. In the last narrative of the novel Naga Baba reappears in a different role and Uma as the Minstrel. The narrator is intrigued to discover Prof. Shankar, Chairman of the Indian Preservation Trust, who has renounced the world to penetrate into the heart of Naga tribal culture, to understand the spirit of the river. Prof. Shankar says: "the Narmada has never changed its course. What we are seeing today is the same river that was seen by the people who lived here a hundred thousand years ago. To me such a sustained record of human presence in the same place – that is immortality". (ARS: 264) The bureaucrat listens to the Minstrel's songs of the Narmada and feels satisfied for the destiny for bringing him to the banks of the destiny. The story is supposed to be told by the old mullah Tariq Mia, starts as third person narrative by an omniscient impersonal narrator, much like the Teacher's story. Again the effect is one of isolation leading one to think of human beings as



multiple destinies with loose inter connections. This technique is part of the reconciling spirit of the novel in which unity should not be established at the expense of plurality. After the narration of the Naga Baba and his experience, Tariq Mia reappears in person at the beginning of chapter sixteen to give recent news of the ascetic and the girl now becomes a river minstrel.

A subtle game is played with the title of the sixth story; the minstrel is frustratingly absent, keeping the readers in suspense until her appearance to perform the song of the Narmada in the next chapter, contributing to the shock of the revelation of Professor Shankar as the Naga Baba, tending to enforce Gita Mehta's humanistic vision.

The work of imagery is centered on a symbol rather than an ideology. The author, probably, senses, like so many poetic minds, that no dogma or intellectual system can ever achieve the reconciliation of the one and the many which are the substances of life. The song closes her book providing the ultimate image of her poetic humanism. Her use of images also permits an integration of Western and Indian approaches of the world and man as projected by their respective arts.

While the literal images in the novel fulfill a role of sensuous evocation of cosmic and human life, the similes and metaphors open out on the imaginary world of secret relationship. Used by the narrators, which are tame and common, hardly drawing attention to themselves. The impressive imagery is located in the substance of the stories rather than in their form. It is connected with the Indian world-view, which the author uses in her work of humanistic reconciliation.

A search for similes and metaphors reveals a non-negligible number which have remained unnoticed at a first cursory reading. The imagery is part of the usual strategy of Western literature. It finds its legitimate adoption in the Indian background of the novel, in the mythical tradition present through a number of episodes and comment in the stories. The River Narmada is the support of a Sutra because it connects people and experiences, beliefs and lives in a mythology.

Rivers are regarded with love and reverence and figure prominently in the epic and folk literature

of Indians. In the novel the Narmada is an active participant in the action of the novel. All who come to her banks woo her in a hope to feel emotional security. Characters like Nitin Bose, Master Mohan and the Music Teacher experience a sense of loss in their lives, but on the banks of the river they are purged. The river is an ambivalent symbol since it corresponds to the creative power both of nature and of time. On the one hand, the Narmada signifies fertility and progression in life of men and women coming to her banks; and on the other hand it stands for irreversible passage of time. The time gone is gone forever and there is a sense of loss and oblivion.

Mythologically, Mehta contemplates the river thus: "It is said that Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream took on the form of a woman.... Her inventive variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the Delightful one, blessing her with words: 'You shall, be forever holy, forever inexhaustible' (ARS: 8-9). There are several songs on the Narmada that are used as structural devices in the novel. Mehta weaves her novel around the myth and ritual pattern of the ancient because it provides emotional certitude to her.

Teaching music also involves the imaginary process of identification with the gods and the cosmos which embodies them. The Veena is an instrument which is created by Shiva. The music student is invited to imagine a raga as a river bed and to think of herself as water washing over stone. She visualizes the raginis as girls in love. The practice of music is a mystical participation in human, cosmic and divine life. The musician begins to play as she should when she manages to be the water to the river of the stranger's raga, the moonlight to his night. On a 'Shivaratri' day she is given in marriage to music. Only when she manages to become again the ragini to every raga she can hope to reach fulfillment. And the meditation on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance is supposed to help her to find acceptance of her mystical calling.

The central knowledge Gita Mehta wants the main narrator to reach is that the Narmada will not satisfy his wish to withdraw from the world. He



will have to finally to re-enter the world like Professor Shankar, discovering under Tariq Mia's gentle prodding that he was brought there to gain the world, not to forsake it. The Narmada River unites the instinctual tribal philosophy with the rational Aryan worldview, and the mythical perception of both with the conceptual approaches suggested through remarks by various characters such as Mr. Chagla and Dr. Mitra. Nothing is destroyed or discarded, but a new insight is proposed.

Thus the novel, *A River Sutra* does not have the structure of a novel in the modern sense. It is in line with the ancient Indian tradition of story-telling. The pattern enables the author to present a multiplicity of viewpoints, which goes a long way in helping her unfold intricate reality of life. The novel derives its vitality and variety in having more than one narrator. It is the chief narrator a senior bureaucrat, and Tariq Mia, the old mullah of the village mosque, who provides the connecting links to diverse characters, stories and experiences.

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