

Man's Eternal Quest for Significance in Gita Mehta's
A River Sutra and Raj

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Gita Mehta

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Abstract

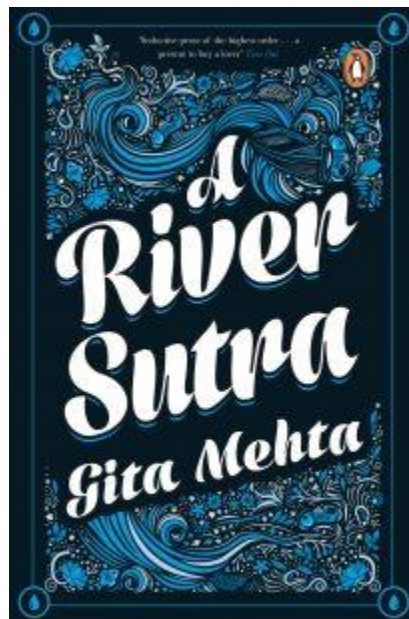
Gita Mehta is a contemporary writer of Indian Writing in English. Her novels mainly focus on Indian culture and heritage. Her works take up matters and issues that reflect the religious, economic and socio-political conditions of India. Gita Mehta's books are smart investigations into the ideas, people, history and personalities that have determined what has shaped modern India. Her novel *A River Sutra* presents the river as a timeless source of Indian spirituality, its banks thronged by holy men and by pilgrims searching for enlightenment. It is an exploration of a soul for the cultural identity through which the heritage of India could be viewed. In the novel *Raj*, Gita Mehta presents her characters especially the women characters as the pillars of strength and decisiveness in a male-dominated world. In fact *Raj* is an ideal text for the study of the working of tradition and the need for change with regards to the status of women. Jaya responds to change in her personal and political life with surprising openness and resilience and manages to hold her own. She is a woman who accepts change gracefully and at

last fills in the form for candidature in the elections. In both the novels, characters seek significance.

Gita Mehta among Indian Women Novelists

A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the 1990s, producing novels which revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. These writers were born after Indian independence, and the English language does not have colonial associations for them. Their work is marked by an impressive feel for the language, and an authentic presentation of contemporary India, with all its regional variations. They generally write about the urban middle class, the stratum of society they know best. Among these writers, Gita Mehta occupies a unique position as a writer who elucidates uniquely Indian experience in a clear and intelligent voice. She occupies a special niche in Indian fiction in English. Her novel constitutes a unique and valuable contribution to the literature of the world. Her three novels are powerful critiques on modern life exposing the shallowness of the spiritual, political and secular modes of living. Her theme is mainly focused on religious, economic and socio-political conditions of India.

A River Sutra



A River Sutra is modelled on the Indian tradition from the structural point of view. It does not follow the pattern of a modern novel. Being an authentic version of Indian cultural ethos, music and art form, the novel makes best use of myths, folklore, rituals, and superstitions and is didactic in nature. The novel presents a certain philosophy of life. There is more than one narrator in the novel and the chief narrator is a senior Bureaucrat, a Hindu in the third stage of his life who gets posted as manager of the rest house on the banks of the river, Narmada.

The Narmada is one of the canonical seven holy rivers of India and it has long been celebrated in the legends and stories of the Mahabharata and the Puranas. This beautiful river meanders through a savage and romantic landscape. The river Narmada is represented as the river Sutra in the novel and holds together the main story and the six sub-stories. *A River Sutra* presents the river as a timeless source of Indian spirituality, its banks thronged by holy men and by pilgrims who are searching for enlightenment.

Puranic sources place the Narmada as one of the very holiest rivers of India. The novel cites or adapts verses from the Puranas:

Bathing in the waters of the Jamuna purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the Saraswati in three, in the waters of the Ganges in one, but the Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters. Salutations to thee, O Narmada. (RS 163)

Attention to Various Popular Beliefs about the Narmada

The novelist has drawn attention to various popular beliefs about the Narmada. For example, “the criminal offence of attempted suicide in the Narmada is often ignored”(RS 2). The river has the gift of annulling the effects of snakebite (RS 6). It can cure one of an unhealthy attachment (RS 225). It can nullify the malefic effect of Saturn (RS 153), and so on. But it is the human aspect of the Narmada that to the novelist is of paramount importance. The river “is an unbroken record of the human race” (RS 268). The novelist has often presented her as a female figure and as a temptress.

A River Sutra – Six Stories

A River Sutra (1993) is a novel that connects six stories with its story teller and the river Narmada. The first story “The Monk’s Story” is about Ashok, the Monk. It is based on the principles of renunciation in life by stripping oneself of all worldly comforts and attachment. The young man’s decision is based on the philosophical view of love as suffering in life, which is essential for the attainment of salvation. The story deals with the process of diksha, or renunciation of the Jain Monk. At the end of the diksha ceremony he becomes a mendicant and a stranger to his father who will not identify his own son, because his features are hidden behind a muslin mask.

The second story “The Teacher’s story” is about the music teacher, Master Mohan. In this story the friendship between the Hindu narrator and Tariq Mia, the Muslim scholar stands for religious unity. Tariq Mia calls the narrator affectionately “little brother”. His learning and singing of the songs about the Narmada besides singing Sufi love songs praise of Allah shows his faith in the holiness of the river and the respect of Hinduism. Dr. Mitra describes the significance of traditions, customs, sentiments and religious faith to the narrator. Religious suicides take place at Amarkantak temple on the bank of the Narmada to free themselves “from the cycles of birth and rebirth” (RS 152). The philosophical and spiritual significance of the holy and immortal river Narmada and the beliefs of the Hindu religion become familiar even to the foreigners. The religious preaching are at par with each other and perhaps all religions have a single objective of the purity of the human heart. The river Narmada is the representations of many faiths and highlights the all pervasive truth about equality of all religions and faiths.

The third story “The Executive’s Story” speaks about Nitin Bose, a young executive, who works in a tea company in Calcutta. Stories about serpent woman as enchantresses and sorceresses make deep imprint on his sub-consciousness. Surprisingly, in real life he falls passionately in love with a coolie’s wife presuming her to be a snake woman. Nitin Bose’s passionate love for the snake woman regulates his mind. He is suffer from mental illness so he wants to get solution. Hindu mythology says that the Narmada is capable to dispel the evil effect. The river has such a healing power. He reached the river bank to make his salutation.

The fourth story “The Courtesan’s Story” is a tale of the love of the flesh recounted by the Courtesan’s mother and herself. The Courtesan narrates how she failed to protect her daughter from the growing indignity around her. The story also describes the tribal myth. Myth establishes a connection between the two world – the tribal and the bandit bridged by the deep-dark forest and the river Narmada. According to the myth the warrior had fallen deeply in love with a woman of Narmada Valley. Strangely he endures her hatred and swallows her insults. But one night, when he touches her, she realizes that he is speaking the truth. She too falls in love with him. Then she marries Raghul Singh at the temple of Supaneshwara. She lives with him happily for a few days. When Raghul dies of an injury through an ambush with the police, the girl ends her life in the Narmada and even her mother is not disturbed when her daughter escapes from her because the Narmada embraces all kinds of creatures in her breast in a lovely manner:

Turtles and river dolphins find refuge in your water

Alighting herons play upon your tranquil surface.

Fish and crocodiles are gathered in your embrace.

O holy Narmada. (RS 279)

It seems, therefore, quite natural that when all shelters fail, the river Narmada should be sought as the last “home”. The girl reaches out to the river in order to avoid the terrible ignominy of a recapture, this time by the police. She is scared to imagine the life of the girl known to be a Courtesan and a bandit’s wife, locked in a cell, on charge of abetting to the crimes of her husband. So, she turns to the Narmada as the only escape. Her mother also seems to be “happy her daughter had died in the Narmada because she would be purified of all her sins” (RS 190). The girl has no desire to live as she jumps into the all embracing Narmada, and dies.

The fifth story “The Musician’s Story” is about the Musician’s daughter who explains to the chief narrator about the birth of music. The novelist presents an elaborate discourse on music in the Musician’s story. The story establishes the art of music as all pervasive and describes the music-legends of Shiva. The Music teacher her father, bargains a deal with a young music learner. The girl tells her father that she learnt music along with another young man on the

condition that he will marry her. Later the young Musician rejects her because she is ugly and could not see the beautiful heart and an extremely talented musician inside her. Unable to bear rejection she shuns music. The very sound of music turned ‘hateful’ to her ears. Her father, unable to console her that beauty is a passing thing and it lies in the eyes of the beholder, brings her to the banks of river Narmada. He wants to make her Ragini to every raga for which she has to surrender herself fully to the Music by becoming the bride of music and not of a musician. “The Musician’s Story” transforms her unrequited love to love to the divine music.

“The Minstrel’s Story” is a bond of the spiritual love of a Naga Baba for a brothel girl. In the beginning, she is just an exploited, abused child, who does not even have a name. The anonymity imparts a legendary status to the kid. She was just called ‘misfortune’ by her father and the stigma is attached to the child; not because it so happened that her mother had died at her birth. “The customers choose the name “Chand”, they said my skin is as “soft” as moonlight (RS 250). She is taken by the Monk into the dense jungle far away from locality and finally taken across the Narmada. There she begins a new life, learns many new lessons, and is endowed a new name, ‘Uma’. The corrupted society had treated her only as a commodity. Now she gains a new life, and learns to live in tune with trees and creatures. She is also taught that the Narmada is her home and mother.

In due course Naga Baba leaves the girl to herself and journeys further in search of enlightenment. Then he acquires a higher enlightenment for which he has been striving and therefore, he is able to understand the value of human life. The Naga Baba comes back as Prof. Shankar after three years. He comes back not with any mythical or religious notion, but simply with a declaration: “I love this river” (RS 263). He loves it because of its immortality, because of the experiences of individual human lives along its banks over a hundred thousand years. Uma has imbibed the attributes of this river, including the look of agelessness at moments. Shankar has come back to the woman with the simple realization – “I am only a man” (RS 281).

As they meet after three years, Uma is on her way to the coast. Shankar laughingly asks if she is “to find a husband like the Narmada found her lord of Rivers” (RS 280). However, in

response to Shankar's question she only coyly signifies that it depends on him. Then he offers to take her to Rudra. The last sentence consistently builds up a situation with their covert sexual hints. He puts his arms around her shoulder. Man is the greatest truth nothing beyond proves true with the statements of Professor Shankar as mentioned above and with this the importance of liberated action or the Niskam karma becomes the evident in the real man's life.

Naga Baba

According to mythological belief, the Narmada is capable of relieving a man from suffering and rebirth. The Naga Baba placed his hands on his knees and began the chant he would continue for nine days and nine nights by the funeral pyre: "Shiva-o-ham / I that am Shiva /Shiva-o-ham / Shiva am I" (RS 255).

Ascetics meditate in order to liberate themselves from rebirth. The narrator very often finds ascetics meditating by the holy pool at Amarkantak, seeking through their meditations to liberate themselves from the cycle of rebirth and death. Structurally the novel comprises seven wonderful stories that evoke the readers' sympathy towards the characters and reveal the secret of man's capacity to love, suffer and make sacrifice in life. The river sends out a distinct message of the lesson of man's attachment to an object of love as well as his capacity to make supreme sacrifice in life. The unnamed narrator describes the tales of various pilgrims encapsulating a mythical and artistic dimension of the river with the humanistic tradition.

Narmada signifies life in general and Indian culture and society in particular. The river, with Shiva and Supaneshwara temples on one side, the Muslim mosque and the tomb of the Sufi poet, Rumi, on the other and many Jain, Buddhist and tribal temples and shrines scattered over its course, signifies the culture that is both ancient and modern. In *A River Sutra* the myth of Siva, the great ascetic, is contemporized to communicate an aesthetic experience of salvation. Siva is the supreme yogi, but he is also the lover of his spouse who is often called his Sakti, the divine energy without which the world would cease to move. Man, himself, would be a 'fragmented' being if reason and desire did not fuse to ennoble and enrich each other.

Myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual of self-discovery. The protagonist at the end of the novel is no longer detached and complacent about his voice of 'vanaprasthi'. In interpreting and systematizing the meanings available to provide a coherent vision of life, the protagonist is compelled to question those values that he had taken for granted. It is here that *A River Sutra* comes a full of circle.

River Narmada is depicted as a mother who always welcomes her children to relieve them from mental and physical sorrows or disorders. Any virtuous woman can prove to be a pain reliever to anyone, maybe in the form of a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother. Anyone who suffers can shelter in their heart. The novel depicts that almost all the sufferers find relief by surrendering themselves to Mother Nature's lap, namely River Narmada. Thus she is depicted as an empowered woman who can contribute a lot in creating a healthy society. River Narmada as a mother can guide the one who comes to her shelter with tender love, if she is respected wholeheartedly. Otherwise she can be like a demon, which can ruin the unsocial elements.

The river Narmada 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.

Focus - Capacity to Love

Weaving the various stories of love in the novel Gita Mehta's central motive is to show that "the human hearts has only one secret, the capacity to love" (RS 48). Each of the stories relates to man's love of something in life that shows an excessive sense of attachment. Attachment is aligned with the fear of losing the loved one, in other words it is a sense of possessiveness. It is an egoistic state of need for other person to someone for his nourishment. The novel comprises six wonderful stories that evoke readers sympathy towards the characters and reveal the secret of man's capacity to love, suffer and make sacrifice in life. The river sends

out a distinct message – the lesson of man’s attachment to an object of love as well as his capacity to make supreme sacrifice in life.

A Series of Short Stories

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 centered on the theme of the river Narmada which is used as a 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 destroyed by love. They finally reach the Narmada River to purify their souls by drowning in it.

O messenger of passing time,
O sanctuary and salvation,
You dissolve the fear of time itself.
O holy Narmada.
You remove the stain of evil.
You release the wheel of suffering.
You lift the burdens of the world.
O holy Narmada. (RS 278-279)

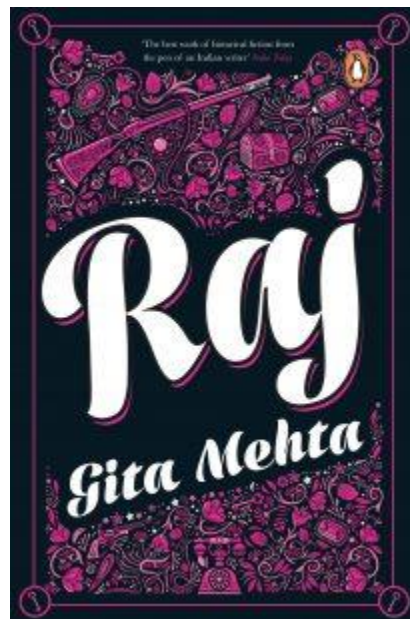
The river has witnessed the passing of civilizations and the songs celebrate her immortality. The beliefs about the powers of the river are manifestations of man’s faith in the river Narmada as against the rational mind’s curiosity to know about human race.

Bridging the Gaps

Gita Mehta through her conscious portrayal of relationships has tried to bridge the gap not only between man and woman, but also between mysticism and intellectualism. Sutra in

Hindi means something which assists in binding and holding the fragments together. So is the river Narmada. So is the novel which integrates various stories, memories, incidents and events. The river Narmada which is the Sutra or the common thread that provides the novel with its continuity. The Narmada is a spiritual Sutra, linking the lives of people and different categories of people. In *A River Sutra*, the author passionately and persuasively shifts her concern to Indian sensibility. There are seven stories which deal with characters quite different from each other. The author offers authentic interpretation to Indian cultural values, music, art forms and heritage. Mehta's major involvement is with human subsistence in modern times. The novel has a setting on the bank of India's holiest river—the Narmada where we find constant traffic of pilgrims, archeologists, policemen, priests and traders. This narrator, the Bureaucrat, is like a screen which exhibits his encounters with the people on the banks of the river, the Narmada. The novel is the description of vanaprasthi, system, pilgrimage, saints, temples etc. In India, rivers are regarded pious and having the capacity to remove our sins. She narrates many superstitions found in the society. Traditional elements seem to give way to modern thoughts and values. Gita Mehta shows how modern man chooses modernity as the substitute of tradition.

Gita Mehta's *Raj*



Gita Mehta's *Raj* is a story of change set in princely India. The protagonist is a Princess whose fortunes are intertwined with the fortunes of two princely states of Balmer and Sirpur and

with those of the country at large. Change comes in the life of the Princess in two principal ways: through a succession of deaths in the family. (She loses her brother and father, and after her marriage her brother-in-law, husband and even her son) – and the changing political reality in princely India and British India culminating in the freedom of the country in 1947. And she has little control over either. But though grounded in traditional values and pieties and partly because of it, Jaya responds to change in her personal and political life with surprising openness and resilience and manages to hold her own in the male-dominated world.

Tradition and Change

Jaya's saga is all the more remarkable when we see it against the background of the lives led by the royal widows and the concubines in the harem. The only other woman, besides herself, who makes anything of her life is her mother. *Raj* is an ideal text for our purpose for perhaps nothing provides a better setting for the study of the working of tradition and the need for change than does princely India, particularly with regard to the status of women. This comes out with telling effect in the letter written by a Maharani to the editor of the Bombay Chronicles Quoted in the novel. In the traditional setting of a princely state a woman is more dependent on man and her marriage is even less a matter of personal choice, marriage being a political arrangement than it is elsewhere. There is much in this tradition as depicted in the novel that is decadent and obnoxious. And since it is a patriarchal system, women are the innocent victims of it. One example of this moribund tradition is the treatment meted out to a widow. She is ritually cursed by the old women assembled at her husband's funeral as unfortunate, unclean and unholy, fit only to be cast and abandoned. Jaya who in her revulsion at this humiliating practice on the occasion of her father's death hits out at the old women shouting a litany of abuse, herself suffers the same humiliation when she loses her husband. Her own hair is shorn as the hair of her mother had been cut at her widowhood. But if the novel dismisses the ill-treatment of widows, it also tries to rediscover or redefine tradition.

A Historical Fiction

Raj is a historical fiction that represents a woman's constant struggle to live with dignity. Jaya is the central character and her struggle begins with her birth, during the time of the Indian

renaissance. In her childhood she learns lessons from the renaissance. After marriage her husband does not treat her as a genuine life-partner. She struggles very hard. She loses her husband and her son. But she is not disappointed. At last she sets her identity as a human being in the 'New India'.

The novel is divided into four books, Balmer, Sirpur, Maharani and Regent. The heading of the first book is Balmer. Balmer is a small state in Rajasthan, with a desert, calling it the land of death. Jaya, the princess of King Jai Singh and the Maharani of the state, is born here. The novel opens in the year 1897 when the first male child of the king is born. The prince's birthday is celebrated by all in traditional ways. His name is Tikka. It was the time of Renaissance. English education gave new views of life to the Indians. Centuries old Hindu orthodoxy was questioned. Customs like Sati Pratha and Purdah system, which were strictly practised during the Muslim rule were challenged. As a matter of fact, the Hindu scriptures have not favoured woman's immolation but strict duties are allotted. Due to the Indian Renaissance, this inhuman cruelty was viewed critically.

Jai Singh, the king of Balmer, unveils the purdah of his wife and openly rejects the purdah. He wants to break purdah. Jaya is born during that time. Her birth is not celebrated in the traditional way. As a matter of fact the birth of a girl was not celebrated. But Jai Singh has a different opinion on female-child birth:

Tikka was tickling the feet of the new baby with a long peacock feather. The baby let out a yell of protest. Jai Singh laughed and bent over his daughter's cradle. That is not the sound of a crying baby. That is a battle cry. If the name is auspicious, let's call her Jaya, victory. (Raj 44)

Thus Jaya for Jai Singh is a harbinger of victory. Jai Singh's new thinking is because of the awakening of India. The queen on the other hand thinks differently;

From the moment Jaya was born, the Maharani had vowed her daughter would be raised in the ways of her predecessors, which alone could protect the child from the harsh, changing world beyond the zenana walls. (Raj 47)

As a mother, what the Maharani thinks is obviously true and a practical requirement of the society. But Jaya is a child of the Indian Renaissance. The Maharaja had decreed that his daughter was not to be raised in purdah. On the other hand the Maharani insisted that Jaya be educated in the traditional manner of the princesses of Balmer. The Maharani think that the princess should be brought up in a traditional way so that she could adjust in her married-life.

The second book of the novel is in Sirpur, a small state in Assam where the river Brahmaputra flows. The book signifies Jaya's transplantation from the dry land of Balmer to the fertile land of Brahmaputra. The young bride Jaya is married to the sword of Pratap, the Prince of Sirpur. Jaya's arrival in Sirpur indicates her life will become rich and enjoyable by her loss of her brother and father. But the joys of her childhood are replaced by a desolate womanhood and she is shocked to learn that her westernized husband may discard her quite casually.

The third book is 'Maharani'. After the death of Maharaja Victor, Prince Pratap is declared officially as a King of Sirpur. Pratap has to return to India and he is declared the King and Jaya becomes the Maharani. But her misery is not reduced. Jaya wants to earn love, satisfaction and human dignity from her husband. But her desire does not turn into reality. Pratap's love for Jaya is sheer lie. On the other hand, Jaya being a Hindu wife remains obedient. She wants him to love her. According to the British policy of that time Pratap requires an heir. Jaya becomes a means to give an heir to Pratap. She performs the duty also. She conceives the child and becomes a mother of a male-child. But Pratap stops Jaya from her motherly duty:

She smiled at the crying baby as she pulled down her sari to feed him.

Stop that!

Jaya looked up in surprise from the infant sucking at her breast. The Maharanis of Sirpur employ wet nurses. I will not have my wife feeding a baby like a peasant woman. (Raj 336)

Only a mother knows that every mother feels when her baby sucks her milk through her nipple. But her maternal rights are not allowed to her. She has no other option and with

suppressed anger she obeys the order of her husband. She becomes lonely within. Maharaja Pratap has already robbed her of the dignity of being a wife.

Pratap's relationship with the dancer becomes a scandal. The moment of greatest shame comes when Jaya discovers that her husband has become a slave to Esme Moore. Jaya wants to get her benefit. She endures a good deal, but never gives up; she fights for her rights and protests to be a hard bargainer. If she fails to do this, perhaps she may lose everything. Pratap also realizes that he can no more he can suppress her rights. Angrily he gives it in written. Later on Jaya has tried to settle the issue of her husband and Esme Moore in England.

The fourth book is Regent. It is a tragic time for Jaya. Raj Guru of Sirpur tries to control on the state of administration. He has tried to keep Jaya away from the administration and from her son, Arjun. He declares Jaya as unclean. He tells Maharaja Arjun; "your mother cannot be with you at this time. She is unclean" (Raj 399). On the fourteenth day, after Maharaja Pratap's ashes had been scattered in the river at Benares, she has been permitted to return to her own apartments. Jaya, a widow, is kept apart as unclean. Her widowhood was curse on her. She was treated thus:

There were no glass bangles to be slipped onto her wrists, no long minutes spent combing the thick hair that had once fallen to her knees, no sindoor to mark the circle of matrimony on her forehead. She did not even have to cover her shaved head. A widow was not considered desirable, only unlucky. (Raj 399)

She knows well that she is not accepted as Maharani but she thinks of her son who was child-Maharaja of the state. She purifies herself in Holy River at Banaras.

After Arjun's death in the riots, Jaya sees the futility of holding the old order and she opts for accession. Gaining new strength, Jaya goes to Balmer to get consolation and advice from the Raj Guru of Balmer. He reminds her of the lesson of the Rajniti, the first lesson of Rajniti, she was taught, is Praja, the people. She followed the advice of the Raj Guru and took the leadership of Sirpur. She allowed Sirpur state to merge with the United States of the Republic of India. In

the Republic India she contested as the representative of the state as an independent candidate. As she writes her name 'Jaya Devi', a sudden smile illuminates the officer's face and he wishes her good luck because the name means victory. Jaya understands the existing social reality tells how deep is the divergence between the values offered by the social conventions and norms ratified by collective consciousness and the real needs and demands of the society. She now understands that modifications in the existing social order can cater to such needful demands. It is not only the ruler but also the people themselves who have been awakened to the situation.

Jaya

In Jaya, Gita Mehta attempts to present her ideal of an androgynous woman combining devotion, affection, care and endurance with fearlessness, courage and ambition. Jaya is truly Janus-faced looking back to the past and looking forward to the future. She is a battle-scarred woman who does not remain locked in the memories of past glory but is ready to seek new pastures in the fiercely competitive world of national politics. Jaya fills with her nomination papers as a candidate for election in free India. Her laughter as she does so is the laughter of a triumphant woman who is sure of her own destiny.

Jaya, a timid female child, comes out from Purdah, and grows to the status of a ruler. She comes out from her shackles of physical repression and brings out a change in the social order. She becomes a true Sati-Mata and learns to endure. She responds not only to her personal crisis but also to the crisis of the people. Her royal blood always longs to serve the people, each time recalling her teacher, Raj Guru's words that her dharma is protection of her people. Jaya feels happy as she does her duty towards her people and country. Jaya is also instructed by her father, the king of Balmer, the lessons of Rajniti, the philosophy of the monarch. The novel fuses historical documents with the fictitious aspects. The plot traces the heroine's growth and preoccupation as a daughter, wife, mother, Maharani, widow and Regent.

Constant Struggle and Crisis in the Life of Jaya

The novel presents the constant struggle and crisis in the life of Jaya. She is a child of the Indian Renaissance and so she is trained and taught in such a way, that she may come out from

the crisis. She becomes the victim of injustice due to Hindu orthodoxy that makes her meek. She is from the royal family yet she suffers like an ordinary woman. She is sometimes disappointed and frustrated but she does not lose the battle. The lessons of modernity she learnt from her childhood strengthen her in her critical times. Modernity allows her to overcome all the obstacles. Gradually she raises her voice against injustice. As a result she is declared as the Regent Maharani of Sirpur. At the end of the novel, she emerges as an independent woman to whom the Hindu orthodoxy cannot adjust of the Republic India. This novel is not only historical novel but also the story of a woman's struggle to get her identity as a human being.

Myth and Culture

Myth and culture comprise that culture is an umbrella term which includes rituals, traditions, customs etc. Myth is also one of the parts of culture. At the time of decolonization native intellectuals feel the need of their own cultural identity so at this time they seep into their own past and drag out native myths. The novel contains myths to describe various occasions such as the myths of great Queen Pushpavati, the myth in Ramayana, the myth of Kamini Temple etc. The myths reflect the culture of Indian society. The novel is a mixture of Indian and British traditions, cultures etc. Both these cultures try to explore their own cultural identity.

Gita Mehta weaves the story of Jaya, the Princess of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur. At different places, we find the theme of tradition and modernity. We find the scene of harems, the court intrigues, the tiger hunts, the neglected Maharanis, the glamorous mistresses, erotic life style of princes, their eccentricities, extravagances and superficialities. Jaya is a woman who accepts change gracefully and at last fills in the form for candidature in the elections. The end takes us to the beginning when Maharaja Jai Singh teaches his children Rajniti. Gita Mehta's portrayal of traditional elements comprises her attack on many social evils such as the custom of Sati, widowhood etc. She describes these social evils and makes us cautious of its consequences and bad effects.

Focuses on Shifts Towards Indian Culture

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 has emerged.

The novel focuses on shifts towards Indian Culture, its diversity and other aspects related with Indian religions, mythology, etc. The narrator of the story comes across different people and thereby different stories. The stories are bounded by three elements – love, death and the Narmada river. *A River Sutra* appears as a simple story of the narrator and protagonist who thinks that renunciation is all about physical withdrawal from the world by living in some isolated place. But it is certainly not a fact. The novel is an exposition of Indian metaphysics. The word used in the title, Sutra, means a principle. Here the principles of life are taught by the Narmada. The river has a lot to teach about human life, about this world and the other world, and about what life is and what it should have been. Gita Mehta imbibed all its essence and thoroughly discusses the relevance of it in order to understand the inner self. India has taken deep roots of its culture from its glorious past. It constitutes a multitude of languages, religions and arts and some of the important aspects of the lives of the Indians. Gita Mehta brings out the true essence of Indian culture and heritage through her skillfully designed stories. Indian culture is not an artifact, but something that is ever changing and still has a very important role to play in shaping the country's identity.

In the novel *Raj*, Gita Mehta presents her characters especially the women characters as the pillars of strength and decisiveness in a male-dominated world. In fact *Raj* is an ideal text for the study of the working of tradition and the need for change particularly with the regards to the status of women. In *A River Sutra* every one of the characters get their resolution from the Narmada river. The importance of the river is written into the traditions of the religions and its role in society is clear. The river plays a role cleansing many, providing a place for suicide, a place for rebirth, and a place for extreme piety. The river itself is a Goddess and people respect it as such. *Raj* depicts the ill-treatment of a widow, who has the self-confidence to redefine the tradition. Through Jaya, Gita Mehta has made an attempt to present her ideal of an androgynous woman who combines devotion, care and endurance with fearlessness, courage and ambition.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:12 December 2017

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