

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*: A Silent Symphony of Indian Culture and Heritage

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Abstract

Culture can be referred to beliefs, customs, values and practices of a particular group of people of a country. Greenblatt quotes the anthropologist Edward B. Taylor as defining culture as, “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. India is a secular nation and possesses cultural amalgamation of various religions. Indian culture and heritage becomes an inseparable features in the life of people who lives in India. This paper examines Gita Mehta's perspectives on Indian culture and heritage.

Gita Mehta is an Indian writer and director of Television documentaries. Her novel *A River Sutra* portrays the mythological time, historical time and contemporary time that knits the lives of various characters who encounter the river Narmada. The novel emphasizes Indian culture and heritage. The story begins with a nameless bureaucrat who follows Hindu convictions of life. His conversation with various characters brings out the importance of culture and heritage in their lives. The writer fabricates the practices of different religions in India, nature's role in Indians and the souls thirst of salvation. The novel is a series of stories of Hindus, the Jain, the Muslims, the bandits, the sages, the tribal and the anthropologist who form a gallery on the river banks of Narmada. The river becomes a sutra in the lives of these characters.

Keywords: Indian culture and heritage, feminine principle, metaphysical, Jainism, Islam and Hinduism.

Indian culture is an amalgamation of various religions. The culture and heritage play an inevitable role in the life of Indians. The Indians follow different systems, practices and convictions. However, there is Unity in Diversity. Indian culture is found to be the first and the supreme culture in the world. India's dynamic culture begins with a mysterious culture along the river Indus. Indian Civilization begins with Indus Valley Civilization and it is also influenced by Aryan Civilization. Other Westerners like Greek, Europeans and Romans have left their impressions on this civilization. However, this civilization has its own uniqueness. The religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism play a major role in the culture and heritage of Indians. Nevertheless, religions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism are respected equally. The present culture of India reflects a collective heritage of the past. It is indeed that Indian culture is varied, rich and diversified with its own uniqueness.

Gita Mehta is a contemporary writer of Indian writing in English. Her writings mainly focus on Indian culture and heritage. Her novels are imbued with issues of religious, political and social conditions in India. In the novel *A River Sutra*, she portrays the River Narmada as an embodiment of Indian culture, its diversity, its religion and mythology. The River Narmada is a mentor who teaches the sutra of worldly life to the characters. It becomes the place of solace, a redeemer and a sutra to develop ideological harmony between the religions. The writer knits the story in a new way. She interlocks the characters with a main character to portray the contemporary India which is a blend of reality and myth. The novel is an exposition of metaphysics. Like Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare* the metaphysical element present in the novel makes the reader to read in between lines. Mehta, being an Indo-Anglo American author she asserts her Indianness by claiming the cultural identity.

The novel begins with a nameless character who is a bureaucrat longing to withdraw himself from the material world. He wishes to spend his life at the banks of River Narmada. He seeks tranquility there. The author portrays him as a representative of "Vanasprata" who returns from his worldly desires. The protagonist chooses River Narmada for his solace. He says "I am now a Vanasprati, someone who has retired to the forest to reflect." (ARS 1). The rivers are worshipped as the manifestation of Goddess in India. Hindus worship River Narmada as the daughter of God Shiva. The protagonist thinks he is very pious and every morning he meditates looking at the river. Mehta associates Indians religious faith and belief with the river. The river is omnipresent with the various characters and their stories are knitted on the banks of the river. Mehta brings out the Indian culture and heritage by mentioning various practices and tradition of different religions.

Mehta shows the uniqueness of India in the terms of multiculturalism. She mentions the religious belief, family bond, the love, the enlightenment, and the salvation. All the stories, the Jain Monk's, the Music Teacher's, the Executive's, the Courtesan's and the Minstrel's reflect Indian culture. The Jain monk depicts the life of enlightenment. He leads a pleasurable life, as a son of a diamond merchant's son. He attains renouncement leaving all his wealthy life. The renouncement of the monk is similar to that of king Asoka who renounces the world at his early age. The predominant faith of Jainism is faith in freeing oneself from the shackles of worldly desires. The monk narrates the practices of Jainism. He says that vows such as poverty, celibacy, and non-violence are to be followed. He also narrates the ceremony of renunciation the includes procession, the donation of all majesty and innumerable wealth. He denounces wife, children and all relatives and completely denounces the worldly desires. He says that this is the practice since the time of Mahavira. The Jain monk covers his face with muslin cloth in order to avoid killing of insects while inhaling. He holds a stick tied with wooden tufts to clear his path. He holds a begging bowl which is the very symbol of poverty.

The narrator who is a Hindu and Tariq Mia who is a Muslim are friends. They share their religious beliefs, customs, practices and manner of living. They seem to be the perfect example of Indian culture. Their customs are different, yet they unite in souls. Tariq Mia tries to clarify the doubts of the narrator when he is disturbed by the gloomy thought about dead ascetics. Tariq Mia tells it is an inevitable end for all. He tells him the ultimate end is same no matter how

important, remarkable or wealthy person one is. He says, “India’s greatest poet also floated down the river...Kabir the man who poems made a bridge between your faith and mine. (ARS 46)

Indian culture also constitutes music such as vocal, dance and instruments. The devotional songs, music and lyrics abound in the novel. Music is the identity of Indian culture. It arouses an emotional appeal between the singer and listener. Imrat is a blind boy and he is surveyed with his pitiable sister. He is a good singer and arouses heart-rending emotions with heart touching music. Master Mohan gives Imrat shelter and teaches him music. The love between Imrat and master reflects the unconditional affection for each other through the devotional songs. Master Mohan loves him so much as he thinks he is responsible for his murder while the Great Sahib killed him after listening his rapturous songs. It is an immense guilt and the master also commits suicide. Tariq Mia says, ‘Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind child. (ARS 91)

Indian culture emphasizes on the knowledge of sixty-four arts. It is considered music is the language of God. The musician’s daughter explains the meaning of the first sound of the creation ‘Om’. The origin of sound, its union and endless joy of the soul are explained by the musician. It is of highly philosophical. Mehta with her amazing knowledge explains the true spirit of Vedas and the wonderful wisdom of ancestors.

Tribes are one of the main constituent parts of India. Their beliefs, ways of living and basic instinct all are different from other religious communities. They retain the rich cultural values which are sometimes modified or distorted by others. Mehta deals with the religious practices and beliefs followed by the tribesmen in India. The tribes live in a closed system. The tribe’s women allowed Nitin Bose to worship Narmada to seek her forgiveness by which he becomes free from possession. Nitin Bose was allowed to worship goddess by making mud-idol, praying to it and then immersing it into the holy river Narmada. Desires have been worshipped as the goddess by the tribes since long.

Naga Baba an ascetic teaches the song of Narmada to a small girl who is brought from a brothel’s house. She becomes a minstrel and bears the name Uma – the name of Goddess Parvati. Naga Baba wanders with ash smeared body, matted hair and the human skull from which he ate and drank. It reminds the terrifying death to ordinary human. But in the end of the novel Naga Baba appears as Prof. Shankar who has taken charge of the archaeologist to the Narmada dig. Mehta deals with both reality and myth to make clear that River Narmada is immortal.

Indian culture is a blend of various cultures formed out of its secularism. Indian culture teaches by practicing religion, a man finds the true meaning of life and attains salvation. Mehta fabricated the Indian culture and heritage with man’s quest of search of God. Religion leads to enlightenment from ignorance. The song that flows like a silent river in the novel blends Indian culture with nature.

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