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An assessment of mythology in Gita Mehta's a river sutra

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Abstract---This paper attempts to present an assessment of mythology and its significance in human life and Indian culture in Gita Mehta's A River Sutra. It also looks at her utilization of Indian mythology and its symbolic meaning from a sociocultural standpoint. It is a project to investigate her usage of Indian mythology and its symbolic meaning in current culture. She interprets renunciation and self-realization in A River Sutra in a very realistic and practical way. The author's concern for man's eternal desire for existence and survival in modern life is evident in the Narmada story and the narrators of the six stories. She clarifies for misled Westerners and Indians alike that it is the active life of karma, not the passive renunciation, that leads to knowledge and enlightenment. As a result, only action, unselfish activity, may assist man in attaining perfection and excelling in life.

Keywords---mythology, karma, narmada, culture, history, renunciation.

Introduction

Gita Mehta, a talented Indian diaspora author, has established herself as a master novelist. She has established herself as a renowned Indo-English postcolonial writer. With her particular style of writing and use of innovative subjects, she has made a significant contribution in the fields of fiction and non-fiction, securing a position in the galaxy of Indian women novelists. Gita Mehta's

A River Sutra includes insightful views on Hindu myths, rituals, and beliefs. The novel tells the story of Narmada - Shiva's penance and the birth of Narmada - the Indian culture's symbol - as well as tribal tradition and man's yearning for life. It is about the legendary symbolism and traditions surrounding Lord Shiva and the Narmada, which is shown as an eternally inspiring force. Gita Mehta weaves her story together with pious invocations, poetry, and lectures. Salman Rushdie writes, "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 emerged" ("Introduction," xxii). *A River Sutra* is a collection of stories delivered by an anonymous narrator. They are all centred on the river Narmada, which serves as both a backdrop and a living identity. Each story's characters only appear once, and the same concept - the river myth - runs through all of them. The tale is set on the banks of the Narmada River. The anonymous narrator listens to these stories while also offering his opinions and views on each one. He appears to be a driving force for objectively describing all of the stories.

Exploring the Narmada Mythology

A River Sutra is a jumble of concepts that serves as a foundation for comprehending the cultural features of several groups that are autonomous but interdependent, similar but unique, and appear to be linked by the Narmada. The novelist has provided a good portrayal of Indian cultural values, music, and art forms through exploring the Narmada mythology. The primary myth in *A River Sutra* is the myth of the Narmada who is portrayed as the daughter of Lord Shiva. The novel opens with the description of the Narmada and ends with "The Song of the Narmada." According to a myth, Narmada was born of Shiva's penance: Shiva, the Creator and the Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The streams took on the form of a woman - the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose-limbed with lassitude of desire. (8)

Lord Shiva bestowed upon her the blessing of eternal holiness and inexhaustibility. Shiva was so taken with her lively motions and sparkling vivacity that he gave her the name 'Narmada,' which means 'the one who provides joy.' Then he married her to the sea, calling him "Lord of Rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors" (9). The river runs in all those varieties that pleasure the Ascetic Shiva to join her spouse. In "A River of Wisdom," Uma Parameswaran avers, Puranic sources variously represent Narmada to be the daughter of Rishi Mekala, daughter of the moon, 'mind born daughter' of the Somapas, sister of Nagas, and a daughter of Surya or Tapa the Sun God, who named her Narmada. She is also called Purvaganga, and Reva (the name used in one of the poems in the novel). (151-52)

The myth of Narmada's birth in *A River Sutra* is based on the *Sthala Purana*

The narrative begins with the narrator's thoughts on Narmada, whom he imagines to be a lady. During the rainy season, the Narmada is at its "most dramatic."

Monsoon rains swell the water, which slams into the marble like waves breaking at high tide. The river churns and bubbles around rapids, dissolving grey-green stones on the riverbed into the oval lingams that are Shiva's symbol. According to legend, the river is regarded holy because of its origin. It is often referred to as Shankari, after Lord Shiva's daughter, and it connects humans to Shiva's vitality. All of the stones tumbling on the ground are said to take on the shape of His emblems.

Various beliefs common in the Narmada region have been reported by Gita Mehta. The narrator learned that it is firmly engrained in the common man's psyche that the criminal offence of attempted suicide is often overlooked if the offender attempts to commit suicide in the Narmada's waters. As in the instance of Nitin Bose, the River Narmada is both a source of life and death, as in the narrative of Courtesan's daughter. The Courtesan was disappointed because her daughter was abducted by Rahul Singh, the Vindhya's most feared robber and murderer, a man who terrified the authorities and whose name was used to intimidate children into submission. She was concerned that no one would now marry her. She later saw her daughter and discovered that she had married Rahul Singh, who was tender to her despite his crass habits. After being apprehended, Rahul Singh committed suicide by drowning herself in the Narmada River to avoid falling into the clutches of the police and being tortured and humiliated. Her mother became overjoyed, believing that she would now be "purified of all her sins" (190).

In fact, the Narmada myth is quite similar to the story of the Musician's daughter. Despite the fact that their marriage was fixed, both were tricked by their boyfriends and remained single. The Narmada mythology allows Gita Mehta to convey every emotion, every experience, and every belief that people have about the river Narmada's legends. In *Gita Mehta: Writing Home/Creating Homeland*, Usha Bande avers, "The revival of myth in the twentieth century manifested itself in writer's attempt to use it to look back and reconstruct the past. It offered a supportive base to build up a new creative perspective on recognizable images" (143). Gita Mehta blends mythological time, historical time, and contemporary time together in *A River Sutra*. Lord Shiva, who penetrates the pages of *A River Sutra*, is another timeless One. The reader is continually reminded of Shiva and Narmada by Gita Mehta. He has been referred to as both the Creator and the Destruction of the world.

In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta also tells the mythological account of the Veena's birth, describing how Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati's eternal love gave birth to this lovely instrument. Goddess Parvati underwent all major penances until Lord Shiva returned her love, and music was born as a result of this immense love. Gita Mehta recounts a legend in which Shiva awoke one morning after making love to Parvati all night and discovered the Goddess still sleeping. He says, Her breasts were like perfect globes and her slender arm rested across them, her fragile bangles sliding up and down with each breath. Shiva was moved to such tenderness by the sight that he created an instrument to immortalize his wife's immortal beauty - the first instrument of music, the veena. (196). *A River Sutra* is inextricably linked to Shiva and his multi-layered metaphors. In several places in the story, Lord Shiva is described as an ascetic. In Tariq Mia's "The Minstrel's

Story,” a story about an ascetic named Naga Baba, *A River Sutra* is once again a witness to the Shiva-Narmada myth. Tariq Mia met the Naga Baba, a member of the Naga sadhus, or Protectors, a sect of martial ascetics. To strengthen his meditations, he spread ash over his hair and body in the ascetic’s bath. Because one could not be a Naga Baba without enduring the most rigorous test of penance and discipline, he worshipped Lord Shiva as ‘the Annihilator of the Universe’ and as ‘the Lord of Death’ in all of his fierce manifestations. Through a purification rite, the ascetic rescued a little girl from prostitution on Shiva’s (Shivaratri) night and gave her the name “Uma,” which symbolically means “peace in the night” (241) and literally means “oh do not do” in Sanskrit. “The Narmada claims all girls as hers,” he told the small girl. You become Narmada’s daughter tonight” (254). He taught her how to read, write, and sing the Narmada’s songs. The same Naga Ascetic subsequently appears as Prof V.V. Shankar, and Uma is the youngster who has grown up to become a famous River Minstrel.

If Shiva’s penance gave birth to the Narmada, the Naga Baba aka Prof Shankar’s penance gave birth to Uma. When she sings to the Narmada’s water with folded hands, “You are twice born/ Once from penance, once from love” (275), she is referring to the Narmada, but it is also true of herself. Uma, like the Narmada, has two births. In “A River of Wisdom,” Uma Parameswaran avers, “...Naga Baba has always been a teacher figure (for Uma) and any student is intellectually birthed and shaped by a teacher...” (154). Professor Shankar asks her, “Where do you go from here?” at the end of the novel *A River Sutra*, when she appears as a famous River Minstrel and completes her chanting of the Narmada hymns. “I am on my way to the coast,” she responds. “To find a husband, like the Narmada found her Lord of Rivers?” Shankar laughs. (280). Gita Mehta recommends that she head for the seaside, where the Narmada River meets the Arabian Sea. Professor Shankar is Shiva’s name, as is Shankaracharya, whose prayers to the Narmada are repeated throughout the tale. As a result, Shiva is at the centre of the plot, and the Naga Baba and Professor Shankar are unmistakable references to the great Lord.

Existence of Folklore and Rituals

The collective consciousness of the Indian psyche is formed by myths, folklore, rituals, and even superstitions. The tale is set in the Narmada region, which is an important habitat for tribals. Gita Mehta has brilliantly portrayed the area surrounding the river’s source; the jungle is dense, and bandits and other undesirable elements live in those regions. Narmada is identified with the snake deity Manasa as a sister in Hindu mythology since Manasa is known as “the daughter of Shiva.” In the other mythological tales, she is said to be “the daughter of Kasyapa and Kadru and sister of the serpent king Shesha” (Veronica Ions’ *Indian Mythology*, 97). Narmada, Manasa’s sister, has the ability to reverse the harmful consequences of a snake bite. Furthermore, serpent motifs appear frequently throughout the story. “Half human, half serpent” (*A River Sutra*, 119) has been spoken of the pre-Aryans. Rima’s teeth penetrated Nitin’s flesh “like the sudden striking of a snake,” and she screamed her delight against his throat, making him believe he still had a creature half serpent in his arms and many more.

Nitin Bose was regarded by Gita Mehta as a clever young guy who was sincerely interested in learning about tribal culture. Despite having a brilliant mind, he made poor decisions that led to his downfall. After the Vano tribe completed the ceremony of immersing the idol on the Narmada's bank, his senses were restored. Thus, tribals have been described as being very secretive about their religious practises but yet being cooperative with believers and those who require assistance. They assembled and begged to the goddess for forgiveness for Mr. Bose's denial of her abilities. Mr. Bose created a mud idol of the goddess and buried it in the Narmada's waters as a metaphor of burying his misdeeds and regaining his sanity thanks to the tribal deity's forgiveness. Mr. Chagla blamed the tribals of having "no sense of time" (142) but R. S. Pathak, in "Tribal People, Locales and Values in *A River Sutra*," avers that "he fails to realize that their life has a rhythm of its own and they have a far more integrated sense of time" (189).

According to Gita Mehta, tribals have their own way of life, philosophy, set of values, and beliefs, and coming into contact with civilised non-tribal people is perilous. The animism and instinctual attitude to existence of tribals may not appeal to the contemporary intellect, yet it has a special significance for them that cannot be denied. They are earthy beings, with a rare spontaneity and passion for nature guiding their lives. For their survival and support, they rely on basic powers. Bhasha Shukla Sharma has made an intriguing comment in this regard. She discovered that most of the references and rites detailed in the novel are accurate, but that there is "no tribe called 'Vano' around the Narmada. The whole area is surrounded by tribals and the tribals of this area are called 'Gond'" ("Mapping Culture through *A River Sutra*," 23).

Gita Mehta bases her story on an ancient myth and ritual pattern because it gives her "emotional certitude" (Pradeep Trikha's "Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*: A Pilgrim's Progress," 177). The Narmada River represents India and its culture, in which people persevere in the face of adversity and find refuge on its banks. The storytellers gather on the Narmada's banks to share their experiences and enjoy the calm and tranquilly. The story is defined by a constant undercurrent of river influence. Tariq Mia, one of the storytellers in the novels, expresses this sentiment: "Such people are like flowing water through our lives ... We learn something from the encounter, then they are gone" (*A River Sutra* 259). The reader, like the narrator, delights in unravelling the tangles of mythology, archaeology, and ethnography in which the river is enmeshed as they enjoy their stories in a rambunctious manner. The novelist is able to describe the psychology of the human mind, which is always under the sway of culture, religion, faith, and desire and entirely submits to it through the use of many characters and their diverse experiences.

Using the myths, Mehta has attempted to focus on the unknown aspects of Indian culture by focusing on individual culture while maintaining the customary focus on the people's collective cultural background. During this process, it becomes clear that the novel's presentation of mythology has been effectively integrated with the narrative, adding a great deal of weight to the novel's artistic quality. In *Gita Mehta: Writing Home/Creating Homeland*, Usha Bande avers, Critics of myth criticism like Leslie Fielder supported the view that myths made literature accessible to the general reader ... the common reader does not look for

intricacies of the plot or the credibility of the characters or the style. What he enjoys is the familiar elements like myths or fantasy. Those accounts for much of the appeal of *A River Sutra*. Gita Mehta makes profuse use of myths and takes support of popular legends and beliefs and mythological stories. (143-44)

Conclusion

To sum-up, the mythological story of the Narmada, which was born of Lord Shiva's penance, is depicted in *A River Sutra*. Rivers are held in high regard in Indian culture because they are said to bring serenity and relief to dissatisfied people. The narrators of the novel find serenity and tranquillity while telling their experiences on the banks of the Narmada, which is revered as one of the holiest pilgrimage locations due to her connection to Lord Shiva. Her effect is limitless, as she nourishes people from all over the region by offering consolation to ascetics, commoners, and grieving hearts alike. The novelist shows the psychology of the human mind through the Narmada mythology, which is continually influenced by culture, religion, faith, and desire, and surrenders to it. Above all else, the river brings people of various religions and races together, illustrating India's secularist ethos. The mythology of Narmada allows the novelist to show how these followers share the same myths, rituals, and beliefs while still maintaining their identity.

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