

## Delineation of Religion in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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### **Abstract:**

Indian Novelist Gita Mehta is one of the most widely acclaimed novelists at international level. She has marked the footprint in Indian English literature. Although only six novels to credit, she has delineated the microscopically Indian scenario as far as political, social, cultural realities are concern. Being an active participant in political movement and highly educated, Gita Mehta has analyzed the socio-political situations of India, spiritual tradition and religions of the nation and used to breathe the patriotic and spiritualistic politics zeal among the masses by bringing spirituality in practical life through her novels.

### **Intraduction**

Gita Mehta portrays multiculturalism in *A River Sutra*. The multiple narrators narrate their stories or telling the course of events themselves. In *A River Sutra*, multiple narrators find equal space to narrate their past-life revealing different facets of culture. The nameless narrator is the chief person who binds all the different stories through the *sutra* of the river Narmada. The technique of the novel is partially similar to the epic *The Mahabharata*. Vyasa wrote the *Mahabharata* but he himself is not involved in it as a character. Multiculturalism, different religions of India and its integrity is depicted throughout the novel. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddha and Jain religion are not only practiced but also inherited from generation to generation.

Mehta deals with the three religions Hinduism, Jainism and Islamism mainly in the novel *A River Sutra*. M.P.Ganesan in his doctoral thesis defines: "Religion as a belief in powers superior to a man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of a human life" (87). She explores almost all the issues and features. *A River Sutra* emphasizes the real tendency of harmonious co-existence of all humanity as the essential feature of Indian culture. Various religions are represented by different characters in this novel. The narrator is of Hindu religion, Tariq Mia stands for Muslim religion. Jain religion is explained through the Jain Monk. Though the religions are different in the world they all teach same lessons of enlightenment and the ultimate destination of human life. The holy river like Narmada is considered to help the people in seeking enlightenment for self. The ultimate aim of binding the people together is to seek enlightenment among the people.

Mehta presents the mingling of the religions as we find in India itself. The religious concern is distinct in *A River Sutra*. People of all religion live in the surroundings of the Narmada River, all religions people are living. One can see that there will be problem when people of three religions live in a same place but Mehta tells about the harmony amid religious diversity in the novel *A River Sutra*.

The narrator has strange experiences and divine feel at the bank of the river Narmada. According to the Hindu Myth the holy river Narmada goes on flowing to meet her bridegroom. He hears 'Allah-ho-Akbar' by a Muslim priest and he looks at a row of ancient Jain caves that are cut into the copper stone. It shows unity of religion in India. A retired beaucocrat officer is also one of the important characters in the novel. He manages quality time to watch, think and introspect over the different aspects of various religions in India. The nameless narrator is very curious and wants to know more about the religions and their correlation interestingly, their practices and their uniformity which is elaborated in the novel.

Gita Mehta depicts Jain religion in a very delicate and in a subtle way. She gives the minute details of the story through a Jain monk. The narrator meets the Jain monk. The monk is quite young. The Jain religious faith lies in freeing the self from the shackles of worldly desires. It follows the difficult vows: "the vows of poverty, celibacy and non-violence." (11) The Jain monk says to the narrator: "I must always look down while walking for fear that may slip on an ant."(11) The general habits, practices, spirit and the tendency of the Jain religion are focused by Mehta in the novel *A River Sutra*.

The old monk teaches about Mahavira to Ashok and he approaches him to be a monk. He says that most of the people in the world die even before they cannot understand desire of renunciation within them. The Mahavira's teaching is helpful to men to lead his path of spiritual enlightenment and freedom as depicted in *The Ghost of Vasu Master* by Venkatesan's guru. Mehta depicts the strict and callous path of Jain monks to lead life. Their patience, suffering and ambition are very difficult to follow and practice them. The whole ceremony of renunciation including procession, the monk has to donate all his majestic and innumerable wealth which symbolizes the undemanding somber life of a Jain monk and also he leaves his wife, children and all relatives to become a symbol of the complete departure from all his worldly desires.

Mehta describes the ceremony in such a way that it enlivens before eyes and it looks as if one is witnessing the whole activity being performed before oneself. The monks in the ceremony recite loudly.

"You will be a social outcast..."

"You will depend on strangers for your most basic needs..."

"You will experience cold." (37-3)

Three pieces of clothes, a stick with woolen tufts and a begging bowl are called muslin mask. These are provided to a monk in order to avoid the killing of insects. Three pieces of clothes are given to cover the most essential part of the body and to avoid any pride due to rich clothes and a stick tied with woolen tufts is to clear the path, a wooden begging bowl is the symbol of his charity based living.

Muslim's different practices and features make their religion different from other religion. Tariq Mia is a mullah. The mosque is a peaceful and calm place. Tariq Mia sings Sufi songs full of devotion and love to god in the mosque near the river Narmada. In Muslim religion a divine joy is tried to be attained by singing Sufi songs. The devotional Sufi songs are sung in continuity for ten days and nights. "For ten days and nights the marble platforms are covered with carpets, campfires flicker on the hillside, and the hills echo to ecstatic singing." (44) The ceremony is not formal but a medium to reach the ultimate reality of the world and to experience

God. The narrator is moved by such devotional songs like any one. He is moved by the uninhibited delight in that quavering voice. One of Sufi songs says,

Can't You see my blood turning into henna  
To decorate the soles of Your feet? (46)

Tribes are one of the main constituent parts of India. Their beliefs, way of living and basic instinct all are different from other religious communities. But they hold the rich cultural values which are sometimes modified by others. Like Hindu, Muslim and Jain, the Tribes also follow the religious practices and beliefs in India. Their closed life system will not allow others to enter in their life. They worship goddess by making mud-idol, praying to it and then immersing it into the holy water of Narmada. They worship desire as the goddess for a long time.

The novelist deals with the constant love and flawless flow of it in life. The whole theme is assimilated into the concept of love its varieties, strength and prospect beyond limitation. Love is free from narrow margins of society. It is the true basis of our survival on the earth. Mehta describes the deeply rooted love which is many-faceted. The river Narmada itself is in love with the ocean, the Lord of rivers. The narrator projects the picture of Narmada along with the inexplicable powers which is enormous and beyond our imagination and thoughts. The river Narmada is personified as a beautiful woman. She changes herself with the change of time. She is shown walking across the path and elegant towards her bridegroom, the Ocean.

Sometimes love resides far away from the existing world home on some other world. The river Narmada adorns herself with coloured jewels, oiling and scenting her. In the early morning, she is dark at all sides, the river looks motionless, being a woman, She has just awoken up and is stretching her limbs as she oiled herself with scented oils, her long black hair loosened, her eyes outlined in collyrium. The reddish colour of the river implies as “painting on her palms and soles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover.” (139)

## Conclusion

Mehta seems to criticize the superficial practices followed by people in general. K.V. Surendran says, “We have several instances in the novel where certain considerable tendencies as practiced by religions are criticized for example, according to the monk the Hindus disguised their greed with their many headed arguments.”(39-40) Thus, Mehta has projected light on the practice of various culture, tradition and religious faith through the portrayal of various religion in India.

## Works Cited

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