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Postcolonialism at its Unabashed Best: Reading Gita Mehta's *The River Sutra*

By Prof. Dr. Aparajita Hazra
SKB University

The River Sutra is an intriguing work by Gita Mehta. After reading the book to its last page, one sits wondering whether this book ought to be called a novel, or a collection of anecdotes that are cleverly sewn together by a number of threads-a number of *sutras*.

The River Sutra in its entirety weaves mesmeric gossamer of tales which come guised almost as the tittle-tattle of a retired Government employee who has no better way to while life away.
But a closer and more careful look at the stories strewn across the 10 chapters of the book reveals more than meets the eye.

The book leaves one with a medley of emotions once it's completed-emotions that take a little while to sort out.

True to its name the work takes a *sutra* that ties all of it together. Ostensibly speaking, the stories, and bits and pieces of anecdotes are threaded together by the winding, tortuous length of the Narmada river that runs as the pivotal *clou* through all the tales. Thus the Narmada becomes the primary titular *River Sutra* in the book. The word 'sutra', originating from the Sanskrit root '*siv*'or '*siu*' meaning to sew together, connotes the factor(s) joining the tales together. A closer look at the matrix of the novel reveals that there are a number of other, sometimes inostensible motifs that run as a *sutra* throughout the book too.

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Prof. Dr. Aparajita Hazra

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The collection of separate but not disjointed tales is plaited together by one link that leads to the other with the Narmada being there in all the episodes. The episodic structure that augments as well as undermines the meganarrative methodology reminds one of the structural marvel of works like of Boccacio's *Decameron* or Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* from centuries back or even closer to homeland, the *Panchatantra* anecdotes. *The River Sutra* makes use of the Framed Narrative or the telescopic narratology as the bureaucrat's all encompassing story gives way to a number of other anecdotes told by different people.

It is ironical that the rural *mise-en-scène* s of the work is introduced to the readers by a man who has lived the major portion of his life in the bustle of the city as a bureaucrat. The unnamed senior retired Government officer who tires of life-or so he says-and comes over to the rural little place near the town of Rudra as the manager of a quiet little guest house is the chief narrator in The River Sutra. As he broaches the discourse of storytelling, more narrators come into the matrix of the work. People like Tariq Mia, the Mullah from the mosque in the neighbouring village across the hill, Dr Mitra, the doctor from the sleepy little town of Rudra, Mr Chagla, the moon-faced, homely assistant to the bureaucrat, the local constable Sashi just go on linking in to the mainstream flow of the tales as they go by.

Gita Mehta describes her characters in such vividness that by the time one finishes one's journey through the book, these few staple characters become well known and familiar to the senses. Every detail like how Mr Chagla, red-faced from the exertion pedals slowly and painstakingly up the uphill road, or how Dr Mitra with his lanky frame, throws up his bony hands as he guffaws at some joke or how our bureaucrat loves to sit in the open terrace of his guesthouse at dusk, watching the last bit of reflection giving way to the dark over the waters of the Narmada flowing quietly below, as the sun calls it a day, brings these characters very close to the hearts of the readers. The familiarity to these down to earth and people-next-door characters is carefully built up in such meticulous detail that after a certain while in the novel, whenever the characters sit around talking amongst themselves, the reader feels participatory to the gatherings. When they talk we feel like we're there, party to their chit chat.

And it is through this chit chat, under the garb of tiddle tale, comes the entire oeuvre of stories.

The stories tell of life, its little tales-an up here and down there, a dash of happiness here and a cloud of sadness there-sometimes it's a tale of ascetic renouncing life for *Moksh*, sometimes it's a story of living life to the full. If somewhere it's triumphant like the Archaeologist's story, it's weighed down with the heaviness of treachery and betrayal elsewhere like in the anecdote of Mohan Master.

The stories are threaded together with *Sutras*-and as the book progresses, one understands that it's not just the Narmada that's the *sutra*-there are others too.

Even the retired Government bureaucrat stays steady as the *sutra* that holds the work in its entirety through his quiet narration.

The others like Tariq Mia, Dr Mitra, Mr Chagla, though they seldom come up as narrators, apart from

Author: Former Dean of Arts, Professor and Head, Dept of English, SKB University. e-mail: dr.aparajitahazra@gmail.com

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Tariq Mia, who tells the tale of Uma and the ascetic, act as a sutra of sorts as they are the ones that make up the little group of people who, with the constancy of their presence, give identity to the locale. Erin Soderberg in *Voices from The Gaps* correctly wrote that Mehta "blends humor with witty observations, constructing a book that presents her own impressions through the experiences of many."

True enough, the heteroglossia of multiple narrators is what makes up the spatio-temporality of this place.

Indira Karamcheti in *The Women's Review of Books*, rather looks askance at *The River Sutra*, waving it off cursorily as "too slight, too airy an entertainment, a reinforcement of what is held to be already known rather than an enlargement of mind and spirit with the challenge of the new" (Karamcheti 20). But a careful reading of the book reveals more to it than meets the eye.

Gita Mehta keeps positing Nature dos-a-dos civilisation at the slightest hint. One understands how *Prakriti* and *Purusha* are counterbalanced with each other all through the work. The entire work, divided equally between three stories narrated by male narrators and three by female ones, bring about a mélange of connections between Nature, contemporary urbanity, landscape, mythology and vicissitudes of life.

According to *Samkhya Joga*, *Prakriti* and *Purusha* are the two facets of the manifest *Brahman*, known as *Isvara*. Together, they regulate and moderate the entire universal cosmic process. *Prakriti* as opposed to *Vikriti*, connotes the natural, unaltered form of being and energy.

Purusha comprising etymologically of the roots '*puru*' and '*usha*' connotes the "eastern dawn" of the Creative consciousness of the Manifested *Brahman*. Both *Purusha* and *Prakriti* are eternal, indestructible.

Prakriti, with its eight-fold nature comprising of the earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, reason and the ego and life force, is the the *Adhibhuta* aspect of God- the *kshetra* or the field while *Purusha* is the indwelling witness Spirit of consciousness, the *kshetragna*-the *Adhidaiva*.

In *The River Sutra,* each tale either begin with the Narmada and its surrounding naturescape, or winds its way back there. The Narmada plays a large role in all of the stories that talk of the variegated chiaroscuro of emotions that make up the consciousness of all the characters, thereby firmly weaving the sutras of *Prakriti* and *Purush* together.

The first story talks of Ashok the young man who had renounced the world to be a Jain monk and was on his way to Mahadeo, a little place on the banks of the Narmada, when the narrator met him. The story talks at length about all that went on in the life of this young man ever since he decided to renounce the world, the turmoil of emotion s inside him as well as in the ones dear to him. The story ends with an ironical punch when the young man confesses how, at the brink of his becoming an ascetic, his mind was riddled with doubts: 'I am paralyzed by fear. This is the last time I will embrace my children, or laugh with my brother. The last time I will enjoy the privacy of my bathroom… I abandon all hope of retreat. The ceremonies of enunciation have progressed too far.' (37)

The next story, the second one, tells the tale of Mohan Master. Tariq Mia introduces his story by recounting how one day the bereaved bedraggled Mohan came to hand him the record of his blind ward's singing to be played on the gramophone at Aamir Rumi's tomb. The story moves on through the chequered theme of a blind young boy and his soulful voice, a greedy wife a quiet and genteel music teacher, the art of singing and the stab of treachery.

The novel moves on to the next tale beside the Narmada-the tale of Nitin Bose, who comes to stay at the Guesthouse on the Narmada. He is obsessed with the persona of Rima, and sings of eye makeup and vermillion, so much so that people start suspecting he is possessed. The Narmada, among the native Vano people, is famed to be able to cure madness as much as it is famed to cure snake bite.

Then comes the fourth tale the Courtesan's story. Her life languishing amidst the reminiscences of the ancient kingdom of Shahbag talks of the accomplished and fine life of the courtesans there. But her story ends in tragedy as her daughter, a beautiful girl who had had her own share of emotional upheaval, ended up giving her life up in the dark currents of the Narmada.

The next story, The Musician's Story, starts on the banks of the Narmada, where the narrator meets a young woman who claims she is on a 'musical pilgrimage'. The woman tells her poignant tale of how her music was solace to her heart that was pained by her lacklustre features. She comes to the banks of the Narmada to nurse her braised feelings and to figure out the meaning of life.

The last story too, clings to the Narmada as the *sutra* as the story recounts how a lonely ascetic comes across a little child who had been dragged into the mire of child prostitution and takes her along in his miles-loong pilgrimage by the river Narmada, naming her Uma.

The book ends with a surprising twist with the story of the famous archaeologist who comes to stay in the guest house by the river, with his assistants and companions. After a sojourn of a couple of weeks which came like a breath of fresh air to the narrator, the caretaker of the guest house, the jolt- though rather pleasant-comes when it is revealed that the archaeologist is none other than the ascetic who took on Uma almost like an adopted daughter.

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The novel comes to what can almost be called a serpentine end as the last story shows a journey back to mundane life from ascetic renunciation. This looks back in irony to the firs tale where the man, significantly named Ashok, makes his crossover from mundane life to ascetic renunciation.

And all along this metanarrative of the binary of life and the beyond, the six stories run like *petit recit* that add up to what *The River Sutra* is all about.

The novel *The River Sutra* posits a lot of binaries dos-a-dos. The novel plumbs deep into the storehouse of annals and anecdotes and mythology that India is. Gita Mehta has a wonderful way of nipping in with bits and pieces of mythological allusion in the rubric of her narrative. The mythological references merge into the storyline so that they do not stick out like unnecessary digressions. Rather, they augment the concept and schema of the narrative.

> "It's true. Don't you see a prowl to the sahib's walk this morning?" Their provocative laughter followed me down the gentle incline of the path. "Be careful not to walk alone, sisters. The mango trees are in bloom."
>
> "Kama must be sharpening his arrows of blossoms and stringing his bow with bees, sisters. Take care the sahib does not lure us to a seduction."
>
> I could not help smiling at the women's references to Kama, God of Love, with his sugarcane bow strung with honeybees and his five flowered arrows of desire. There was indeed a mood of longing in the jungle. Small flowers foamed over the leaves of the mango trees, the wind carried the scent of lemon blossoms and sandalwood to my nostrils. "(Mehta 97)

Again, the narratology allows the storyline to be interspersed with the various classical aspects of the Indian core existence. In the Musician's Story, the storyline beautifully gets sprinkled with little bits and pieces of tradition as the girl narrates her life as her father's disciple in learning music:

> "The first sound of creation was Om. Each vibration of Om created new sounds that led to the primary scale. Think of these seven notes as the Om of music. If you cannot play them correctly you will never be able o master a raga."I was only a child but my father wanted me to understand that music was the mathematics by which the universe could be comprehended." (Mehta 195)

At another juncture of the same story the lady recounts how her father explained the mythology behind the origin of all the *ragas* in Indian Classical music:

> "There was no art until Shiva danced the Creation," he said, explaining how melody was born. Music lay sleep inside a motionless rhythm-deep as water, black as darkness, weightless as air. Then Shiva shook his drum. Everything started to tremble with the longing to exist. The universe erupted into being as Shiva danced. The six mighty ragas, the pillars of all music, were born from the expressions on Shiva's face, and through their vibrations the universe was brought into existence. "The melodies of these six ragas sustain the harmonies of living things. When they fuse together they become the beat of Shiva's drum that brings the universe to destruction. But they are all male. And music can never be still, it can never be without desire. Life must create more life or become death. So each of the six ragas was given six wives, six raginis to teach them love. Their children are the putras, and in this way music lives and multiplies." (Mehta 210)

These little touches would enable a non-Indian reader to figure out the quintessence of Indian culture and mystic ways of life to an enormous extent.

There are quaint little stories too that get narrated by someone or the other in the novel, adding to the core Indianness of the book. For instance the little tales that the indigenous inhabitants associate with the Narmada add to this local touch. In Chapter Nine, Dr Mitra, much to the disbelief of the city-conditioned retired Government officer, tells the him the story of the Immortals around the Narmada, in what is one of the numerous telescopic narratives:

> "It is as if reason and instinct are constantly warring on the banks of the Narmada. I mean, even the war between the Aryans and the pre-Aryans is still unresolved here." "After four thousand years?" "My dear chap. What about the temple of Supaneshwara on the north bank of the Narmada?" I reluctantly admitted that I had never heard of it. "But you must have heard of the Immortal who sleeps in the forests near the temple." "What is an Immortal?" I asked, faintly irritated by Dr. Mitra's heavy-handed display of mystery. "An Aryan warrior."
>
> "Are you telling me that a four-thousand-year old Aryan warrior is asleep on the north bank of the Narmada?"
>
> "Absolutely, my dear fellow." Dr. Mitra gave me a gleeful smile. "I can even tell you his name. Avatihuma."
>
> I've never heard such nonsense in all my life." "Ask any local tribal. Your guard is from Vano. He'll corroborate my story." (Mehta 158)

In Chapter Sixteen, Titled 'The Song of The Narmada', references to the rich classical tradition of Indian literature is alluded to very inostensibly under the garb of homely chit-chat among a group of acquaintances in the guest house:

> 'Thousands of years ago the sage Vyasa dictated the *Mahabharata* on this riverbank. Then in our own century this region provided the setting for Kipling's *Jungle Book.* In between countless other men have left their mark on the river."

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An assistant grimaced at her fellow scholars.

"For instance, Kalidasa. His poem *The Cloud Messenger* and his great play *Shakuntala* both describe the hills behind this rest house."

I could see the conversation was a familiar game to the professor's assistants as the other girl said, "Then twelve hundred years ago Shankaracharya composed a poem to the river."

"What about all the poems Rupmati and Baz Bahadur wrote when the Narmada appeared to them as a spring from under a tamarind tree not so far from here?" asked one of the men.' (Mehta 264-5)

One remembers how Gita Mehta described the purpose of her story telling to Wendy Smith, "... I wanted to make modern India accessible to Westerners and to a whole generation of Indians who have no idea what happened 25 years before they were born."

The only thing that intrigues one is the portrayal of women in the novel. The book leaves one with an uncomfortable feeling that women are rather underplayed in this novel. Though the narration of the stories is divided equally into male and female narrators, the characterization of the women bothers one a tad.

Some of the women one comes across in the book are the wife of Master Mohan, who proves to be instrumental in the death of the talented blind young singer because her avarice got the better of her. Readers get a good idea of this shrew-like wife of Master Mohan's whose words vie with her actions in cruel rudeness.

"Wives! Don't talk to me of wives. I never take mine anywhere. Nothing destroys a man's pleasure like a wife."

Master Mohan knew the paanwallah was being kind. His wife's contempt for him was no secret on their street. The small houses were built on top of each other, and his wife never bothered to lower her voice. Everyone knew she had come from a wealthier family than his and could barely survive on the money he brought back from his music lessons.

"What sins did I commit in my last life that I should be yoked to this apology for a man? See how you are still called Master Mohan as if you were only ten years old. Gupta-sahib you should be called. But who respects you enough to make even that small effort!"

Her taunts reopened a wound that might have healed if only Master Mohan's wife had left him alone.' (Mehta 54)

One wonders why the pitiful desperation of the woman who has had to choke her own dreams because a man who promised all sorts of support to her in marriage had failed to provide for her. He remains the martyr whose peace was sacrificed to the rough querulousness of his vixen-like wife. The portrayal surprises one a bit, more so as it comes out of the conceptualization of a woman.

The end of Master Mohan's story shows how the greed of the wife caused a young singer to lose his life to a thug-almost making a veritable villain out of her.

Again, Ashok, the young man who renounced the world for the life of an ascetic, is seen to have a wife who cries and whimpers and serves only as a hindrance to the goals of Ashok.

In the musician's story, it is reiterated that marriageability is the biggest credential to a girl. If the girl happens to be ugly, like the young lady there, whose dark skin and disproportionate nose and chin caused her to suffer many a harsh word from her mother and many a silent tear secretly, she is to seek solace in something else, like music in this case. What irks a feminist mind is the insinuation that beauty will be measured in the hackneyed parameters dictated by a phallocentric society. What is more gruesome is that the girl, almost groveling to get married, finds herself jilted and tries to hide herself behind the façade of music. One balks at the fact that nowhere is it even hinted that skin-deep beauty and the so-called parameters of normativity do not matter in the least. Nowhere is the girl told that her big chin and dark skin do not matter. The novel seems to go along with the idea that despondency is legitimate in her life, but music could be an art that could provide compassionate recompense. The tale of her trauma is almost heart-breaking:

'If my mother had been more sympathetic I would have asked her then to end my music lessons. Unfortunately, my mother seldom spoke to me. My ugliness upset her. When other children stared at me, sniggering at my ugliness, my mother's eyes filled with tears but she never comforted me or told me they were wrong.

Shamed by mother's tears, I hid in the bathroom, examining myself in the mirror to see if my face was losing any of its coarseness. Each time I looked I saw only two features in the mushy flesh, this nose growing bigger as if trying to join this chin that drives forward like a fighter's, tempting an opponent's attack.' (Mehta 220)

And as if the mother's quiet rejection was not enough, the father too says words that carve a niche in her mind:

"I will continue to teach you. But on one condition. They say the greatest gift a man can give is the gift of a daughter in marriage. If you insist on studying under me, you must be prepared to be a bride."

It seemed to me that I could not escape the specter of marriage. Knowing no man would want me as a wife, I begged him to continue my musical education. (Mehta 218)

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Music thus seems to have come as a means of pleasure to the woman largely because no man would ever agree to marry her because of the way she looked.

Apart from this, in 'The Tale Of The Courtesan', the portrayal of first the elderly woman who comes forth as narrator of her tale as as courtesan in the courts of Shahbag, and then her daughter, who, though she is beautiful, rouses an inexplicable sense of disdain and vexation in the mind of the retired bureaucrat who was at that point the listener to the story of the courtesan and her daughter.

All this somehow makes the readers feel the sense of a lack-the want of more of the Feminine Principle. Gita Mehta being a feisty woman herself, somehow makes the readers expect more of strength in the woman characters than seen here. The novel rather lets the woman characters slip into the clichéd tropes of the nagging woman, or the evil shrew or the voluptuous seductive siren.

However, Nature is projected as the chief Feminine Principle in the novel.

Francine Prose in her review of *The River Sutra* once observed that there is an intriguing 'layering of the stories that leave the reader with the sense that things are richer and more meaningful than they seem, that life is both clear and mysterious, that the beauty and the horror of this world is both irreducible and inexplicable." (Prose 6)

True enough, in an age when many Indian authors gullibly step into the snares of a colonialism of the mind even while writing about Indian-ness, Mehta is one feisty author who upholds the essence of Indian heritage, tradition and culture with resolute élan. She comes across as a fiercely postcolonial writer who stands up for the Indian way of life to vindicate the same so as to set the orientalist view of India as the subaltern on its head.

The study of the concept of the subaltern deals first with preliminary definitions of this concept as it was initially used by the Italian Marxist political activist, Antonio Gramsci, in his article 'Notes on Italian History', which later on expanded into his widely known *Prison Notebooks,* written between 1929 and 1935. Gramsci talks of how the Subaltern connotes the underclass subjected to dominant impact of the hegemonic power structure of the elite.

History and literature always reflect that hegemonic power structure, thereby consolidating its perpetuation. Gita Mehta, through her bold and proud portrayal of Indian life as it is, reads history 'from below', so to speak. Hers is a contrapuntal view that subverts the orientalist stereotyping of India as the land of the poor, the mystic, the cultureless.

There are two kinds of representation: a) *Darstellen* or representation as depiction from outside and b) *Vertreten* or the rhetoric-as-persuation from inside. Gita Mehta takes her techniques of *Vertreten* to the acme.

In an interview for Hindustan Times on January 27, 2019, Padma Rao Sundarji asked Mehta:

> "The press note issued by the committee calls you a 'foreigner'. Notwithstanding your lineage and the fact that India is always present in your writing, are you one?"

Mehta proudly answered: "I am an Indian citizen and carry no other passport or nationality."

Gita Mehta portrays the Indian way of life without drawing back in any trace of hesitation with any aspect of life. Pradyumna S. Chauhan from Arcadia University in Pennsylvania once said:

> 'Whether midnight's children or grandchildren, most of them seem to have had their minds bent in a similar fashion. They interrogate the colonizer's version of history, indeed; but, more unmistakably, they render scathing accounts of their native scenes, finding them *sans beauty, sans strength, and sans any meaning or* purpose.'

Not so with Mehta. India in Gita Mehta's *The River Sutra* is presented in its multifaceted diversity.

The Spiritual India, the Mythological India, the Musical India, the Religious India, where Nature, especially, the Narmada takes on as the chief religion. All other religions-Hinduism, Jainism, Islam-all fade into insignificance, and therefore merge and fuse into each other to the towering being of the Narmada in the book. And as Pradyumna Chauhan says, 'There is nothing that her eyes do not light upon, and certainly nothing that they do not illuminate. To encounter her writing is virtually to make a fresh discovery of India.'

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