Chapter-8

Recapitalizing

Modern Indian English novels and novelists are of particular interest on account of their experimentation in technique and language. These novelists seem to be fully aware of the fact that issues pertaining to the Indian subcontinent cannot be easily and simplistically rendered, and so all of them have made use of a complex narrative technique. Most of the recent novels are experimental interrogative, confessional and polemical. They represent a radical departure from what was written previously by their predecessors. Unlike the early Indian novels, which were mostly realistic in nature, these novels vie with each other to break the old fictional form. They are full of cryptic clues and arcane utterances and are always on the verge of coming out with some important explanations or conclusions, however ambiguous they may tend to be.

Gita Mehta has been acclaimed as an eminent scholar. Her five major works – *Karma Cola* (1979), *Raj* (1989), *A River Sutra* (1993) *Snakes and Ladders* (1977) and *Eternal Ganesha* (2006)– are powerful critiques on modern life exposing the shallowness of spiritual, political and secular lives. The two earlier books, *Raj* and *Karma Cola*, are poignant studies in hypocrisy and sham of the princely class in colonial India and pretentious gurus who ostentatiously profess and promise enlightenments to the never ending flow of westerners in postcolonial India, coming in search of the ‘missing magic’ in their lives. A close reading of Mehta’s war reveals her interest in delineating instructors, teachers, monks, gurus, political and social leaders. From her preoccupation with these teachers, religions and secular, it is apparent that they have a significant role to play in the life of individuals. They are architects of
people’s lives educating them in all walks of life.

Raj begins during the last years of the nineteenth century the novel’s protagonist, Jaya Singh, is the daughter of the Maharaja and Maharani of Balmer, one of the kingdoms of Royal India. Mehta paints Jaya’s childhood, the traditions and rituals, political pressures and duties that inform her life, with evocative detail. She deals even handedly with the political and social issues, conveying the immense pain and demoralizing powerlessness with which the Indian people had to deal while still managing to portray the British with some objectivity. The novel achieves historical sweep, following Jaya from childhood through adolescence to her betrothal and through her marriage to a prince of Royal India who has no interest in Indian women, but who as a westernized playboy, Prefers European women, airplanes, and polo to the duties of a protector of the people. Mehta uses Jaya as a lens through which to view these turbulent years of India’s struggle for independence. She does an admirable job of portraying Jaya’s world- a woman with resources and education raised half in and half out of the traditions of purdah and Hindu ritual that reined unchanging for generations before her. The novel is rich in detail and complexity. But much of the action, like Gandhi’s sact march or the violent struggles between Hindu and Muslims, is experienced from a distance, through those to whom Jaya is connected rather than through Jaya herself. The novel has been criticized for a lack of character development and depth rather than drawing the reader deeply into the unfolding of history, the evenness and limited scope of Mehta’s handling present a somewhat flat aspect, as of great events viewed through the wrong and of a telescope. The novel is most valuable as an account of a lost way of life as it was vanishing within the complex political realities that gave birth, ultimately, to the modern nations of India and Pakistan.
In an interview Mehta enunciates that the content dictated the book’s form, she explains.

“India is a place where worlds and times are colliding with huge velocity: We’re putting satellites into space, and we have bullock carts; there’s that constant tension and contradiction of immense sophistication and an almost pre-medieval way of life. I thought the only way I could describe that collision was anecdotally by taking snapshots, as it were.”

Mehta’s second novel, A River Sutra, is a more intimate and deeply focused work. The narrative centers on India’s holiest river, the Narmada in the form of a series of tales, or modified sutras of Indian literature. The tales of various pilgrims to the river – top the deep veins of Indian mythology and artistic traditions while also forming a prose meditation on the country’s secular humanist tradition. The character of an unnamed civil servant, who has retired from the world to run a government rest house on the river Narmada, is the thread loosely weaving the stories together – along with the Narmada itself. Mehta’s subject matter here is as rich as the tradition she taps. Classical Sanskrit drama, Hindu Mythology and Sufi poetry all find reflection and reiteration in the novel. One recurring motif playing through the book is that of the range of Indian classical music. Another is that of Kama, god of love, and the passions and mysteries of the human heart. For all its substance of ancient Indian tradition and thought, A River Sutra is a modern work that acknowledges the difficulties facing modern India at the same time as it takes the reader on a skillfully realized Journey into a resonant culture.
On account of its content and also narrative style, *A River Sutra* may appear to be a didactic work and may earn some fastidious critic’s denunciation. Stella Sandhal, for example, remarks:

*A River Sutra* is a very didactic book. By virtue of her genes Mehta seems to consider herself fan expect with a mission to educate her western readers about Indian classical music, poetry and religion. Unfortunately, the varied snippets of information are no better than a first-year introductory course on Indian culture taught by an enthusiastic westerner enamored of the fictitious ‘mystical’ India. …But she betrays her ignorance too often to maintain even a superficial aura of expertise.

There is certain openness about the deeper meaning of *A River Sutra*. One can decipher strands of meaning running simultaneously in it. Most of the tales, as said earlier, are characterized by ambiguity. Their contexts may be interpreted differently by different people depending upon their training and sensibility. Literature, unlike reportage, is valued for the multiplicity of meaning and associations and *A River Sutra* is no exception.

Few writers have committed themselves so wholeheartedly to the vagaries of writing and few have commanded such worldwide attention. Perhaps the most incisive insight into Gita Mehta’s creations echoes the same dedication and devotion. Mehta’s fictional and non-fictional writings trace a self-conscious symptomatic response to the need to discover an appropriate literary form to frame a graphical and narrative sense of Indianness. Mehta’s entry into the elite class of writers of her time represents a significant worldview, the order of civilization, their
break up, culture, the subtle operations of power and freedom, a postcolonial agenda, the fate
of revolutions and above all the realities of the actual world. In attempting all these over a long
and distinguished career, to revive her location as being among New York, London and India,
Mehta is perhaps uniquely qualified to interpret her homeland for the diverse audience she
aspires to. In an interview with Wendy Smith, she herself declares:

There’s a tremendous richness to living on three continents. The magic of America
is the can-doism; it gives me the belief that anything is possible. Each time I finish a
book and think I’ll never write another, America makes me think, ‘Yeah, I’ll have
another shot.’ London’s great virtue is that, as the capital of an empire, its libraries
have staggering material on India. And because of the British reticence, it’s easy to
be alone and write there. My heart is in India- it’s home- so when I am there I don’t
write, I just let it all seep in through my pores.

Mehta’s novels move through time back and forth reads Indian history and picks up the threads
that could fit into her narrative. As a result many people might complain about the authenticity
of the narrative. Her novels have an amalgam of traditional and modern; the metropolis and the
country; the royalty and the commoners; the festivals and flirtations; the aromas and the
stenches. In this context Usha Bande makes an apt observation while reviewing, Raj:

The novelist has skillfully used her authentic historical material to carve out
convincing and real characters in their strength and weaknesses, whims and fancies,
and pride and prejudices. Without being involved in their world Gita Mehta lets them expose themselves by their roles rather than by letting her rhetoric tilts in favour of one or the other.

How colonialism intrudes even in independent India becomes obvious when we turn to *Snakes and Ladders*. Lost in the present global politics and the consumer-oriented market economy we are passing through a confusing phase as the colonial, the postcolonial and the decolonized forces on the one hand and the traditional approach on the other, work on us with bewildering intensity. Since the past cannot be separated from the present, so India has to carry a double burden of tradition and modernity. On the eve of its fiftieth anniversary, Independent India marches forward with poverty and affluence, caste factors and liberal policies, feudal attitudes and modern rationality – full of paradoxes as even yet India all the same.

_Eternal Ganesha_ recounts the story from birth to rebirth the most popular and beloved Hindu deity Ganesha. In India his image appears everywhere – on village walls, in cyber cafes, on hand bags and commercial packing, on the sides of trucks and rickshaws, in textiles and neon, and in the most sacred precincts of ancient temples. Ganesha has been seen in various delightful forms- he is elephant headed, he has a large-bellied body of a man and multiple arms, he is girdled by a serpent and he rides a mouse, and enchants the faithful and transcends cultural boundaries. Another evidence of his being popular deity is many names given to him- the Pitcher of Prosperity, the Remover of Obstacles, the Grantor of Boons, the Guarantor of Success, and the Lord of Beginnings. He is the symbol of tolerance in a peevish world. In this probing and entertaining text Mehta has explored the rich religious and cultural meanings of
this beloved figure.

In dealing with Mehta’s works one explore a varied territory of different literary genre- a non-fiction-fiction (often term faction), a historical novel, a novel in the Indian aesthetics of storytelling and a collection of prose writings. The analysis of their style, techniques and structure yields the author’s vision of certainty and faith in her own culture and traditions. But she not unaware of the latent tensions, the overt materialism and the fast disintegration of the values. She looks at these problems from different stand points: in *Karma Cola*, the internal rifts between the old freaks and the new-comers is not much different from the caste divisions we have; their superior-inferior syndrome causes tension and violence; in *A River Sutra*, the author looks at the violence of suicide which she condones if suicide is committed in Narmada, but she inveighs against the society for creating the likes of Rahul Singh and condemns the violence perpetuated by the administration. In *Raj*, the colonial violence to the native rulers and the freedom fighters draws her attention. *Snakes and Ladders* provides her a better scope to look at degeneration of values in modern India which disillusions her. In *Eternal Ganesha* varied myths and religious beliefs which makes Lord Ganesha eternal has been explored.