Chapter-2

Review of Related Literature

When it has become a general trend to look for feminist leanings in any work written by women, and for the sense of loss and rootlessness in any work coming from the diaspora, it is delectably a different experience to read Gita Mehta who looks at life from refreshingly new perspectives. Not that she is unaware of women’s problems or that she is impervious to the diasporic displacement, only she finds many more interesting themes to write about. Her first book *Karma Cola* (1979), attracted critical attention for the satirical treatment given to the hippie influx in India and its repercussions on both Western and Indian societies, while her two succeeding novels *Raj* (1993), and *A River Sutra* (1993) were specially acclaimed for the novelty of approach with which familiar themes are tackled. The issues raised are recognizable: issues of identity, exile and diaspora, and of history and postcolonial politics, but she manages to give them a pleasant spin with the skilful handling of the narrative technique, keeping these concerns crucial to the text, yet making them interactive participatory exercises.

In 1997 Mehta brought out a collection of her essays meaningfully titled *Snakes and Ladders: A Glimpse of Modern India*. She observes India in all its colors; and with keen insight and by the flow of her language she is able to make the familiar appear unusual – sometimes glorious, at others mysterious, the book also provides a glimpse of her early years.

Gita Mehta’s works are varied, dealing with subjects such as experience of ennui, nostalgia, historical and political changes in India and the perennial theme of East-West encounter. India is at the center of each work and the author takes care not to allow any of the themes to be
overriding as to shift the focus from India. Usually it is alleged that the migrant writers create ‘imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind’ and that their representation of India and Indianness is hybrid, meant for the western readers and Gita Mehta is no exception. Her literary and cultural allusions to India’s geography, mysticism, religions, history and the existing political situations are substantial and candid but they are at times too romanticized and eroticized to be acceptable to the indigenous readers. Between ‘real’ India, and India of the ‘mind’ there is but a thin line. Her works have a living immediacy that creates an authentic, recognizable milieu but when she depicts ‘high culture’ and traditions of the land as in A River Sutra, she slides into pseudo-philosophy, in trying to keep its contemporary relevance intact.

*Karma Cola* was the starting point of Gita Mehta’s literary career. It was by chance that she came upon the idea which she later developed as a theme for her book. The incident behind the decision to write something on ‘Karma’ is interesting. It was ‘sparked by Mehta’s annoyance at being seen as an automatic India expert’ (Smith, 1997: 53). At a publishers’ party an informal discussion was going on about the Karma Philosophy when Gita Mehta entered the room. Seeing her in a sari, someone just grabbed her arm and said ‘here’s the girl who’s going to tell us what karma is all about.’ Taking her for granted as an ‘India expert’ just because she was dressed in a sari irritated her and she retorted, ‘karma isn’t what it is cracked up to be.’ Hearing this piece of conversation, Marc Jaffe of Bantam Books suggested that she should write a book on the theme. The topic was still hot in the 1970s after it had picked up in the 1960 with the Hippies making a beeline for India in search of Nirvana. Writing a book on the concept would be, Gita thought, ‘taking the Mickey out of cultish spirituality at a time when people were really scared about it’ (Smith, 1997:54). She wrote *Karma Cola* within three weeks and when
the book came out it got a warm response. Its sub-title, *Marketing the Mystic East* is self-explanatory. The work is satire on both the Indian fake mystics and the western naïve seekers.

The theme of *Karma Cola* is the inflow of thousands of questing westerners ‘clashing cymbals and ringing bells’² in search of the mystic India, ready to gulp down her philosophy, appropriate her ‘shakti’ and delve into her esoteric realms. Places like Haridwar, Banaras, Manali and beaches of Goa were flooded with these so-called seekers, who seemed gullible enough to imagine that Karma is an all-inclusive panacea for the ills of the world. When a wave like this spreads in a land, it also has its ramifications on the local population. The influx gave rise to dubious ashrams selling hallucinatory drugs and bartering their superficial spirituality for material gains. Most of the western ‘instant spiritualists’ were duped by the opportunists, thus creating an atmosphere of distrust and conflict, tarnishing the image of the country. Not that the west lacks genuine scholars and intellectuals seeking to understand Indian philosophy; nor does India lack really profound scholars and real philosophers who could expound the tenets of Indian thought to the satisfaction of rational seekers. But the trendy seekers who came with the waves of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Hippie movement were here for instant kicks and more often than not ended in clinics.

It is this wave that catches Gita Mehta’s attention after Marc Jaffe suggested that she should write a book on the theme. In a series of inter-connected essays she presents her own observations with ironic wit and sarcasm and waves them with the impressions and experiences of many others. *Karma Cola* is a work of nonfiction but Mehta’s terse and brisk prose and her ability to knit various episodes into a whole give the book the flow of a novel. If the author
satirizes the western ‘cultish’ onslaught on Indian culture, she also takes to task the half-baked philosophers and ‘gurus’ who do more harm to the culture than the spurious seekers.

Gita Mehta’s style and narrative technique is commensurate with the thematic structure of her works. *Karma Cola* has the flippancy of the nomadic life of the seekers. The language has the quality of the ‘clash of cymbals and the ringing bells’ about it. The mood of the questers – nauseated and frustrated – reflects in their phraseology and disregard for propriety. The speed of the jet travel is also evident in the use of terse language, quick sentences and interesting coinages like ‘monomania of the west’ and ‘multimania of the east’. Nothing seems to have escaped the author’s keen observation.

Her *Raj* took a long time of nine years because it involved research, travel, interviews, and delving into old historical records and also because of difference of opinion with the publishers. Apart from visiting libraries, browsing through dusty documents and watching the footage of Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee celebrations, she interviewed the Rajmatajs of Jaipur and Tehri Garwal to understand what it meant to be from the family of rulers, and how it felt to throw off the veil and jump into the political fray. All this went into the depiction of Jaya.

*Raj* is a historical novel dealing with the turbulent period in Indian history from 1897 to 1947. Starting with 1897, the novel concludes with the end of an epoch when India attained freedom and the princely states were merged with the Indian Union – some willingly, others unwillingly. The novel maps and dramatizes within its narrative framework the important events with which the century set in – the famine of 1898, the ever increasing British
interference in the affairs of the native rulers, emergence of Gandhi and other national leaders, their clarion call to the nation, the two wars, awakening of the democratic spirit among the masses and finally Independence. Apart from history, the novel presents the story of a woman-Jaya, the princess of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur – her awareness, her fight and her victory.

In many ways *Raj*, can be termed ‘just one more novel on the much-explored theme’ of the princes and colonial India. It has all the ingredients and stock themes – court intrigues, life in the harems, the tiger hunts, the neglected Rains and the glamorous mistresses. There are also elaborate descriptions of the exotic life styles of the Indian princes: eccentric, decadent and extravagant. Despite these, *Raj* is the saga of triumph – the triumph of ‘the people’, of democratic principles and of a woman who accepts the political change gracefully.

The novel is divided in four books: ‘Balmer,’ ‘Sirpur,’ ‘Maharani,’ and ‘Regent’. It has a “Prologue” and an “afterword.” The prologue sets the pace of the story as it opens with little Jaya going hunting with her father Maharajah Jai Singh of Balmer, which in turn shows the training Jaya is going to receive, the affection and regard the public has for their Maharajah and finally the ‘fear’ which had become a part of the colonized psyche. Maharajah Jai Singh’s insightful remarks, ‘Rulers are men and men are always frightened. A man cannot govern unless he confronts his own fears’ (*Raj*, 1993: 5), resonate the frightened psyche of the Rajas and Maharajahs, worried for their survival. ‘Afterword’ documents the abolition of the privy-purses, agreed upon at the time of merger. One cannot miss the undercurrent of indictment of ‘breach of faith’. What the British could not or did not do, Independence did to the rulers – liquidated their identity.
The novelist has skillfully used her 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, Mehta lets them expose themselves by the roles assigned to them rather than letting the rhetoric tilt in favor of one or the other. It is for the reader to judge whether the British were oppressive or the Nationalists were a ‘boring lot’; whether the rules were effeminate, inefficient; or the manner in which the British succeeded in their game of giving the rulers a long rope and then strangulating them with the same rope, accusing them of excesses and moral laxity and then using it against them as an excuse to annex their kingdoms.

Jaya, though docile and passive in the beginning emerges as a spirited character, feminine yet brave. Charming and bold, she impresses her husband Pratap by her handling of Esme Moore affair, her ability to outdo the men in the masculine game of polo, and in fact by creating favorable ripples in London. Maharajah Pratap finally recognizes her abilities and leans on her. Jaya keeps her dignity and though a neglected, or rather a rejected wife, she does not appear pathetic. There are clear indications that Jaya has a soft corner for that ‘blue-eyed Angrez boy’ – James Osborne, but both Jaya and Osborne keep a dignified distance. However, one can hardly condone Jaya’s weakness in responding to Arun Roy’s amorous advances. Is it, one would like to ask, for the western reader?

*Raj* underscores the importance of doing one’s ‘dharma’. The maharajah and the Maharani of Balmer are steeped in this lore and they are intent on performing their duties towards their people. The Raj Guru tells a confused Jaya, ‘your dharma is protection, Bai-sa. You cannot
escape that destiny.’ Jaya feels light and happy when she does her duty toward her people and her country – India – by accepting to be a part of the whole. In the end there is, indeed, the beginning – the beginning of a new era when she files her nomination for the election and the dream of a new and united India becomes a reality.

*Raj* is a Hindi word for rule. Accepted in English now, it denotes the period of the British rule in India. In the novel it stands also for the rule/raj of the native rulers. Conversely, it could be construed as an abbreviation of Rajniti, which had become defunct in Imperial India. With the Imperial rule exerting pressure on the Rajas and the native rulers dissipating their energies and wealth in self-indulgence there was no ‘Dharma’ and no ‘Rajniti’. Jaya is caught between the skewed British rule and the weak Indian rulers. She uses Rajniti as a survival strategy but when the two Raj – British and native – end, it is the third one that deprives the erstwhile rulers of their rights and nullify their sacrifices.

The idea for *A River Sutra* came to her when she was sitting on the bank of a river and thinking of the flow of time like the flow of the river. In this novel she thought of bringing together ‘mythological time, historical time, contemporary time, and narrative time – all into say one paragraph’ (Wallia, 1997:3). But when she actually came to writing, Mehta was skeptical about the subject and wondered if it would be palatable to the western readers. She was secretive about it wrote it privately. But she was surprised to find that this novel in which she blended Indian mythology with contemporary realities was warmly received by the readers.

*A River Sutra* creates many Indias but it is the perennial India that holds the interest of the writer and the reader. The theme of integration of various religions and philosophies with the
geography of the river, which symbolizes the culture of oneness, becomes prominent with each story. It explores the problem of identity through the narrator; he is significant to the story though not its hero, because it is Narmada who is the main motivator and the protagonist. The bureaucrat-narrator’s desire is simple: he has fulfilled his worldly obligations and wishes to lead a life of ‘real’ retirement, but as the narrative advances he logically realizes that retirement is not as unproblematic as he construed it to be. All human experience is subject to speculation and question and there is no end to these. Each episode leads him to an awareness of man’s limitations and the inscrutable nature of reality that is beyond human comprehension. The novel thus becomes a record of the bureaucrat’s awareness that there can be no renunciation without proper involvement. The perennial flow of the river is like the perennial flow of time. The river becomes a symbol of the eternal time and her minstrel becomes her representative. Hers is a song of love, suggestive of the multi-pronged and multifaceted concept of love.

Between Shiva (the Cosmic Ascetic) and his Daughter (River Narmada) on one side, and the narrator and his quest on the other, there is the vast tapestry of life – life in its different settings, life with its many meanings. And this trajectory is representative of existence.

The epigraph to the novel is from Chandidas. It reads: ‘Listen, O brother/Man is the greatest truth/Nothing beyond.’ The full implication of the novel becomes clear when we go back to the epigraph. It is love in its many forms that leads to the love of man. This is conveyed through the six stories – the story of the Jain monk is not so much of his renunciation as of his yearning to understand love, ‘I have loved just one thing in life,’ says the monk and lets the bureaucrat narrator brood over the myriad possibilities. The story of Master Mohan and his blind pupil is again of love – love between a teacher and his pupil in the ancient guru-shishya tradition. Nitin
Bose’s love is lust and it is damaging until he sublimes it. Sublimating lust to creativity and study, he gets back his mental peace. But no proposition is as simple as it appears to be on its face value, says Gita Mehta. The case in point is the story of the musician’s daughter. Sublimation is thrust upon the musician’s daughter before she is internally ready to accept it and she feels miserable. Passionate love is depicted in the story of Rahul Singh and the courtesan’s daughter. However, love is not a solution for them because their relationship does not have the sanction of the society and the law. Professor Shankar’s story of renouncing the world and again getting involved in it and Uma’s story—a reversal of her mentor’s—of renouncing the world before it engulfs her, are probably self-explanatory. Finally what matters is love for humanity achieved through comprehending love in its broader sense in terms of human love, or may be through love of nature.

Professor Shankar loves Narmada, not because it is holy but because it is immortal. Its immortality is contained in its power to sustain human record— to be the same when Ved Vyas wrote his *Mahabharata* on its banks or Shankaracharya wrote his *Sutra*, or much later Kipling set his *Jungle Book* in its precincts. Professor Shankar and his team excavating the banks for archaeological study or the ascetics and pilgrims worshiping her, it is all the same to the River. She flows on, the primordial being, a ‘sanctuary’ to man.

*A River Sutra* is a combination of two words—River and Sutra. Sutra in Sanskrit is a form of verse and Shankaracharya’s *Narmada Sutra* is a profound tribute to the river, the daughter of Shiva. Human beings must inculcate all those characteristics that Narmada has. She is bliss itself, she is the remover of sins, she can ward off the effects of snake poison and she is the
immortal river because on its banks life converges. The bureaucrat narrator is native enough to think that escaping into the retreat of the Narmada valley will automatically bring in the fruits of a retired life of renunciation. But just as the river flows miles and miles from its source to its end where it joins the sea, human beings too have to go through life till the final merger. Another interpretation can be that Sutra also means thread. Here the river is so prominent that in fact it is the real sutradhar of the narrative. One more point may be of interest – the western readers are well aware of the Kama Sutra and possibly by using the word ‘Sutra’ Gita Mehta wanted an Indian tag to attract attention to her work. This idea struck me when I read C.J.S. Wallia’s interview in which he begins his interview in conversational tone thus: ‘Let me begin with Kama Sutra, Sorry. I was editing an article on Mira Nair’s new film, Kama Sutra, just before I came here. I meant to say River Sutra – your novel’ (Wallia, 1997: 2).

Though Gita Mehta’s heart is in India, as she often confines, she is not sentimental about it, nor is she unmindful of the present day realities existing in modern India. With her incisive wit and frank assertion she paints India as it is fifty years after independence in Snakes and Ladders with corruption, nepotism, chaos and self-serving politicians, all forming a part of her vignettes. There seems no hope for the country and yet like the game of ‘Snakes and Ladders,’ things are set right again to slide down once more, vacillating between hope and despair, progress and regress; and within less than two hundred and fifty pages she paints her India with the strokes of an artist.

Snakes and Ladders, the title though in English, has an indigenous allusion. Gita Mehta deliberately chose this title to denote the paradoxes of Indian life. To quote her, ‘The
traditional Indian game of Snakes and Ladders is played by rolling dice to determine how many squares a player can move his maker up a board starting at square one and finishing at square one hundred. Because of its unpredictability it was one of our favorite games when we were children’ (VII). What makes the game interesting is that it has an element of chance, it is suggestive of danger and it means going up and then sliding down to the jeers of the opponents. We, in our fifty years of nationalhood have seen ‘a roller coaster ride, the highs so sudden we have become light-headed with exhilaration, the lows too deep to even contemplate solution, as if the game of Snakes and Ladders was invented to illustrate our attempts to move an ancient land towards modern enlightenment without jettisoning from our past that which is valuable or unique’

The epigraph to the novel is from Goethe who had an urge to make a journey to India to see the land in his own way. That the land is unique in itself is again vouchsafed by Mark Twain’s words about India to which the book is dedicated, ‘To “the sole country under the sun that is endowed with imperishable interest for alien prince and alien peasant, for lettered and ignorant, wise and fool, rich and poor, bond and free, the one land all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for shows of all the rest of the globe combined”. Mark Twain 1897.’

The theme of Snakes and Ladders is again India – not the mystic India of A River Sutra or the esoteric India of the Nirvana seekers of Karma Cola – but India fifty years after her independence. As different aspects of India reveal themselves to her, the author offers us the snapshots of the nation and the emerging national consciousness. Each short essay becomes a reflection and a refraction of society. This is a postcolonial society which unfortunately perpetuates the colonial and pre-colonial values. The author shows dexterously how we still
live in contradictions – a rag-picker, unmindful of his utter poverty takes pride in telling the author that he is a Bhat, the community of bards who once held mystic power over kings; he and the likes of are wondrously unaware of the ‘banish poverty’ slogans of the government; there are the educated people who buy a new gadget and worship it before it is installed; and then there is a senior bureaucrat who sitting in his office, expresses his exasperation with the Prime Minister of the country, and has the nerve to affirm the democratic principle, “she doesn’t bloody employ me!” he snarled. “The people of India employ me” (13). Such paradoxes, the author believes, make India livable and lovable.

The book is divided in four parts and has in all thirty-five chapters – each showing India’s march forward towards progress juxtaposed with the traditional attitudes that still persist and make the country a big paradox. We worship trees but lured by the ‘Bumper profits’ we slaughter them mercilessly; we have the vision to appreciate great filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, but we have the impudence to leave them to die pauper; grand ideas like those of Satyajit Ray’s get no financer because such themes do not sell; Indian elections are the greatest show on the earth but the voters are ‘faceless, nameless.’ The essays cover a long period from the freedom movement to Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984 and thence to 1997 when we celebrated fifty years as a sovereign democracy. There are lively, sometimes searing, sometimes acerbic comments on the leaders. In some of her interviews and conversations after the book was published, Mehta admits that she slimmed down the volume considerably to make it precise and to give one woman’s vision of her country. The essays are insightful and often witty; she has the unique knack to involve the reader with her anecdotal style that she wrote with the western reader in mind. She provides a brief year-wise chronology of events at
the end of the book obviously for them and also to make India accessible to the new generation Indians who are not aware of the events of the recent past.

In *Snakes and Ladders* the style and the diction has the brisk movement of the player throwing the dice, climbing up the ladder or sliding down the snake. Let us consider a few sentences: if ‘the Indian home has an aesthetic it is chaos, enabling it to accommodate regional influences’ (173) and ‘perhaps it is because the Indian looks on his home more as a place to live than a work of art. The art, if there is one in India, is supposed to lie in the living’ (175). Again in the chapter “Food for Thought’ she remarks, “The Green Revolution had changed India for ever… Yet millions of Indian were still hungry, millions of dispossessed villagers were still migrating to the cities’ (61). Each chapter stars with an idea that becomes episode as a number of other ideas or incidents are narrated to develop the basic theme but by the end there is a sudden reversal which is almost like sting-in-the-tale ending.

The titles of the four books are in a way hybrid and contain, in a capsule form, so to say, the themes we have been discussing all along. *Karma Cola* is an amalgam of Karma, an Indian concept and cola a western drink. Cola is a sweet fizzy drink that does not contain alcohol but is all the same addictive. Also, the usage quoted in Cambridge International Dictionary, ‘All colas taste pretty much the same to me’ (Cambridge, 256), is a pointer towards its blandness. *Karma Cola* indicates not only the urge of the phony seekers to understand Karma but also their bland and jaded approach. Karma is a deep philosophy and can be interpreted with myriads of tenets. The very idea that it could be comprehended with hallucinatory drugs is in itself not only ridiculous but also preposterous. From another angle, we could also link the title
to the contemporary consumer-oriented philosophy. The questers probably think that Karma could be gulped down like Cola. In *Eternal Ganesha* Mehta tries to explain the various forms of worship offered by Hindu people in India.

Thus Gita Mehta attempts to come back to cultural folds, to understand the intricacies of her shared past with her community and to transmit part of her vision to the people in her ‘second home’. Dorinne Kondo affirms ‘Home stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders: it stands for comm. unity’ (Kondo, 1996: 97). That Gita Mehta should feel the need to explicate and explain herself to the west is in itself an acknowledgement of cultural difference felt by a diasporic consciousness. This cultural difference that has become the site of production is regulated by the desire to move in and out of the oppositional cultures, to mythologize the ancient past and to recover and affirm an authentic culture of a lost home; this position is intrinsic to the diasporic condition and also to the postcolonial situation. An argument can be made that Gita Mehta’s works foreground the diasporic consciousness with memory and experience affording grounds for constructing agency and registering resistance to the logic of ‘othering’ by positionality. Re-visioning and mapping this ‘identity politics’ into a national-cultural space imply a sense of belonging and connectedness. This connectedness is strengthened because of Gita Mehta’s yearly visits to India when she relaxes, interacts with friends and relatives and imbibes the changed/changing ethos. Gita Mehta’s vision of India is not remote as is Jhumpa Lahiri’s who admits that hers is a ‘tunnel vision’. Not so with Gita Mehta. This provides us the starting point to understand Mehta’s work vis-à-vis the ambivalence of a diasporic consciousness in a postcolonial situation and the patterns of affliction in diaspora. Thus by blending the subjective experience with
observation and imagination, Gita Mehta creates her narratives out of diasporic and heterogeneous material.
References


