Chapter -3

Soul-Questers and Spiritual Bedlam in Karma Cola

“East is East. . . West is West . . . the twain shall never meet,” said Kipling in one of his prophetic seeming verses. E. M. Foster in his A Passage to India brought about a very close confrontation between a questing foreigner and a mysterious India with disastrous consequences. His Fielding and Aziz are made to realize at the end that the gap between the two cultures cannot be simply wished away. British versions of East-West encounter in the early twentieth century generated thought and gave rise to various perceptions and speculations on this topic. Many Indian writers in English also dwelt at length in their books with the complexity of East-West relationships in terms of its impact on Indian situations and characters. Among these are Kamala Markandaya, Santha Rama Rau, Anita Desai, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and others who portrayed East-West confrontations of people and ideas with their far reaching implications on national and international scenes. The meeting of the East and the West is shown in their novels as a significant step which, besides changing the course of history, also entraps individuals who are caught unwillingly in the crosscurrents of east-west interactions.

Gita Mehta’s Karma Cola is a powerful critique on modern life exposing the superficiality and the shallowness of spiritual, political and secular modes of life. At symbolic level the central issues in the novel are the gurus and their spiritual bedlams, a confrontation and an encounter between the East and the West; the Orient and the Occident. The novel not only embraces an enormous variety of experience in the ashrams but also informs the cultural collisions of the
East-West encounter, the materialistic gurus and their spiritual causalities. Everywhere people are crazy about karma and the Indian myth claims that we are living in the age of Kaliyug which is characterized by speed. Karma is being realized through the instant death ultimatums, to be more precise, as happened in Jonestown on the instructions of a spiritual guru by drinking cyanide mixed with the soft drink Kool-Aid: Karma attained through grape flavored cola. The Western disciples hardly realize that recycling cannot offer the glories of immortality but the fetters of karma that chain humans to the wheel of existence.

It is a poignant study on the hypocrisy and sham of the Princely class in Colonial India and the pretentious gurus who ostentatiously profess and promise enlightenment to the westerners coming in search of the “missing magic” in their lives, in a post-colonial India. The book documents a series of episodes and scenes located in various parts of India during the 1960s and 70s when thousands and thousands of them from the West arrived in India: “Clashing cymbals, ringing bells, playing flutes, wearing bright colors and weird clothes, singing, dancing and speaking in tongues”. (5)

Bearing an enticing title and published in 1979, the book conjures up the mystic East in it. The article appearing in The Hindu, observed: “There’s a Madison Avenue tongue in cheekiness about Gita Mehta’s titles. You’ve got to give it to her the girl who murdered a mutated mantra over the spiritually thirsty hordes flooding the sub-continent in restless streams of ochre and orange in the throes of Karma Cola.”

Beginning in the late 60s, a mammoth exodus of Westerners descended upon India, disciples of a cultural revolution who proclaimed that the magic and mystery missing from their lives was
to be found in the East. For Gita Mehta the movement of these Western “new nomads” epitomizes a global escapism masquerading as spiritual hunger. The ‘pilgrims’ who are the ‘casualties of spiritual tourism’ are variously exploited by the gurus and the ashrams become places where the traditions of an ancient and long-lived society are transacted as commodities. The novel, with its fund of irony, satire and acerbic wit, is a probe into the ashram life where spirituality for all its wheeling and dealing in Karma has turned into the most practical joke of all.

As Corrado Micheli observes: “Karma Cola reads as a wickedly, witty satire on the thousands of hippie from Europe and North America, who went to India in the 1960s and 70s, seeking meaning to their lives.”¹ These visitors from the West are here in quest of “instant nirvana” and they seek out gurus from whom they hope to derive “Shakti,” a direct transmission of cosmic energy from the guru to the devotee.

The novel, according to the Illustrated Weekly, is “a short taut savagely satirical account of the hippies and Western star freaks on a spiritual quest in India.” In an interview for this magazine, Gita Mehta says:

It was the product of my own experience. I was at university when Ginsburg arrived and there was the business of the Dharna Bums. And I came back from university when John Lennon and the Beatles hit India. I had been watching this whole Caravanserai arrive and also the anticipation of Indians who said, at last the West is coming to us; at last the rock’n roll show is on."²
The occidental’s ideas about mystical India along with their sentimental implications, combined with the immanent exigencies of Western societies, have created such a web of chaotic misinterpretations that the ancient spiritual tradition of this country is being constantly reinvented and reified to Western liking. With Karma Cola, Gita Mehta made her debut on the Indo-English literary scene precisely to debunk such spiritual Orientalism. Her antiromanticism is a vigorous of her being Hindu and Indian, or as she has lately defined herself, an “inert Indian,” who is to witness a further episode of “appropriation” of her motherland by the voracious West. It can also stand for the last phase of those more cruel abuses her forefathers had fought with their lives and a firm contribution to the process of de-colonization that the illuminated minds of India have ignited from time immemorial, now running the risk to be put out by new Coca-colonizing intruders. But it is also an anti-romanticism meant to sweep away the wooliness of thought and the crankiness in which those “monstrous concepts” of Indian philosophy, to use her words, stemming from her primeval Indian civilization, have been enveloped by the desperate enthusiasm of the West especially in the last decades of our history. Indeed the anti-sentimental attack to the consumerist Occident that struggles to gobble up Hinduism and chokes itself in the process remains highly amusing and ironic throughout her work, though never failing to disclose to the sensitive reader the often disguised sadness of our age. As if Gita Mehta wished to re-enact in Karma Cola the great cosmic game of lila, enjoyed by the Indian divinities in the tragic amusement of creation and destruction of humanity’s worlds.

In the novel the characters and episodes are fitted nicely to represent a view of those critical years of our age that have so much impressed the life of sensitive human beings and so have
changed very little of course of our pitiless materialistic era. The view is the product of the writer’s personal experience as a journalist and not merely a fictional invention. The books becomes therefore a valuable contribution to the analysis of that interesting confrontation between East and West that runs across our centuries and millennia, ever exhausting its attraction and vitality, forming indeed a major theme in Indo-English literature. At the same time, and at a deeper level, we feel that the same liveliness and topicality fill the book in our new millennium, which on the one hand is a confrontation of the author’s validity as an artist, while on the other, having passed the test of time, it arouses the sensation that its subject matter should convey a truth, an impalpable reality that only the shrewdest minds are able to capture in words: the ability to perceive in anticipation those elements of sensitivity opening up a new epoch, and to define the kind of anxieties the new age will be carrying along. Gita Mehta’s first book can claim this merit. Its prophetic quality finds today striking echoes in the path that our modern occidental age has undertaken and it remains a refreshing reading while journeying throughout India.

In reading Gita Mehta’s Karma Cola, one reminded of Aijaz Ahmad’s observations “One did not have to belong, one could simply float, effortlessly, through a supermarket of packaged and commodified cultures, ready to be consumed” (In Theory 82). Gita Mehta delineates the element of spiritual anguish stemming from one’s sense of non-belonging, of being rootless in a supermarket of commodified cultures. Despite this spiritual anguish, the traditional occidental religious tradition seems no longer to provide viable alternatives to the dominion of an increasingly materialistic society that crushes and consumes one’s spirit.
The Occidental marionette’s mystical experience in the Oriental home land of adoption is an object of derision. Gita Mehta shows that India to these Occidents is more land of imagination and dream than that of reality. Hence the Occident polemics and interrogatives fail to find an apt solution. They remain frustrated. In the words of the writer, one fails to find an answer to these Occidental interrogatives because:

In a tradition where the question asks itself and the answer replies itself and all that remains is to establish the identity of the asker, clearly the occident is going to experience serious difficulty in eliciting any information at all, be it spiritual, physical or just the fastest way to get to the next town (72).

It is quite evident that for the Occident, India has a disorienting effect. On deeper reflection one finds that the Occident is not immune to easy snares of disorientation or, rather pseudo-orientation regulated by one’s conventional modes of experiencing the go of the world around him. All endeavors to reckon what India mystically teaches become an absurd and futile search for meaning. It leads to further illusions and confusions on the part of the exploring self. Mehta says that among:

The endless opportunities of narcissism provided by the Wisdom of the East, the Occidental feels at ease. It is his perception of himself as a philosopher and not as the victim of philosophy that permits him to be so enthusiastic (106).
India promises him the ultimate chance of immortality, as he acclimatizes himself to the new milieu and accommodates its mystical creeds to his own way of life. In this way the law of universal casualty becomes rather a pledge of rebirth. Gita Mehta affirms that for the Hindu:

Eternal life is death, not in the bosom of Jesus- but just death, no more being born again, to endure life again, to die again. Yet people come in ever increasing numbers to India to be born again with the conviction that in their rebirth they will relearn to live. (106).

The Occidental way of interpreting re-incarnation is quite banal and trite. It is visionary and dreamy. It centers on the idea of fleeing from the burden of human responsibilities and the solemnity of moral predilections and choices. Reincarnation, therefore, becomes a strategy and technique of postponement: “It’s kind a nice for your ego running a movie in which you are always the star” (4), ingeniously avers one of Mehta’s characters after having undergone an experience of an arcane “reincarnation mediation” in an Indian ashram. The Occidental’s opting for India as their home is to discover the magic and mystery of their being.

In Karma Cola, Gita Mehta seems to reduce mysticism to the banal and the commonplace. She seems to be marketing the mystic East: Karma, one of the elementary kinetics concepts draws us directly to the core of Indian spirituality and becomes a “metaphysical soft drink” to be exchanged with the physical one” (106), Coca Cola, the most well known brand or rather a symbol of an increasingly Americanized consumerist Occident. Unlike the popular soft drink,
fizzing in ice cubes, Karma is too much of a burning/debatable issue to digest. Corrado Micheli observes:

Gita Mehta is lavish in producing humorous evidence of this reified India in her book, from cut-price tours to the spiritual land “with names spanning all seven chakras of human possibility” “(68), to advertisements meant for tourists, boasting of an airfare that provided “Nirvana for $ 100 a day” (107), to the mystic paraphernalia for sale: incense, sandalwood mala beads, and mantras to worship those alien gods. “who comfort them” (77). And naturally not to betray the western image of the East, “a slice of the real India” (16), [The Atlantic Literary Reviews].

Has the proliferation of the Gurus in India any meaning in the true spiritual and religious sense? Gita Mehta seems to be sarcastically humorous to this quest for spirituality on the part of an Occidental: “I think they should definitely have a quality control on gurus. A lot of my friends have gone made in India” (83). Indian religiosity seems to be entrapped in the vicious circle of the Occidental’s craze for a “Karma Cola drink” and these spiritual questers and speculators deal it as a commodity like the ‘Coca Cola’. This provides an occasion to our enterprising spiritual Gurus and Swamis to thrive on these Westerner’s spiritual malaise and prevail on their frail psyche for spiritual solace and consolation. Corrado Micheli humorously says: “Mesmerized by the appeal of a globalized market, they put up their Guru Industries Ltd” (“East-West Encounter in Gita Mehta’s Karma Cola” Atlantic Literary Review 102).
India as portrayed by Gita Mehta in Karma Cola is a kaleidoscope reflecting the occidental anxieties and angst. Like many expatriate writers, Gita Mehta seems to be preoccupied with the theme of alienation. Her Western characters are victims of displacement and deracination. They are estranged from their roots and are in quest of new moorings. Whether Americans or Australians or Europeans, all evince a sense of non-belongingness to their respective homelands.

The most striking feature of these occidentals is that when they arrive in India, in order to overcome their sense of alienation, they are given new names from Indian mythology in the ashrams in India. Thus they forget their erstwhile lives and dead new lives in these ashramas under the tutelage of their gurus. But this transformation in their lives is a marginal one. They fail to assimilate the spiritual connotations of the terms like ‘Karma’ and ‘Nirvana’. Intellectual dousing in these terms fails to bring about any psychic change in their lives. The novelist says: “To go from the monomania of the West to the multimedia of the East is a painful business. Like a sex change” (36). What one observes is an endless, almost an uncountable number of soul-questers pouring in from the West into India: “Never before had the void been pursued with such optimism and such razzle dazzle” (53).

The novel is a sarcastically humorous account of the Western star freaks on a spiritual quest in India. Everyone suspected that whatever the Americans wanted, they got. Then why not Nirvana? For Gita Mehta, the exodus of these occidental nomads epitomizes a sort of global renegades masquerading as spiritual or soul questers. And then the French came along with Germans, Scandinavians, Australians, Canadians, Italians, South and Central Americans,
British, Swiss and so on. Their number was overwhelming and all comes searching for spiritual centers: “The diplomat had calculated that of the quarter million French people on the subcontinent, a good eighty percent were in pursuit of either mind expansion or obscure salvations” (21).

The French always asked for pictures or idols of the God Shiva. They recite Shiva-o-ham and they declare themselves as Shaivites. They do not like Indians but are fond of the Indian Gods especially the God Shiva: “They are like children, you see. It is our gods, not us, who comfort them. They like familiar things like mala beads and incense” (76). The French are happy here with Indian Gods, vexed with routine Mother Mary’s worship. Even though the idol of Kali appears to be frightening, the French long to worship Kali: “they must have Kali, with her garland of skulls, drinking blood. They say mother Kali shows the strength of the female” (77).

But do these Occidentals succeed in finding salvation? Simply dressed in saffron robes and unconsciously chanting Indian platitudes and mantras won’t guarantee spiritual bliss to these spiritual bedlamers and global escapists. The novelist observes: “And the Occidental longing for salvation and their shock when they didn’t find it. It was a sad misreading of the goals and desires of other civilizations” (The Illustrated Weekly of India: 30).

In an age of speed Karma, one can attain Karma through orange flavored cola, an emblem of instant death ultimatum. Karma for these Western nomads becomes a spiritual currency. It has been delectably received and recapitulated through spirituality:
I can’t visit London anymore. “The Karma there is too heavy for me”, says the Iranian hairdresser.

“I crashed my car last night, I have bad Karma,” says the Mexican student.

“That dude’s dangerous. He has heavy Karma,” says the Harlem drug dealer.

“Craps – it’s a ‘low Karma game”, explains the American gambler’s girls friend.

“… anything goes as Karma” (105).

The culture of the occident is a coat which does not fit him. It is a culture of mandarins. It has no real and living roots. Hence his journey/pilgrimage to the Orient in quest of a new coat, a new culture (Sypher 1962: 171). To these so-called seekers from the West, karma had become almost anything they want – it was only a sort of mental vibration that could go with any casual recognition – coincidence, chance, crossing the road – anything goes as karma. “The speed of jet travel appears to have eliminated the distinctions between geography and philosophy. Or those between hallucination and salvation. Or those between history and mythology,” (19) comments Gita Mehta wryly on the situation arising out of this influx of disciples from the West. Reason and religion has now become target of popular amusement and the stampede of people in pursuit of mind expansion and obscure salvation has wiped off our ancient values and thrown us into chaos and confusion. “Sacred knowledge in the hands of fools destroys,” say the Upanishads, and both Indians and westerners are grossly demoralized by their incursions into instant philosophy. The Easterner is engrossed in multiple possibilities of salvation, while the westerner is immersed only in his own ego. The westerner can never grasp the Hindu concept of Maya which enables the Indians to make “mind –blowing
affirmations” while they themselves are lost in a “plethora of contradictions.” So it is the fate of the west to be wrecked against infinity ever as the Indian gurus sell their birthright for a mess of pot, shoddy goods and glitter of gold.

Gita Mehta’s portrayal of East-West encounter is vivid and original. Mehta takes hold of the innumerable facts littered on the East-West meeting ground so that she could turn them to original perceptions evoking a unique sensibility. There are a host of gurus in India who gather numerous disciples around them and set them up in special camps all over India; Delhi, Goa, Haridwar and Banaras. These gurus ensured the disciples that they could attain their inner potency: “It’s all to do with rediscovering your inner environments and your outer aura and Supreme Shanti” (53).

Mehta describes the transaction between the Eastern gurus and their disciples as banal and incomprehensive. In this connection, Laxmi Parasuram writes: “The disciples submit them round the bend.” Here is a nice clean Brahmin, who is reputed to have miraculous healing powers. Devotees come here to roll their eyeballs as the gurus are rolling their eyeballs. They believe if they roll their eyes long enough, they can acquire healing powers: “…the faithful were emulating the guru, following his eyeballs with their own” (54).

The devotees come here regularly to attain miraculous powers to overcome their future obstacles. It is quite absurd because whom they adore for transcendence are ordinary human beings like us. But the fact is the gurus’ powers are limited to control the bodies of others, sometimes their own. The Hindu philosophy has captured Western imagination that none has greater currency than karma. The Westerners believe that they can attain supremacy over their
bodies through karma. It is not surprising because East encounters are far from serious. Laxmi Parasuram writes critically: “It is all a big joke with gurus giving benediction from helicopters and disciples getting high on hallucinative drugs and sexual orgies.”

Gita Mehta is depicting only an end game which once had an intellectual dimension. Aldous Huxley had struggled with Vedanta for a mere understanding. Later on, while William Butler Yeats was translating the Upanishads, he found in the East “something ancestral in ourselves, something we must bring into the light” (67).

Today the so-called seekers are the real scum who yearn for kicks that go with violence and obscenity. They sell themselves to hallucinatory drugs and end on ailments in clinics and asylums. The Western disciples hardly make out why they are in India. Mehta illustrates how India is expected to provide what the Occidentals hope for. Unfortunately all their queries are bound to remain frustrated.

In the eyes of an Indian, India is a Rishi Bhoomi, the land of sages. The gurus convince that enlightenment is possible through oral examination which leads to knowledge. An aristocrat Englishman was startled when he found a guru’s urine daily turning into scented rose water. As defecation is scared, the unprecedented magnanimity of the guru gesticulated the Englishman. He observed the most adored urine vessel: “…remarkably like ordinary urine” (82).

It is rumored that India alone can turn nausea into serenity. But fact is, India became a stampede with people turning their nausea into dysentery. The Indian Nation airlines publicized an advertisement used for publication in foreign magazines boasting of an airfare that provided Nirvana for $ 100 a day. A guru with a large number of foreign followers
confided to a correspondent from Time that he can give them instant salvation by turning them into neo-sanyasis. There is another intellectual guru who can predict the future and especially his views on revelation. He wrote a long piece in an Indian magazine explaining his views on what happens when great cultures meet: “Everything is perfect. But also the Third World War is coming! That is going to be perfect, too! It will kill utterly” (103). The prediction is so terrible that we are sitting on a volcano in meditations. It is prophesied that anytime the volcano may burst and we will get the taste of the immortality. The guru is enjoying as the thinking man’s guru. There is the guru Maharaj Ji, who is famous for his less intelligence. He once hired Houston Astrodome to spread his teachings. Mahara Ji sat on a high elaborate throne spotlighted from every direction. When the disciples grieve, he encourages them with the Eastern the message: “Enjoy, Enjoy, Enjoy” (104).

There is another guru who supports the faith of his followers from Delhi, by promising a proof of the existence of God. The guru informs the disciples that God exists in the Oxford English Dictionary under the letter ‘G’. This guru has become famous and his followers have also become so extensive, that now he is giving benediction from a helicopter. In this context, N. Kalamani opines: “The lure of the guru is so much that whatever he does, he is cheered and loudly acclaimed.”

The deceitful gurus give their disciples a change of names promising Eternal Silence. The smugly complacent disciples become entangled in a magic spell that they have reached three quarters of Nirvana; Nirvana karma, Cosmic Energy and Eternal Silence, but their rational
minds fail to grapple the essence of metaphysical postulates. Gita Mehta brings out the irony of the situation, when she interviews a Western inmate of the ashram:

“What are you doing in India?”
“I am being”
“Pardon”
“Being” (34)

Two Italian women, an Indian nuclear physicist and an English biochemist were to be the participants in a newest inspiration, a world conference on Chemistry, Physics and Transcendental meditation. The scientists became curious and expected something beyond their reach. The guru advocated that by concentration and, through meditation the disciples could create an impenetrable field of energy between the ground and their bodies. The guru succeeded in capturing the full attention of the scientists. After blessing the scientists, the guru got up to leave shouting: “Gentlemen, remember my words. It is time to ring the bell for EUREKA!” (109) These gurus are enjoying a great honor and reputation because the tongues of the disciples are silenced by the incoherence and their desire to taste the deathlessness.

A large number of French girls are living in seedy hotels all over India in search of holy gurus. But their search ends in insanity. One such French destitute, neglected by her parents, flew to India and became a victim. She got to India abandoned Europe. Hearing about holy men in the mountains of India, she began her search for the Teacher. The teacher was a fat oily man sitting
under a tree listening to a radio. All his disciples sat in adoration. The French woman had a son and daughter by him.

One night the master lay down, closed his eyes and never woke up again. Dramatically his son hardly a year old, fell back dead. The woman was left with a daughter and believe suspicious of killing the teacher. People think her an incarnation of the Goddess or sometimes as a witch or sometimes insane.

A reputed guru was sent for on the death of one of his devotees. He was expected to raise the dead into the living. The news of the arrival of this world-renowned guru was cause of much commotion. The bewildered American disciple was questioned about this miracle which he witnessed:

“Was that the greatest miracle you saw in India? Your guru raising a man from the dead?”
“No man, the real gurus in India do that sort of thing every day of the week. I didn’t think raising a guy from the dead was such a big deal after I’d been around India a couple of years.”
“What was the big deal? Did you think anything was a miracle?”(51)

The American had thought a long time before he answered that question: “Yeah, I saw a miracle. You should have seen that morgue, guys rushing all over the place, clerks, morgue
attendants, administrators. Nobody knew where anything was. I reckon the real miracle was when the Master found that body. The rest was peanuts.”

The theme of East-West encounter also resulted in sexual assault. There was an ashram run by an older Indian woman considered an embodiment of the guru and called Ma, a pedicure. Many devotees kept entering the Ma’s room just to pluck at the hem of the garment. One day a flustered Parsi woman burst into the room to touch Ma’s feet. The Ma was frightened when the Parsi woman all of a sudden cut Ma’s toes unintentionally. It was a young Sikh who had originated the woman’s problems. His spiritual motives covered his longing for the nymphet’s beauties. Ma relaxed the tension by making the Sikh an inmate of the ashram: “if he wants to be near the girl, that’s beautiful. He will be made a member of the ashram…” (146)

Ma had grasped that the love scene might create a lot of trouble. So, rather than fight with him, she had cleared the way for the Sikh to join the ashram. The guru’s teachings inculcated sexual desires in the ashram inmates instead of asexuality. The guru of the ashram said that separate forms of meditation were required to understand the difference between the Indian attitude toward sex and the Westerner’s. The conclusion was that the Westerner had a profound fear of impotence. The guru exhorted to act out all sexual fantasies until they exorcised them: “Go towards your body, go toward your desire, and then go past them. The death of desire is the birth of Atman” (149). A guru stated at a lecture that his disciples must learn love and love him as a father, mother, brother and lover. A young American woman who took it literally burst into the guru’s room screaming: “Take me, Lover! I’m yours” (149).
The philosophy of Tantrics is concerned with sex of all the Hindu disciples. The perfect synthesis of Tantrics is sex and death. They believe it because it allows human mind to perceive eternity. A five year-old girl is chosen as an incarnation of Goddess in a branch of Tantra in Nepal. After she reaches puberty, she is prohibited from indulging her sensuality as she once wore the mantle of Transcendence. The Tantric Philosophy not only nullified her virginity but also motherhood: “…She is creation, and has been revered as the mystery” (151).

The Tantric gurus are adamant that in the world, good and evil are mere illusion. The disciples, though understood the nature of the ephemeral world, are trying to impose a vision of morality in a world where it is quite inapplicable. Confusions about morality not only appear in India but also make way to a number of nuns and priests abstaining from Christianity and taking up Hinduism. The nuns are anxious to get rid of themselves of the burden of ego. Resultantly, the irresistible force of Hinduism, and the immovable principal of Christianity are found in the therapy rooms.

Tantric ashrams became store-house for the anxious nuns to overcome the burden of ego. The prime concern of the foreign disciples, who came to India wounded in sex, needs reassurance and freedom of sexual experience to overcome their sense of impotence. No one understands what the guru is teaching but they hang on his every word: “From their expressions of bliss, he thinks they must have grasped his meaning” (159).

Sarkar, a resident of Calcutta established Anand Marg cult where Socialism and Kali worship is evolved as philosophy. It gained a large following not only in India but also all over the world. But one day his wife announced that Sarkar was not a socialist egalitarian but a rude
human being. It is rumored that the Marg had execution squads. It was found that a lot of Hindu minded people around the world were killing or being killed in the name of philosophy. But the members of the Marg claimed to possess hidden strengths. The Marg initiated mind-control arts of ancient India especially black magic: “More of that old black magic. Mind control. Market control. Out of control” (169).

Two nuns leave their convent for a Sadhu expecting more teachings than in the convent. One of them is ready with thirty thousand francs to build an ashram for the guru. Till then no one hear of the nuns. But the guru reappears at Anjuna beach in Goa. He is found ruling like a feudal, handling smuggling, picking up women and doping, made into a legend. There is more politics in Indian ashrams than in the whole of the Western hemisphere. Despite all these, gurus never stop playing favorites and, ashram meditation is nothing but Maya, an analysis of fantasy and illusion. But the ashram gurus promise the disciples to teach more than they dreamed. A guru says: “if you’re real good I’ll make you feel good” (184).

Jung, while travelling through the subcontinent, says that the western lives in a madhouse of abstractions where as the eastern lives in a madhouse of distractions. Gurus give philosophical names to distractions such as: Bhakti Yoga- the meditation of adoration; Hatha Yoga- the meditation of physical endurance; Tantra Yoga- the meditation of senses; Guru Yoga enlightenment through teacher; and Reincarnation-enlightenment through rebirth.

Gita Mehta claims that poverty and disease are reality. She ensures that poverty and diseases are inefficiency. We can conquer the two, if we work hard. Thus, Karma Cola is undoubtedly a rationalistic analysis of the contemporary situation and it does not indulge in any sexist politics
or sentimentality or ambivalence. So, one may indeed call it a totally liberated book that depicts the obliviousness of distinctions moving to mindlessness. Mehta takes up cudgels against the approach of ‘Zero’ and stands up for clarity and reason.

With all their mantric and tantric powers, the gurus become a detestable lot for the readers of Karma Cola. How fantastic it would be for a perceptive reader to believe a guru raising the dead into a new life, making the impossible possible like walking on water and bringing rain to the drought-stricken land. These are nothing but a travesty and mockery of the Hindu philosophy of Karma, a unique aspect of India’s cultural and religious experience. Is the guru an idol or a paragon of Karma? The novel does not provide any explicit answer to these puzzling questions. What the guru gives to these soul questers? Not love and solace but mind fucking platitudes: “My followers have no time. So I give them instant salvation. I turn them into neosanyasins” (107). This is a clear manifestation of the cultural decadence which now has become a grave human concern. N. Kalaamani aptly maintains: “Gita Mehta blasts at the hollow ritualistic life that is prescribed for patients seeking spiritual balms. With an iconoclastic violence, the writer lashes at these suggest that the spiritual houses and the ashrams are not the places to seek salvation. But it is Karma. It is love since the best place one can turn to or rely upon for spiritual bliss is the heart of man. Otherwise the pursuit of these soul questers would be just a meaningfully meaningless one that would simply land them in a blind alley.

Gita Mehta’s portrayal of east-west encounter in contemporary times beats all previous accounts of the subject through sheer force, vividness, and originality. Although labeled
“notification” the book reads stranger than fiction, given the double entendre and terse vigor that marks its style. Mehta takes hold of the innumerable facts littered on the east-west meeting ground and turns them to original perceptions evoking a unique sensibility. She has a rare knack for mixing facts with fancy in order to create sheer absurd situation that are strangely funny and bitterly serious. Even as her scathing wit cuts into the follies and illusions of people perpetrated in the name of God and religion, she touches us with a rare sensitivity that commiserates with the plight of these poor lost souls. The odds and ends of cultural interactions portrayed in Karma Cola takes them almost to the end of the tether. The division of the book under tell tale subtitle such as “Reinventing the Wheel,” “Karma Crackers,” “Tricks and Treats,” “The Odds and the Gods,” and so on condenses the situation into scintillating scenes marked by artistry and vigor.

It is true that the special quality of Mehta’s version of the east-west encounter is mostly based on the excesses indulged in by its present incumbents. Mehta is aware that she is depicting only an endgame which once had a more intellectual dimension. Brahmins of western intellectual thought – Huxley, Yeats, Foster and others were led to the East by genuine inquisitiveness, but those who came after – the Beatles and the Rolling Stones – were mere populists. But even this earlier wave of western immigrants belonged to a higher class than the ones that have taken their place. It is in this context that we may look at an earlier book on the same subject – Jhabvala’s A New Dominion. This book also deals with a situation arising out of the search for self by westerners who play themselves into the hands of an Indian Swamiji. This Swamiji runs a Universal Society for Spiritual for Spiritual Regeneration of the Modern World and is only too eager to spread his message all around the world. Evie, Margaret, and Lee are his disciples
and he wields a stranger power over them with his hypnotic eyes and cool demeanor. His responsibility, he says, is “to mould and to make”; but before he can mould and make he has to “break.” (121) Deliberately, he proceeds to break the mind and will of all his disciples until they surrender totally and become “nothing.” They have to endure extreme states of negation – hunger, filth, heat, vermin and what not, and become nervous wrecks while the Swamiji coolly ignores them. His professed goal is to teach them overcome their ego, and while this is being tried, Evie become a mindless slave, Margaret dies of jaundice, and Lee is left in lurch with no sense of direction. Jhabvala in her book depicts a new dominion – a dominion over which the mind dominates although with ambivalent connotations. The Swamiji thrives on weak minds and pursues his own ends which ostensibly serve the cause of moral regeneration.

The version of East-West encounter presented in A New Dominion harks back to the days when there was at least a veneer of genuine give and take between the two cultures. “I here,” (66) claims Mike in Karma Cola as he looks at those who came after him. These originals are the ones who were impelled by a genuine need to open up their minds to a different culture and endure its privations. But most of those who came later were only after thrills and escape. Karma Cola gives us marvelous vignettes of these thrill seekers – hoards of them who are “in pursuit of the meaningfully meaningless.” (17)

Jhabvala deals with the originals of an earlier era with the particular edge of fiction whereas Gita Mehta takes up the true account of a general menace that affects our present time. Unlike Jhabvala in her novel, Gita Mehta in her work of nonfiction sharply intrudes into her scenes. The form she has chosen gives her ample opportunities to come out with biting remarks and
this is mostly done through the figure of a roving observer who is always present on the scene. This observer, gifted with a panoramic vision both of space and time, scans vast areas of history with a rare insight and enables us to figure out the chaotic trends. A stark common sense and distrust of pretension help the observer analyze the situation and delve into history to find easy explanations for present shoddiness. However, no one on the present scene, Indian or foreigner, stands totally vindicated for the unforgivable hotchpotch they have created out of a cultural vacuum.

For the Indian mind these spiritual doctrines are the sacred conserves of the essential Indian experience. To the occident, these spiritual pathways are pastimes ‘excruciating experiments in plumbing a beyond.’ Putting on orange robes and changing names cannot undo identities, cannot exterminate differences. Major crises of cultural displacement of the non-Indian votaries can find no lasting solutions in “arrogance of nomenclature.” Change of names cannot be the food for their spiritual hungers. Whether the westerner is to be blamed for seeking Indian asylums or the Indian guru is to be accused for doling out alms indigestible to the western psyche is a rather perplexing issue.

“Was it the meaninglessly meaningful?” puzzles Gita Mehta to illustrate the derided approach of her Occidental puppets to the mystical experience their imaginary India is expected to provide. The inevitable confusion which derives from it, only adds a further element to India’s disorienting effect, contributing to strengthen certain common ideas or banal expectations that only serious reflection and cognition may hope to dismantle.
But even when we come to knowledge, the occidental is not immune to easy traps of disorientation or, rather, false orientation dictated by his traditional modes of perceiving the world around him. The belief to getting to know what India mystically teaches turns itself into a further illusion for coating his indelible ego. Above all India give him the ultimate chance of “immortality” as he accommodates its mystical principles to his usage. In this way, the Karmic Law – the law of universal causality, which connects man with the cosmos and condemns him to transmigrate indefinitely – becomes rather a guarantee of rebirth, an escape from the deeper meaning of death and nullity which so much scare the ever healthy advertised West.

In one of his articles Massimo Introvigne, Professor of History and Sociology of Religious Movements at Torino University, Italy, highlights the fact that “the tragedy of the Occidental way of conceiving reincarnation lies in its representing a cheap attempt – or dream – to escape from the seriousness of the moral choice and human responsibilities of our daily living. Reincarnation becomes therefore “a joyfully permanent vacation,” or “a technique of postponement.”

Karma Cola does not underline the anguish or rootlessness of an expatriate writer. Gita Mehta’s views are objective; she is more like a Westerner in her vision and portrayal of India. For all the irony and satire in her work there is a human concern at its core. Sardonic and sometimes Swiftian, the novelist’s invective never deviates into cynicism. A River Sutra, published almost fourteen years after her first work, seems to give answers for her questions on life and death. The gurus of A River Sutra are profound, wise, loveable characters who have discovered the truth of life. And the fruit of their enlightenment is that religion is not a god-
hunt. Its springs are in the human heart. And its outward expressions are the ragas, Tariq Mia, Master Mohan and Professor Shankar have found the meaning of life in love. That is Karma. This is also the answer to the modern problem. And the answer is in the psychic constituent of the individual. Soul-questers are disillusioned if they seek their signals in spiritual houses.
References


4. Ibid.