Chapter-4

Raj: A Study of Woman’s Struggle for Her Identity and Existence

Feminists insist on women’s liberation from patriarchal social structure and thinking. They strongly protest against every cruelty committed on women by any fair name of religion or morality. They boldly demand human rights and dignity of women who remained dumb and docile for centuries in the male dominant world. Literature proves their powerful means. About the initial stage of the feminist movement Sarala Palkar writes:

This women’s liberation movement was initiated in the 1960s by women who were politically committed—women who were active participants in the civil rights movement or in the protest actions against the war in Vietnam or those who belonged to the various progressive or Marxist groups. It was their bitter experience of the blatantly sexist attitudes that were evinced by their male associates in these politically progressive movement that finally led women to form their own groups and associations… By the late 60s and 70s feminism had emerged as an important political force in the western world.

As the early feminists were mainly concerned with social and political change, little attention was paid to literature and literary criticism at the initial stage of the women’s movement. But soon enough their political action was extended to the cultural field.”¹
Thus emerged the Western feminism. In the second half of the twentieth century, because of the acceptance of democratic political system in many nations of the world, the spread of education among women and communication media plays a very significant role to spread the feminist ideology. It becomes now the global phenomenon. As a result of this movement a plethora of writings, both creative and critical, has come out.

But when we study the history of human civilization and culture we come to the conclusion that feminism is not a newly developed ideology. In every era the enlightened beings have raised the issue of human rights of the women. No doubt their path remained spiritual and somehow ideal. The ‘Ideal Path’ remains always thorny. So their thoughts were neither totally accepted by the political authorities nor by the people in general. So they could not reduce the miseries of women. Generally people prefer and practice and whatever easily pleases them. Thus the ideal path remains a utopia.

In the ancient literature of India we find many times women’s rights and dignity are honored, for example, Buddhist literature, Hindu scriptures. In the Shri Brihadaranyakopanishad ‘Gargi’ is honored as the spiritually advanced women.² even Manu, the first lawgiver of Hindus has insisted to honor the women;

> Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-law, who desire (their own) welfare.³

Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honored, no scared rite yields rewards.⁴
Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers.⁵

The houses on which female relations, not being duly honored, pronounce a course, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic.⁶

Hence men who seek (their own) welfare, should always honor women on holidays and festivals with (gifts of) ornaments, clothes, and (dainty) food.⁷

These statements of Manu insist to honor the Hindu women. Why was/is the code not accepted and practiced by society? Obviously this concept is for the ideal society. It is tough, too. The laws of Manu on one hand insist on honoring the women and on other hand strict duties are imposed on them. In these duties their individual identity and liberty have no place. Here woman is a mere dependent creature. In comparison to women, men are given more liberty.

Generally it is accepted that for the social harmony all the laws must be honored. But unfortunately in the Hindu society to honor women has become a subsidiary or untouchable ideology since centuries. The duties imposed on women are more demanding. Their rights are not given to them, consequently their miseries are multiplied. No Hindu woman was/is out of this law; either she was/is a peasant or a princess.

Gita Mehta’s *Raj* highlights the issues of Hindu women in pre-independent and post-independent India in a very realistic way. With first reading of the novel it seems,
Raj, presents a re-reading of a significant chapter of Indian history, dealing with human relationships in a colonial society… Raj is the first genuine counterpoint to the imperial clichés of the popular British view of the Raj.  

Raj is also differently evaluated:

Gita Mehta weaves the story of Jaya, the princes of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur. It is intricately interwoven with the political events but it has the tears and romance of a woman’s existence in India which saves the work from being a mere record of the all-too-well-known history of our freedom struggle, or a racy account of the grandeur and frivolity of the exorbitant life-style of the princess.

Raj is a historical fiction but under the veil of historical event it represents a woman’s – Jaya’s – constant struggle to live with dignity. Her struggle begins with her birth. It is a time of Indian renaissance. In her childhood she learns the lesson from the Renaissance. After marriage she is not treated as a genuine life partner by her husband. She struggles very hard. She loses her husband and her son. But she is not disappointed. At last she sets her identity as a human being in the ‘New India’.

Gita Mehta's Raj reflects a crucial period in the Indian history comprising Imperial British India and Royal India under the Princes. Raj opens with the year 1897 with the birth of Tikka to conclude in 1950, the end of an epoch when India attained freedom and the princely states merged with the Union. It is a lucid historical episode that follows the progression of a young
woman born into the Indian nobility under the British Raj.

In the ancient fort of Rajasthan, Mehta discovers and depicts a Royal past. It is the story of a young Princess Jaya. She weaves together elegant language and colourful pictures of Indian culture and depicts Indian colonial life from an Indian perspective. She is able to narrate the story without bias or bitterness, a kind of style which she adopts in her other books. She leaves the reader to formulate an independent position from which to read the history. As M. Uma Rao Observes ‘While intelligence is obvious and her opinions clear, she is ultimately not interested in pressing her political impressions into her reader, but she presents historical facts with gentle persuasion in a beautifully woven tapestry based upon her female protagonist's strength of character with autochthonous imagination.’

Mehta’s Raj with a bulk of 463 pages is divided into four books, 'Balmer', 'Sirpur', 'Maharani', and 'Regent'. The story of the merger and the struggle has been incorporated in these four books that form the main body of the narrative. The novel opens with a prologue that introduces the reader with Maharaja Jaisinh, his Queen and their children in Balmer, a princely state in Rajasthan.

Jaya and her elder brother Tikka accompany their father Jaisinh in hunting a panther. Jaya is left on the edge of the jungle. A ring of children appraises Jaya. One of them questions her: ‘Bai-sa, have you ever drunk cow’s milk? Do you want to try it our way?’ (p.3) The boy clambers under the cow pulling Jaya behind him and squeezes the full udders directing a stream of warm milk into her hair and eyes. Later Tikka and Jaya ride on an elephant into the jungle, where a hunted panther is captured and bound to a tree.
Book one of the novel takes us into the past when Jaya's brother Tikka was born in the year 1897. Here Mehta emerges into a picturesque world of Balmer. She has enabled the reader to grow into intimate relation with the spirit, the emotion, the mysticism and glamour of Balmer, with its swift passage from euphoric celebration to profound sadness. She shows the skill of narrating in luxuriance of imagery.

Maharaja Jaisingh, a puppet in the hands of British, is a frightened man. Feudal India has been exposed in its anxiety to hold power not on its own, but ironically on the strength of the British. It struggled to maintain a separate identity and underwent psychological turmoil. The British increasingly interfered with the affairs of the local rulers and directly ensured control over them, appointing agents in their courts. The British by subtle force reduced the native rulers to clawless tigers.

As mentioned earlier novel opens with the celebration of the birth of Maharaja's first child. People from nearby villages throng to celebrate the birth. But the court astrologers predict famine that occurs every twenty years since the rise of the British power. The farmers know that another famine has begun. Earlier, few Europeans had travelled to Balmer and called it the Land of Death, but later, found it to be a land of prosperous farmers.

Mehta focuses a clear and detailed picture of the royal court. Jaisingh is seated on the throne attired royally. A conference with the nobles persuades him to meet Queen Victoria, and tell her the condition of India, and to collect some fund for famine-struck areas…
‘Go to London, Durbar. You are the voice of the people's assembly. Victoria must listen to you. India's Empress can not ignore India's suffering.’ (p.16)

Persuaded by the fervent bickering of the Queen and the nobles, Jaisinh visits England. The reader gets a lucid view of railway tracks leading to Bombay. The stations were crowded with families fleeing the famine and the spread of plague, while the British and rich Indian merchants were safe, with sanitary cordons around their homes. Jaisingh's bitter mood depicts his gnawing hatred and anguish towards the British and a craving to protect India from its clutches.

Jaisingh receives the news that the Maharaja of Dungra, an old friend of his father's, has arrived in England and wishes to see him. Mehta illuminates the meeting of Jaisingh and Dungra. Dungra is dressed ceremoniously. The eccentric nature of the British is revealed in the sarcastic remarks of a man with a cap pulled low over his forehead. He nudges a woman standing next to him, ‘Look at the old bugger wears more gewgaws than a music hall harlot.’ (p.20)

The conversation between Jaisingh and Dungra reveals the helplessness and dilemma of the native rulers under colonialism. Dungra asks Jaisingh’s opinion about the imperial masters whom they have witnessed through close quarters. Jaisingh replies thus:

‘What does it matter what I think, hukum? I have no army to give weight to my views. Dungra raised a languid eyebrow, be careful Jai, that is a seditious remark.'
You are in England. For such sedition you could lose your throne.’ (p.21)

On the occasion of jubilee parade, the Indian rulers pay tribute to queen Victoria. Failing to gain private audience with the Queen, Jaisingh returns to Balmer from Bombay through famine-struck lands. The curse of drought hung like a nightmare on Balmer. On the border of Balmer, an old man asks a question which Jaisingh could not answer. ‘We still own our land, hukam. But if the rains fail again, what shall we do?’ (p.26) Jaisingh, perturbed with the prevailing circumstances, asks his wife to break purdah. Jaya's mother is happy and sovereign in her limited domestic world. A typical traditional housewife, humble, submissive and entirely devoted to her husband, kept pace with the customs and practices purdah.

Throwing all shackles of superstition in air, the pregnant Maharani moves out of fort and resides in a cluster of mud houses to share the woes of the drought and famine stricken peasants. When the Baran rebukes the queen for mingling with outcast, Kukibai the old concubine of the zanana, reprimands the priests and their superstition:

‘Tell me you grotesque creature, does an emerald necklace still buy a tola of cocaine? How much jewellery have you taken from the women in these last months for opium or liquor?’ (p.36)

Jaisingh tries to explain the political realities which cornered him like a trapped animal. He states,
‘If the rains fail again, I shall have to construct a railway and allow foreign factories to be built in Balmer. I must arrange loans so the farmers do not have to sell their land to the Angrez companies at unreasonable prices. All this costs money…….. I plan to sell BalmerNavratan to Tsar. He will not reveal the sale to England.’ (p.37)

Mehta creates one of the greatest examples of synthesis in all human history. The glory of the Hindu past is obliquely suggested by an overt contrast with the inglorious or general present.

Towards the end of fifth year of drought, the Maharani gives birth to a baby. Jaisingh laughs at the yell of the baby, and bends over his daughter's cradle. ‘That is not the sound of a crying baby. That is a battle cry. If the name is auspicious, let's call her Jaya, victory.’ At the age of three, Jaya experiences the first shower of rain and the Maharani re-enters purdah. Jaya is raised in the ways of her predecessors. She is made to recite the ancestral litany of the Balmer Maharanis:

‘Like the great sati, Queen Pushpavati Devi of Balmer, may I bring honour to the Rajput blood that runs in my veins and bear sons to increase the sons of the sun.’

(p.42)

First there are the music lessons for Jaya with the old ustad. Jaya's happiest moments are playing Polo with Major Virsingh at the evening and hearing Kuki-bai's stories at afternoon. Mehta's imagery is psychedelic in narrating Kuki-bai's feats on the elephant tusks in this way:
'She patted the tusk’s broad back. Hut! Moti Hut! The elephant wound its trunk around Kuki-bai's waist and lifted the small figure into the air, holding her suspended until her vermilion-painted soles found balance on the ivory tusks.' (p.51)

As Jaya is born in an uncertain world of fits and starts, she is sentimental to the cultural divide and attitudinal differences of the British and Indian rulers. She is taught the traditions of Balmer, music, polo, rangoli, performing pujas, rajniti, horse riding and also rifle firing. She is also trained in the art of personal decoration ‘Sola Shringar’, the sixteen arts of being a woman.

At this stage, Balmer experiences the advent of railway and motorcars. Maharaja Jaisingh appoints Captain Osborne as a tutor of Tikka to learn him the ways of the English. He also appoints Mrs. Roy, an Indian governess to teach Jaya the English language. Both the children loved and respected their tutors. Mrs. Roy is a true patriot. Even his knowledge of Rajaniti fails to protect him from the various pressures of the colonial rulers as he was forced to appoint Osborne as the tutor to his son. His helplessness is allegorized ironically in his reference to the four principles of Rajniti;

‘Saam, I tended my people, putting their survival above the vanities of an empire, and I was called seditious. Daan, I provided for the state, and my only son was taken hostage by the Angrez. Dand, how can I be just when I cannot give sanctuary to those who fight injustice in the British Raj or try a man who has the ear of the Angrez? What then remains of monarchy but Bhed? Intrigue, flattery, and imitation - the weakest arm of monarchy. This is what it means to be an Indian king in the
In the two years that Tikka had been in England, while Jaya and James Osborne accompany Jai Singh for tiger hunting. The journey through the jungle was very exciting. The hunting scene is highly intriguing. Here we have a glimpse of Osborne's tenderness towards Jaya. As a teenager Jaya had developed infatuation for the young Osborne, the son of her brother's tutor. She does not display her deep affection towards him throughout her life. Through the months that Jaya's metamorphosis from girl to womanhood was being guided by the purdah ladies i.e. Kuki-bai, Chandni, Baran etc. At this juncture, Europe was hardening into alliances which resulted in war. Captain Osborne assures Jai Singh that nothing can happen to Tikka in England at war. We get engrossed in the Manwar ceremony celebrated by the warrior caste. Jai Singh with a broad outlook intends Jaya to be brought up in a modern way, while the Queen is adamant that Jaya be brought in the traditions of the zanana. Jaya learns Rajniti from the Raj Guru and about the Indian history, traditions and political reality of the country from Mrs. Roy. Jai Singh ensures that she gets proper education in all aspects of statecraft and the happenings in and around the country.

The catastrophe that befell on the Balmer house is Tikka's death, in the First World War. After Tikka's death Jai Singh also dies being unable to reconcile with the grove tragedy. On his deathbed, the king declares Jaya the future ruler of Balmer. However, Jaya is a victim of colonialist's conspiracy. The British Empire made General Man Singh's son, John the ruler of Balmer. Even the Maharani is not spared the humiliation for she is forced to leave the palace. She fled to Maharaja Dungra who promised to shelter her as a sign of brotherly affection.
The Hindus and the Muslims strongly repelled the Rowlatt Act and the Royal Proclamation of 1919. On the fateful day of Jaliawala massacre, Jaya's marriage to Prince Pratap's sword is solemnized in his absence, a marriage considered most degrading for a princess. Jaya's personal fate is inescapably tangled with the destiny of the country. The section here connects the local crisis of Jaya as an individual, Sirpur as the local state to historical national movement markers as demonstrations against Rowlatt Act and Jaliawala Bag to the world scenario where the leagues of nations were at war for the first time in history.

Book two of Mehta is full of varied portrayal of Sirpur, a small state in Assam where ever flows the river Brahmaputra. The book signifies Jaya’s transplantation from the dry land of Balmer to a fertile land of Brahmaputra. After marrying prince Pratap's sword, Jaya arrives at Sirpur in her bridal conveyance. Outside the iron railings of the purdah palace, Abyssinian eunuchs were waiting to usher Jaya into the presence of the Dowager Maharani, the grandmother of Victor and Pratap. She is an old woman, crippled with arthritis. Hard knuckles cracked against Jaya's temples to remove the evil eyes, and then she handed over the iron keys to Jaya. She also tells her about her grandsons and tells the younger concubines to remind them of their own customs, when they were in Sirpur:

Jaya stared in shocked silence at the purdah garden as the Dowager Maharani's rasping voice described how she had sent girl after smooth-limbed girl from the harem to seduce the awkward schoolboys during their holidays, hoping to recapture her grandson's souls from Britain through their loins. (p.180)
Jaya's own days were filled with marriage functions. The Dowager Maharani accompanies Jaya to the Kamini temple, which is named after Kama, the God of love. The Goddess was in the form of a stone shaped like a gigantic vulva. Its thick lips glistening like black glass from daily anointing with coconut oil. Red liquid seeped through her stiff fingers as she smeared Jaya's cheeks and forehead, chanting, ‘May your homage to the Goddess bring fruit to your womb and may you enrich our house with sons.’ (p.185)

On arriving in Sirpur, Jaya feels that a harsh reality had treated on her dreams. She was filled with remorse, for even after marriage she could not escape the treachery of the British. The ancient kingdom of Sirpur, steeped in traditions and rituals, has the same old wounds inflicted upon her. The British sent Prince Pratap and Prince Victor to England as hostages in the pretext of educating them. The British were successful in alienating these future rulers from their cultural and social mores and develop in them a taste for everything European. The Sirpurfell a prey to this betrayal. While the elder brother Prince Victor was obsessed with Cora Hart, an American actress, Pratap is a compulsive flirt, carelessly squandering away the royal treasury by chasing white women.

Jaya continued to be a married virgin. After a long wait of two years, Pratap arrives at Sirpur. But it turns out to be a nightmare for Jaya, as Pratap prefers to spend his first night in the City Palace with Maharaja Victor and his guests, rather than with his new wife, Jaya. She knew that the party also consisted of beautiful women. The next morning, the maidservants come to dress her again as a bride. Finally, when she meets Pratap, her excitement is nipped in the bud. He repudiated her that she is old-fashioned and condemned her etiquette and habits. He expressed
his desire of westernizing her by appointing a governess. He also confessed that he married her for the sake of convenience:

‘The empire has instructed me to stay in India. If I am permitted to travel abroad again, I shall have to be accompanied by a wife. That's why I agreed to our marriage. So, here we are, Jaya Devi. You cannot eat quail or wear a sari. You know no languages. Yet through you I must outmaneuver the empire which forced me into this marriage.’ (p.191)

Pratap leaves with an injection that she must change her mannerisms. Lady Modi, a governess for Jaya and Prince Pratap often snubbed her with satirical remarks that the traditions and values she grew up with in Balmer are irrelevant and need to be replaced. Pratap is an ardent lover of European life style. He often heckled Jaya's traditions which he felt are obsolete and uncouth. With submissive tolerance she had to cope up with not only a fastidious husband, but also suffer sarcastic remarks of Lady Modi, Mehta gives a vivid picture of Modi's sarcasm:

‘The muscles in Lady Modi's delicate throat moved up and down as she swallowed. Without stopping for breath, she finished the martini.‘Another, darling.’ Jaya returned to the drinks tray and was sharply corrected when she forgot to throw the vermouth into the flowerbed. Green eyes, darling. Wherever did you get them? No secrets under your family's mosquito net, I hope.’(p.194)
At the same occasion, she says,

‘Forgive my bluntness, darling, but you are rather hairy. Pratap hates that. I've often heard him say Indian women remind him of wild boars, bristling with coarse black hair.’ (p.195)

Pratap also thinks that all Indian women are disgusting. Jaya endures all these bluntness of Pratap and Lady Modi silently. When it was confirmed that the Prince of Wales would be visiting to Sirpur on his tour of India, a great deal of preparation needed to be taken place. With great excitement Prince Victor and other nobles make arrangements for royal visit to the state. While Jaya was undergoing changes in her appearance and manners, the entire Royal Palace undergoes a facelift. The renovations are undertaken at a huge cost, at a time when Sirpur was devastated by flood. Maharaja Victor raised loans to exhibit extravagance and progress. The self-centered British did not bother about the welfare of the people but made huge profits by selling their merchandise to the indulgent native rulers. At this point, Jaya was informed that the people were no longer in awe of the British Empire; instead Gandhi's loincloth enthralled them.

Sirpur's preparation to welcome Prince of Wales coincided with the Nationalist struggle getting unprecedented momentum under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The Prince of Wales is hosted comfortably. Jaya manages to convince her husband and plays polo with the Prince instead of dancing with him. Prince of Wales congratulates Jaya for the best goal. In Calcutta, Jaya meets Mrs. Roy, but her spirits grew bitter with remorse when she learnt that the Sirpur
brothers raced and drank, and Pratap showered his tempestuous affections on Esme Moore, the dancer from the Globe Theatre. Jaya realized that her self respect was mortgaged to the Empire. Though her husband betrayed her, she never accused him of conjugal infidelity.

The amount spent for the celebrations on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales, had emptied the Sirpur treasury to a dangerous degree. Due to insufficient funds, Pratap is unable to travel abroad. He becomes furious when Victor sailed to Europe alone. Pratap spends the summer months in Kashmir with Esme Moore. By winter having exhausted his credit with the Calcutta Bankers, he instructs Jaya to prepare for a journey to Balmer to borrow money. ‘These damned fool bankers want me to start selling jewels, like some tradesman. There's nothing for it but to go to dusty old Balmer and ask Maharaja John for an advance on your dowry payments.’ (p.253)

This shows the mean attitude of Pratap and his selfishness in using Jaya as a tool for his status and money. Jaya tearfully narrates to Kuki-bai the humiliations inflicted on her by Pratap. The humiliations of last five years exploded inside her as she flungs herself into Kuki-bai's lap and sobbes her anguish into the scented skirt. Kuki-bai consoles Jaya saying that as per her horoscope Jaya would bear a son.

In her first visit to England with her husband, Jaya was highly appreciated as the most beautiful princess for her scintillating charm in the presentation ceremony before the Queen in England. In London Maharaja Victor was always at Cora Hart's elbow, showering expensive gifts on her. Jaya dissuades Cora Hart that the king would never receiver her. Cora suffers a change of heart. Ignoring Victor she announces her intention to marry a Texan. Unable to reconcile to a
life without Cora Hart, Maharaja Victor commits suicide. Modi passes on the sad message:

‘Oh! Darling, I’m sorry. Lady Modi took Jaya in her arms. Victor is dead. Pratap wants you to wait in Calcutta while he tries to keep the details of the suicide out of the Nationalist press.’ (p.278)

One becomes kind enough with Jaya to share the humiliations inflicted upon her. The way Pratap and Lady Modi snub her with satirical remarks is very pathetic. Though Jaya is aware of the harsh reality of the world, she could do nothing, except remaining a silent sufferer. It is also worth notable that the huge expense for the visit of the Prince of Wales is the sign of hypocrisy. Mehta here paints a true picture of lavish life styles of Royal Indian society, the way Victor and Pratap shower money after white women is evident in the novel.

Book three opens with the ceremony of the new king of Sirpur at the Kamini Temple. The Raj Guru begins the recitation of the Sirpur lineage and holding the Sirpur sword in his hand, he declaims to the new ruler, ‘This sword is the final power of the sovereign, the symbol of justice. But there is no justice without dharma, and the dharma of a king is righteous service to his people.’ (p.282). Prince Pratap, thus, takes over the change of throne as Maharaja of Sirpur. The urgency with which he fulfilled his need left Jaya bitterly regretting an intimacy that soiled her, as his remoteness had never done. Sirpur experienced a face-lift in connection with the hectic preparations for the viceroy's visit. It was a function arranged to welcome the Maharaja Pratap on to the throne of Sirpur that stands vacant due to Victor's demise. It was a customary on such occasion for the representatives of the British Empire to read the new ruler a homily.
The viceroy seemed pleased with the ceremony, and at the luncheon he complimented Jaya for the arrangements.

Jaya remembers the long years she had waited for Pratap to consummate their marriage. Now only the necessity of an heir forces her to admit the ruler to her rooms, and the palace doctors confirms at last that she was with child. When her son Arjun is born, Jaya felt secure for she had kept the Sirpur line intact that instilled hope in her after a series of severe buffettions. Maharaja Pratap had not only robbed her of dignity of being a wife, but also stole her rights of maternity by employing a wet nurse for the child.

Mehta exposes the extravagance and eccentric nature of Junagarh Nawab. Jaya and Pratap along with Lady Modi visit the Nawab of Junagarh to attend the wedding of his dogs. It is learnt that the Nawab provides all luxuries for his dogs, while his subjects suffer hunger and basic necessities. Here we have humorous dialogue between Jaya and Lady Modi:

Which poor girl is the Nawab marrying this time? That's the whole point darling.
He is not marrying a girl. He is marrying his favourite dog. Jaya nearly dropped the glass in her hand. The ruler of Junagarh is marrying a dog? Oh darling don't be ridiculous. The Nawab's favorite bitch is being married to a dog. (p.301)

The princely states were under the purview of the Butter Commission to plead for their rights guaranteed by treaty. The nationalists expected that Indians would be invited to sit on the Simmon Commission that will decide whether British India is ready for Self-Government. The
disgruntled Indian rulers panicked and rushed to Delhi to seek protection from the British. In Delhi, Jaya is greeted by a succession of Maharanis who bless Arjun on the occasion of his birthday. Jaya is uncertain whether her husband is taking the momentum of National events seriously, since he spent his days at the Flying Club. At this juncture, Jaya meets Major Osborne. A tremor of excitement passed through her when James took her hand into his. Jaya felt herself being drawn into his steady gaze, and wonders what her life would have been, if she had married a man like Osborne.

Maharaja Pratap insists Jaya to accompany him to the dinner meeting with the nationalists. Jaya meets two of the most formidable men in British India, Sardar Patel and Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Mehta also introduces us to Sarojini Naidu:

The plump woman whom Jaya had met years ago in Mrs. Roy's house in Calcutta broke from the circle. ‘My dear child. This is a surprise. Were you brought here by your old tutor?’ Jaya blushed as Mrs. Naidu's attention focused all eyes on her. There was laughter from the rulers that Sirpur's wife should be so well known to the Nightingale of India. (p.318)

Returning back to Sirpur House Pratap declares that after all this he has to present himself in Bombay to the Englishmen of the Butler Commission and will go to Calcutta for a little interlude from the tedium of politics. Jaya is fearful that Maharaja Pratap's indifference would offend the stern sahibs of the Butler Commission, and endanger her son's future. From the lady Modi's letter Jaya knows about Madame Enid and Esme Moore, and takes a sudden visit to a
brothel in Calcutta. Madame Enid enlightens her about the plight and pathetic conditions of the girls who are forced into prostitution. These children are the products of rape by the Britishers. But one of the prostitutes proclaims that she never allowed Maharaja Pratap to touch her for she realized that Pratap was his brother. Enid also exposes the fact that Esme Moore wanted to be in films, but Pratap persuaded her to become his mistress with the promise of marriage. Now she blackmalls Pratap. So in a weak moment, frightened Jaya asks Pratap to name her the Regent Maharani of Sirpur, until Arjun is of an age to take the throne.

Even after the Simon Commission report was published, it is learnt that the British Empire intended to retain its power. Jaya drives out of Sirpur House in Delhi, her young son on her lap, she saw the fury of Indians, for Britain had once again broken its promise of freedom. On the day of Arjun's fourth birthday, a bomb is thrown from the visitors' Gallery into the Treasury Benches crowded with Englishmen, while the viceroy is seated on his throne in the legislative Assembly. Bhagat Singh, the man who threw the bomb, defends his action in an overcrowed Delhi courtroom, saying that the attack was not directed against any individual but against an institution. Bhagat Singh's words are immediately censored. But Bhagat Singh's defense is spread by word of mouth throughout the subcontinent, and when he is condemned to be hanged; his name was intoned as a mantra of freedom. There was a spurt of revolution. Any Indian imitating the British is ridiculed. Maharaja Pratap complained that it is difficult to reach the Flying Club through the crowds who were spitting at the British car and beating their fists on it as they shouted, ‘British today! Shame! Shame! (p.349)

Maharaja Pratap does not need the advice of Jaya to return to Sirpur. Amidst the din of slogans,
lathi charge and bloodshed, Jaya is crest fallen when she heard the death of Pratap in a plane crash. Jaya is overcome by an agony of remorse, for it happened when Arjun is only four years old and when the entire nation is in turmoil of rage and discontent against the failure of the Round Table Conference.

The narration interweaves Indian history to with a larger frequency to take it to the larger frame of nation, and the sense of time in history. As the narration goes on, Indian freedom struggle becomes more active. The nationalists were expecting the self-government for India. But the Simmon Commission report was in favour of British. It is the climatic part of the novel, where the nationalists, unable to bear the report, opposes it very strongly and as a result BhagatSinh throws the bomb in legislative assembly and stirs the mind of Indian people as well as Britishers. His death becomes the mantra for freedom. At the same time, Prince Pratap also dies in a plane crash.

Book four celebrates Jaya as Regent. As the book advances and the freedom struggle gain momentum, the fate of the princely states gets more and more entangled with the rest of India. Gita Mehta reveals this by giving quotations from the proceedings of the Indian National Congress, from the speeches of National leaders, and from the utterances of Churchill. These quotations at the beginning of each chapter in book four serve as connecting links. The opening lines of the book four is like thus:

The embrace of the British Empire is a dangerous thing. It is not and cannot be the life giving embrace of an affection freely given and returned. And if it is not that, it
will be what it has always been in the past- the embrace of death.

-Indian National Congress

Unclean by the act of surviving her husband, Jaya had been confined to the airless puja room for thirteen days. Gita Mehta gives a pathetic description of Jaya's widowhood, in the following lines:

Jaya's toilette had taken only a moment. There were no glass bangles to be slipped onto her wrists; no long minutes spent combing the thick hair that had once fallen to her knees, no sindoor to mark the circle of matrimony on her forehead. She did not even have to cover her shaved head. A widow was not considered desirable, only unlucky. (p.355)

At the time of Arjun's coronation, the Raj Guru predicts a bad omen of the storm and also says that the priests must take custody of the child until the year of mourning is over. But Jaya's hope is raised by the minister of Agriculture: ‘If Maharani-sahib were to immerse herself in the waters of the holy river at Benares, she would be purified and the period of mourning ended.’ (p.357) At this juncture, Jaya receives gold bangles from Dungra - the symbol of brother's protection. On the first day of the New Year, Lady Modi visits Jaya. Here Gita Mehta presents her indifferent nature by her callous remarks. We also get the views of Indian national congress through her mournful expression. ‘They have decided to throw every Englishmen out of India. They don't want Dominion status any more.’ (p.361)
After a long gap of ten years, Jaya meets her mother at Dungra’s residence. Arjun is delighted to see Mahatma Gandhi in the ashram. It is understood that in his idyllic ashram, Gandhi is in search of the means to unite an unruly subcontinent without bloodshed. In a letter to the viceroy, Gandhiji says that he regards the British rule as a curse. He ends the letter in this way: 
This letter is not in any ways intended as a threat. Therefore, I am having it specially delivered by a young English friend who believes in the Indian cause. (p.367) 

The viceroy does not even reply to Mahatma’s letter, except not to defy the British Empire. It becomes necessary for Gandhiji to launch his Civil Disobedience movement against the British Empire. As a result, in the year 1930, Gandhiji marches towards the seacoast at Dandi where he breaks the British Empire's Salt Laws. He says, 'On bended knee I asked for bread and I received stone instead.'

Maharaja Arjun's procession journeyed up country for taking allegiance of his tribal subjects. James Osborne suggests to appoint a tutor for Arjun. On the advice of Osborne, Jaya appoints a young English tutor Mr. Stevens. Lady Modi observes all these that there was more than friendship between Jaya and James Osborne, chemistry that often sparks between a man and woman. She says…

‘Even if you are lonely, you would be foolish to forget Osborne's office. Major Osborne has always been attracted to you. I saw that during the Prince of Wale's visit to Sirpur. When the poor man couldn't keep his eyes off you, and I see it now, in the way he controls himself.’ (p.394)
Lady Modi and James Osborne advise Jaya to admit Arjun to a school in England to be away from Hindu-Muslim riots. Jaya reluctantly heeds his advice and admits Arjun personally to a school in England. This happens just after the demise of the Maharani-Jaya's mother. The arrival of Arun Roy brings some pleasant moments in Jaya's dreary life. Both of them go for hunting spree in the jungle on an elephant, which ends up in love:

Arjun Roy's lips brushed her neck and his fingers stroked her hair. Jaya was afraid to breathe, but on the platform high above the night animals, enclosed by leaves like black stains against the thick branches of the tree, she felt the lawyers' tenderness burning away the violent humiliation of her past, allowing her to repossess her soul each time her name was whispered into the darkness. (p.416)

When Jaya blames and slaps Arun for enticing her into his arms. Arun Roy retaliates that she had come of her own free will. He also threatens her that nothing would prevent him from telling the truth to her subject. This is how Arun Roy exploits and blackmails Jaya, on the contrary, James Osborne is also fascinated with Jaya, but he does not take advantage of his position. But Jaya wonders when she comes to know about the disclosement of his relations with Arun Roy in a report at Dehli.

As Hitler's armies marches into Poland, every member of Indian National Congress resigns from government in protest against India's being forced to enter another world war. Sixteen year old Arjun arrives from England at a time when Hitler had overrun France and Churchill became Prime Minister. On Arjun's persistence, Jaya allows him to take flying lessons.
Eighteen years old Arjun leaves the City Palace with his ceremonial sword. His troops follow on horseback, through the heavy jungle into the battle. When the Japanese recovers Rangoon and Arjun's army had managed to join the Sirpur Lancers, an aeroplane carrying Arjun with malaria and fractured leg arrives in Sirpur. Meanwhile the war in Europe ends with the news that America had dropped two atom-boms on Japanese cities and Arjun leaves for London for an operation.

Jinnah remains intransigent in his demands for Pakistan and takes most historic decision……. ‘We have said good bye to constitutions and constitutional methods’ (p.439). Arjun returns from London and enquires about the state. In response, he comes to know about a huge rally demanding a separate nation for the Muslims. Jaya's anxiety for her son's future turned into an inconsolable sorrow, when Arjun is killed in a Hindu-Muslim riot. Jaya is engulfed in a catharsis of unfathomed trauma and it took considerable time to recoup with the fortuitous nightmare. The rush of events did not allow Jaya to mourn her coveted son's death. She moved with the need of hour and decided to accept Sirpur to the Indian Union. She could not totally rely on Arun or James Osborne for she knew the harsh reality that Osborne would choose the Empire rather than support her at the time of crisis. This fact can be realized by James Osborne’s intention to leave India. ‘Everything I could do is finished, Bai-sa. It is time for me to go home. (p.459)

Though a chain of tragedies struck her, Jaya did not lose herself in the aura of despair, frustration and disillusionment. She endured through all vicissitudes with indomitable will. Born in a Royal family, Jaya is a long suffering woman, had a penchant to serve her people,
even as an ordinary citizen of her country. Jaya realized that she can’t escape destiny and the
words of the Raj Guru constantly rang into her ear: ‘Your dharma is protection. Bai-sa. You
cannot escape your destiny.’ (p.460)

Jaya's conscious decision to join the election fray after India attained independence is part of a
deeper realization and conviction that the Indian rulers have forfeited their claims to rule.' She
thought of making her life meaningful in serving her people not as a Maharani, but only as one
of them. Therefore she joins the democratic process by filling her nomination for general
election. The election officer seems to repeat what Maharaja Jai Singh had said years back,
when Jaya was an infant; ‘If the name is auspicious, let's call her Jaya, victory.’ True to her
name Jaya is an ultimate victor, who triumphantly surmounts all impediments. She dedicates
her life,

……. to fulfill her role as the guardian of her people, Jaya must first win her own
freedom then lead her kingdom through treacherous change of history to the
moment when palace and country will triumph over destiny.

Right from the begging to the end, the novel presents the constant struggle and crises that take
place in the life of Jaya. She is a child of Indian Renaissance, so she is trained and taught in
such a way that she can come out from the crises. She becomes the victim of injustice due to
Hindu orthodoxy. The orthodoxy makes her meek. She is from a royal family yet she refuses
like an ordinary woman. She sometimes disappoints, frustrates but she does not lose the battle.
The lessons of modernity she learnt from her childhood strengthen her in her critical times.
Modernity allows her to overcome all the obstacles. Gradually she raises her voice against injustice. As a result she is declared as the Regent Maharani of Sirpur. At the end of the novel she emerges as an independent woman – to whom the Hindu orthodoxy cannot adjust – of the Republic of India. Gita Mehta has attempted to present her ideal of an androgynous woman combing devotion, affection, care and endurance with fearlessness, courage and ambition in Jaya. Thus it is not only a historical fiction but a story of woman’s struggle to set her identity as a human being.
References


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.
