CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Among Indian women novelists in English Gita Mehta occupies a prominent position as a creative writer and also as a prose writer who has dwelt upon contemporary Indian social and political reality. Her works have not received as yet the attention they so richly deserve. Gita Mehta occupies a pride of place among novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Attia Hosain, Santha Rama Rau, Jai Nimbkar, Shobha De, Namita Gokhale, Gita Hariharan, and Arundhati Roy. These novelists have, broadly speaking, analysed in their fiction the socio-cultural modes and values that constitute Indian society. The chief contribution of these novelists lies in their exploring the moral and psychic dilemmas and repercussions which their women characters face in their efforts to cope with the challenges of life in the family, and society and life in the broader world of socio-cultural matrices. While some of these novelists have taken up the predicament of the new woman as their theme, Gita Mehta has widened her field of exploration in her fiction. She delves deep into a vital area of Indian culture that lies exposed to colonial culture. She deals, like Naipaul and Nirad Chaudhuri, but without the Swiftian overtones of their writing with the cultural landscape of India.
subjected to visible and invisible invasive attempts of western civilization to dominate it and to mimic it.

Each of the four novels *Karma Cola, Raj, A River Sutra* and *Snakes and Ladders* is noted for its brilliance of narration and stands apart for its varying subject matter. Gita Mehta uses an easy conversational style of writing and subtly explores the themes. A close reading of Gita Mehta's works reveals her interest in delineating instructors, teachers, monks, gurus, and political and social leaders. From her preoccupation with these "teachers," religious and secular, what is apparent is that they have a significant role to play in the life of the individual. The attack on their pretentiousness is more poignant in *Karma Cola*. The novel embraces an enormous variety of experience in the ashrams. The central issue in the novel is the gurus and their "spiritual bedlams." To the hordes of Westerners arriving in India to understand and embrace Indian culture what the deceitful gurus give is change of names and instant Nirvana. Nirvana, Karma, cosmic energy, Eternal Silence are metaphysical postulates whose essence their rational minds fail to grapple. Gita Mehta brings out the irony of the situation, when she interviews a Western inmate of an ashram:

"What are you doing in India?"
"I am being"
"Pardon?"
"Being"
The gurus in *Karma Cola* are shallow mendicants exploiting the gullible and the knowledgeable alike. Escaping from an unwanted past, the materially advanced society turned to India for spiritual knowledge. Building a cenotaph over their spiritual aspirations, the gurus enact their material drama with spiritual counters like Karma, Nirvana and so on. With an iconoclastic spirit Gita Mehta lashes out at the Indian gurus when she says: "The American poet Wallace Stevens reminded the West that the last illusion is disillusion. The Indian guru reminds the Westerner what lies beyond the last illusion." \(^2\) Sardonic and sometimes Swiftian, the novelist’s invective never deviates into cynicism. When the guru in an ashram in Western India with a large number of followers confides to a *Time* Magazine correspondent, “My followers have no time. So I give them instant salvation. I turn them into neosanyasis,"\(^3\) there is a tinge of sadness about the pervasive spirit of cultural decadence. It looks as though Nirvana for $100 a day and instant salvations are the outcome of the East-West encounters. The novel offers a satirical view of the pantomime quest for Karma. With savage irony Gita Mehta points out that intellectual dowsings in terms like Karma or Nirvana cannot achieve psychic transformations. Karma is not a commodity to acquire, as Americans have acquired materialistic gains by means of their striving. According to the *Time* magazine, Gita Mehta’s style reveals a witty documentary satire. In only 201 pages Mehta embraces an enormous variety of life and death. Her skepticism never descends to
cynicism. Given her subject this is a miracle of rationalism and taste. Gita Mehta's tough intellectual approach, rather uniquely combined with an unusual sense of humour produces carefully carved incidents, which are pure theatre, funny, and at the same time desperately true.

If *Karma Cola* is a study of the spiritual gurus, *Raj* throws light on the political leaders and Raj gurus and attacks the hypocrisy and sham in their life styles. The novel depicts the political turmoils and intrigues in royal India under the British Raj. It exposes the trials and tribulations, search for an inner recognition, colonial subjection, the craving for freedom, and such other aspects of the colonial rule in India. Spun around the central character Jaya Singh, the novel offers a vivid glimpse into an Indian woman's long moment in history. Born as a princess, Jaya Singh grapples with history in order to fulfil her role as the guardian of her people. Jaya's individual growth corresponds to a period of momentous changes that sweep across India as her great civilization heads inexorably towards the bloody struggle for Independence from the British Raj. Torn between tradition and Gandhian ideals, Jaya becomes a politically aroused leader who will guide her kingdom through a treacherously shifting world. Gita Mehta mentions this objective in the "prologue" to the novel.

...'Rulers are men and men are always frightened. A man cannot govern unless he confronts his own fear.'
Jaya was too young to understand that Maharajah Jai Singh was teaching his children Rajniti, the philosophy of monarchy, as it had been taught to prince after prince of the House of Balmer. Not until she became a ruler herself did she comprehend that the Maharajah taught his children the traditions of courage when he was himself a frightened man.¹

With its epic narrative style, taking in its sweep the drama of India’s struggle for Independence the novel brings out the first principle of *Rajniti*. It is that the people really matter and this in fact is the principle of democracy. It illuminates the history of India and leads the protagonist to learn a vital lesson in *Rajniti* which is that the will of the people is sovereign. With history and fiction so compellingly interwoven as in *Gone With the Wind*, the novel is a montage of modern India unmatched in sheer brilliance of detail and scope to any novel to-date. It presents richly decorated brocade over-sewn with sex, landscape, polo, politics and tragedy.

*A River Sutra* strikes a rather different note. Mehta weaves this novel around the myths of Shiva and Narmada and a ritual pattern of antiquity. The novel is a series of mythopoeic experiences as told to a retired bureaucrat on the banks of the river Narmada by a motley crowd of pilgrims. And the stories told are not stories about fairies. They tend to be quite savage. “Each tale is a major enquiry into the
tragic reality of life and brings with it a critical problem... There is a sensitized openness towards the analysis of the concept of morality and emotion leading to an orientation towards essential human experience." Gita Mehta's concern in this novel is with the unraveling of the deep feelings of the inner cognizance of man. All the characters in this novel are an unlikely assortment of paradoxes, tensions and confusions, with each one attempting to discover and interiorize the truth of his being in his own unique way.

The epic narrative style of Raj is totally absent in A River Sutra. Instead, a lyrical fluidity of language and narration is seen throughout the novel. Indira Nityanandam says:

\[\text{A River Sutra} \text{ reminds us of the gopurams of South Indian temples - crowded with a myriad sculptured figures - each an independent entity and yet part of a unified whole. The novel echoes the view that a novel is more a way of travelling than a secure niche, and more akin to the way a man enters and meanders through this world than an assured resting place in the afterlife.}\]

The narrative technique combines continuity and discontinuity, reconciliation of time and timelessness. Rama Nair says:

\[\text{The traditional form of the novel is replaced in A River Sutra by a didactic subdivision of its constituent elements into narratives noted for their brevity and romance. The irony of life itself}\]
is woven into the moral fabric of these tales. The organising principle of *A River Sutra* is conceived both temporally and spatially. The oracular tales of *A River Sutra* embody within themselves “fragments of significance” and derive from the epiphanic moment, the flash of instantaneous comprehension with no direct reference to time...

In this instance, myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual of self-discovery. The protagonist at the end of the novel is no longer detached and complacent about his choice of ‘Vanaprasthi’. The river sutras unsettle his subconscious, and unconsciously and ironically, that in his ‘epiphanic’ moment.7

In her attempt to explain something of modern India to herself, Gita Mehta reveals in the form of short essays in *Snakes and Ladders* some aspects of India, its history, its politics, its culture, its crafts and its economy. In this attempt the author tries to find a cohesive identity of India as a nation since its independence and concludes that the identity of India is discoverable in its plurality. Modern India with all its progress can only be recognized as an ancient civilization. Referring to the writer Alex Arenson’s acerbic observation in 1945 that India was a civilization, Gita Mehta quotes that “civilization is always a process: not a being but a becoming” and says:
Half a century later that observation still proves astute. Somehow India has managed to stay a civilization, still unpredictable, still surprising, still defying definition. Maybe India's indolence preserves her. Or her traditional fascination with unifying what appears fragmented. In any case, in a world of perpetual motion India remains a perpetual becoming, a vast and protean sea of human improvisations on the great dance of time.8

In the "Foreword" to the novel the author says:

India gained self-government in 1947. Living through our first half-century of nationhood has been 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 has been invented to illustrate our attempts to move an ancient land towards modern enlightenment without jettisoning from our past that which is valuable or unique.9

At every stage Gita Mehta's art of narration reveals a pattern of intramurality, a pattern of the contemporaneity of the past with the present. This vision of modern India deriving from a deep historical sense, from an understanding of the mind of India as it were, is rare in the field of the essay. With all his savagely ironical descriptions of the post-colonial mimicry, V.S. Naipaul in part reveals this technique in
India: A Million Mutinies Now. Unlike the sharp tone of *Karma Cola*,
the essays in *Snakes and Ladders* are nostalgic and gently ironic.
REFERENCES


