Chapter-8

Diasporic and Postcolonial elements in Gita Mehta’s works

Gita Mehta occupies an important space in the band of Indian writers. There are two reasons why her writings are significant. First, she lives in a postcolonial world and can see the period of India’s colonization from distance in time and space. In addition, she belongs to a family of freedom fighters and she herself has witnessed the movement. Thus her voice carries more authenticity. Second reason is that she was born in India and now she stays in the USA and England. Thus she squarely fits into the category of diasporic writers. In her specific case, there is less possibility of marginalization and uprootedness because of her status in the foreign land and her ability to come to motherland at her will respectively. This is how she adds a novel dimension to the term diaspora. At apparent level it may appear out of context to discuss the concepts of diaspora and postcolonialism because the aim of this research is to see the representation of India in Gita Mehta’s works. But whatever representation she has made has obviously been filtered in the terms of diaspora and postcolonialism. It is her migrant’s status in a foreign land that may have compelled her to perceive India in different terms than a native writer. Therefore, before we conclude, it becomes necessary to see how she depicts India and her culture in her works as a postcolonial and diasporic writer.

Postcolonialism is a literary term that emphasizes the impact of the culture of the European empires on their erstwhile colonies. The approach involves the critical examination of European representation of colonial people and the production of ‘counter discourse’. It is designed to resist the colonial encroachment of European culture on former
colonies. Diaspora is comparatively a recent phenomenon. It is the writing of the migrant people living in foreign lands. They generally come across the problems of marginalization, uprootedness, cultural and social alienation. In this kind of writing there is an imaginative gratification of the desire to connect to the homeland or to go back to the homeland.

A diasporic experience is the one of being positioned as an outsider to the mainstream society. Robert Young explains this term as an experience of a person who never qualifies as a norm; of a person who is not authorized to speak but is always spoken of. The world in which he or she lives exists for others. This is the process of exclusion which does not let an outsider settle in the mainstream society and this process generates the energy of the diasporic writing. On the same line, postcolonial theory also has these elements. The feeling of being marginalized and the torment of being denied the rights is deeply embedded in the postcolonial psychology. Postcolonialism talks in the terms of issues like gender, ecology, social justice and power structure. Though it is not a scientific theory, it operates on the basis of relativity; relativity between ideas and practices, between harmony and conflict, between different people and their culture. Certain other aspects like migration, multinationalism and globalization are commonly found in both, diaspora and postcolonialism. Because of these events, the twentieth century diaspora has been born. It is because of migration and multinationalism that history and culture have become ‘shared’concepts. This is how the questions of privilege and power arise and superiority of the western culture is denied. The central quest of postcolonialism is to long for reclaiming an identity which was marginalized earlier. The narrative voice is of resistance; to counter the denial and misrepresentation. On the other hand, the central quest of diaspora is to long to recreate motherland in symbolic terms. Now central to both are
the notions of nostalgia and reclamation of identity. Here the term nostalgia goes beyond its interpretation of ‘longing for past’ or ‘home sicknesses’. The past is recreated and restored to a pre-colonial time. It is the process of reinterpretation of past. Then this recreated past is relived somewhere else which is not motherland. This ‘homeland’ is recreated as a consolation that there still exists the lost world and it also serves as refuge. Although the sense of loss and the pain of broken links persist, this recreated past allows one to replant this past in a new culture for survival needs (psychological and emotional survival).

Indian theorists have certain important and grave questions regarding postcolonial and diasporic representation of home and culture, ethnicity and identity. As the theories explain, the recreation of past creates a utopian version; else it is a static picture. In both the cases, the changes brought about by forces like globalization and multiculturalism are neglected. In a sense it is no better than playing the very colonial game of romanticizing the East as exotic; an incomprehensible land of myths and mysteries. In other cases, writing becomes elegiac as the writers try to look for the western approval, vindicating their authority. The complexity of diaspora lies in two simultaneous demands; on one hand there is longing for the homeland; on the other there is a practical need for survival in the ‘other’ land. This creates a subtle matrix of relationship between the diasporic subject, the homeland and the host country.

The theory of postcolonialism has always been an issue of debates in literary and cultural studies. It lacks concrete theories and ideological formations. Therefore it lacks in a unified critical perspective. It is used as an umbrella term and covers a complicated phenomenon called history. Thus it resists a single and specific definition. Every erstwhile colony is radically different from others in the terms of cultural, and national and historical aspects. Every ingenious culture experiences
domination, enslavement, marginality and multiculturalism in an indigenous way. In addition the experience of being colonized does differ from nation to nation. Thus it goes without saying that every nation’s postcolonial writings will be considerably different from that of other nations. Therefore postcolonialism has to have a wider perspective. Jasbir Jain states that the origin of the word postcolonial is vague, “It has provoked a range of definitions and theories...analysis and critiques. It has also evoked anger and resentment.” (Contesting Postcolonialism, p.12-13)

Diasporic writings also address these questions; recall of homeland, ancient glorious past, the urge to return and impossibility of return. The major concern remains space and dislocation. Migration causes dislocation and the resultant effect is that of sense of loss. What is more significant here is not diasporic longing for home, but is it the push and pull of their in-between situation. ‘Home’ may be an illusory place or a fictional world constructed through migrant’s imagination. But it remains a preoccupation of the people migrated to the modern metropolitan centers from erstwhile colonies. This is how the diasporic writers try to resist their incongruous situation.

The existence of resistance is indicative of the presence of power. Since the notion of power is inherent in colonial situation, postcolonial writings concentrate on resistance and subversion. This is the reason why we generally come across terms like ‘center’ and ‘periphery’, ‘dominant’ and ‘silent’, ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’, and the ‘hegemony and hybrid’.

Theoretically women experience diaspora in three different conditions. First, when they grow up in a foreign land with migrant parents. Second, when they get married, they get uprooted from parental home and homeland. Third, when they consciously opt for their choice to
go to some western metropolitan center to pursue higher studies or to grab lucrative job offers. In their real life situation, they are caught between all the psychological problems of diaspora such as dislocation, non-belonging, marginalization and cultural dissonance. In addition to these problems, there is a variety of oppressive conditions and discriminatory practices in the terms of gender both inside and outside community. Men expect the women to remain within the cultural parameters. On the contrary, women face the urge to break free and want to transcend the dogmatic constraints.

Gita Mehta has written two novels- Raj and A River Sutra-, one non-fiction- Karma Cola- and one collection of short essays- Snakes and Ladders. Her last book Ganesha explains a Hindu deity Ganesha. These works cannot be immediately put into the category of diasporic writings. But they are diasporic in more than one ways. These works are diasporic in innovative ways. They are not dominated by the traditional diasporic patterns of marginalization, identity politics and ethnicity. On the contrary, they have evolved different narration techniques. These techniques do convey the notion of ‘otherness’ with a faint flavor of irony. The ironic tone is directed towards the peculiarities of both, the motherland and the foreign land. Another technique is of self-appraisal. Her works have a tendency to revisit and re-vision the past but it does not come out of longing. Rather than creating an imaginative motherland to subdue up rootedness, there are conscious efforts to preserve the indigenous identity of home culture and to show the right image of India. In Karma Cola Gita Mehta laughs at both, the western gullibility and contemporary Indian pseudo spirituality. In A River Sutra, the focus is on Indian mythology and cultural life which existed in past and up to certain extent does persist. In Raj, the interrogation is into the nature of native princely India within the Imperial British India. In Snakes and Ladders, Mehta returns to the homeland and highlights the multicolored
picture of contradictions which prevails in her homeland. The author’s relationship with the motherland operates in very subtle manner as she looks back in awe and wonder, amusement and skepticism.

There is a broad categorization under which new diasporic writings can be studied to understand the author’s relationship with the motherland. These categories are: exotica, history, fantasy, collusion and use of third space. These categories explain that the diasporic writer’s situation is always on the flux and one has to constantly reinvent himself and work out new strategies to relate to his acute experiences. When we look at Gita Mehta’s works in the light of above mentioned categories, we find that each book fits into a specific category. In A River Sutra, the author looks at the homeland from a distance in time and space. It creates a world of myths and an exotic ambience. Thus it can be categorized as exotica and fantasy. In Raj she attempts to revisit the past and thus revision the history. Snakes and Ladders is again a work of collusion and history. It makes an honest attempt to look back at India as she was. What adds to this book is the author’s bemused look as an outsider or at least a look from distance. Indian aspects are described in a manner that it becomes ‘assault on the senses’ and ‘assault of the senses’. In Raj, the author has tried to form a self-definition by creating and recreating the colonial past. In Karma Cola, cultural conspiracy and complexity are at work. In all her works, Gita Mehta has ruled out the possibility of return to the homeland. But at latent level, at unconscious level of mind, there persists an urge of the unfulfilled desire. In her specific case, she is well set in the USA and England in social as well as economic terms. Therefore more than the urge to return to the homeland, it is her urge to uphold the homeland in the eyes of the host country.

If we assess Gita Mehta’s works as a whole, there is always a forward movement. It vindicates the argument that the author is not
caught between the two opposing worlds. It is not the existence of contradictions but of dynamic existence. For her, interrelationship of the host country and motherland produces a satisfactory self-image. In her interview, she herself has made it clear that the experience of living in three different continents is enriching:

There is a tremendous richness of living on three continents. The magic of America is the can-doism, it gives me the belief that anything is possible. Each time I finish a book and I think I’ll never write another. America makes me think, ‘Yeah, I’ll have another shot’. London’s great virtue is that, as the capital of an empire, its libraries have staggering material on India. And because of the British reticence, it’s easy to be alone and write there. My heart is in India—it’s home—so when I’m there I don’t write. I just let it all seep through in my prose. (Gita Mehta: Making India Accessible p.53-54)

This expression of her ease, comfort, social status and economic stability immediately puts her works in different category. A general diasporic experience is in sharp contrast with her experience. For example, Bharti Mukherjee’s character, Jasmine, remarks

The country has so many ways of humiliating, of disappointing. There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams. (Jasmine, p. 21)

Thus Gita Mehta’s acknowledged status in the ‘foreign land’ allows her to derive her material boldly from Indian culture, history, mythology and religiosity.
Gita Mehta displays a tendency to glorify her motherland. In order to achieve this goal she also creates an imaginary motherland. Among all her works, *A River Sutra* is the best example of this tendency. The long descriptive passages and themes of certain stories have been questioned. For example, the story of the courtesan’s daughter has glorified the life of a courtesan. There is a romanticized description of exotic romance in the Haveli life and justification of their importance in the name of store house of courtesy. They are described as versatile ladies who claim to be the most learned women of India. They were supposed to know about everything: sixty four arts from architecture to zoology, painting, flower arrangements, music language, philosophy, jewelry, literature, mathematic and so on.

There are passages after passages that celebrate the significance, learning and expertise of courtesans. The author is at pains to use the courtesan as a mouthpiece to convey to the readers the efficiency of their lives. It is an attempt to take out the stigma attached to the profession:

To give such a compliment is one of the things we taught these princes. But to teach a prince the subtle grading of color or the microtones of melody, to educate a young man’s palate so he becomes an epicure, to introduce him to the alchemy of scents- this was the most demanding part of our education. You see, we were forbidden to voice our instructions. (*Karma Cola*, p. 202)

Even such description is not enough. Mehta weaves other impressive images of the courtesans to drive the nail into the minds of readers that they were not mere dancing girls. They were socially useful and highly respected. The courtesan’s grandmother was an expert in dance and music.
We come across one more exotica in the form of the Executive’s story. It is not a simple tale of aberration of love. It goes beyond love and shows how life had been for the colonial estate managers. Nitin Bose himself was aware of the ‘Englishness’ of the place. He describes it as the realm of the British fantasy untouched by the modern India. The temporal setting of Nitin Bose’s life is postcolonial time but his life carries the colors of the colonial masters. When he reaches the tea estate, he assumes the role of a ‘Pukka Sahib’. It is clearly suggestive of the colonial dominance. He vehemently gives orders to servants. It proves the point that colonialism does not end with the colonial rule. The two aspects of colonization, of being dominated and of domination in post-colonial time do persist for a long time. Reading in-between the lines informs us that Bose’s article on tribal life and rituals carries an echo of colonial attitude. From another perspective, the elite class of independent India carries the look of superiority to the tribal. So the tribal are still in a state of colonization even in free democratic country. It suggests a very deep impact of colonized psychology. Once a race is colonized, the traces of colonial psychology are almost everlasting.

The musician’s daughter with ugly appearance creates an enchanting world of music with musical notes and her veena. There is pages long description of musical note found in the nature. The correlation between the musical notes of the instruments and the natural revelations of the same code is exotic. Birds, animals and trees teach the rudiments of music to his daughter. It is suggested that music, when learnt in this passion and dedication, leads one to salvation. But statements like the following can reinforce the western romanticism of the East, “The Vedas say that by playing veena, with the correct rhythm, keeping its notes and characters intact, a man can hear the sound and attain salvation.” (A River Sutra, p. 207).
In *A River Sutra* in particular, Gita Mehta’s efforts are to impart subtle delicacy of Indian culture through various stories. She does not lack knowledge of music and her authenticity is beyond doubt. But there are experts who opine that while writing for the western audience she has missed the essential flavor. She is criticized for not having the scent and sound of the land. Usha Bande writes:

It is generated because of her diasporic situation in which she tends to look at the land and look at it from distance in time and space. It could be because she reflects on the issue of identity when confronted with otherness, and the process of reflection-evocation, using the prop of memory, helps in visualizing beauty and richness in retrospect. (Gita Mehta: *Writing Home/ Creating Homeland*, p. 37).

Her works are set in India. They speak for India, her culture, mythology, rich traditions and religiosity. Even in single work, the tone varies. Sometimes it is ironical; sometimes it is serious; more often it is the tone of demystifying of cultural concepts that the West generally associates with India.

*Snakes and Ladders* is another significant work from the point of view of diasporic writing. Though in the very preface, Gita Mehta clarifies that the essays are written to explain India to herself, we can say that they are for the western audience as well. The first three parts are written with no sparing sarcasm and criticism of the post independent India. The book seems to be her statement that India people lack in proper governance. As a piece of diasporic writer, it may also be a kind of justification of the western approach to India as a corrupt country. However, the later part of the book reveals another tendency of diaspora; to glorify the mother land. She praises the vividness of Indian life and praises the contradictions. In the last essay, “The Leisure Time”, she
evokes a ‘romantic’ atmosphere with the help of myriad of indigenous sounds and smells which are indispensible elements of common Indian life. Even here, the description lacks the original touch. It seems that what she describes is at the level of ‘seeing’ and not ‘feeling’. In other words, India is seen through binoculars. In this way only colors can be captured, not the essence. The following are few lines from this essay:

The scent of parched earth in the monsoon rains
When peacocks fan their tails to dance.
The green sweep of parakeets crossing the sunset.
The popping of water lilies, the snarling of pi-dogs,
The koyal bird crying for rain
Glass Bengals sold by lantern light, fragile color fracturing the dark

(Snakes and Ladders, p. 286-287)

In her works, Gita Mehta shows India’s attractions and projects an Indian world-vie. Her approach is neither of self-denigration nor of mere self-appraisal. In this context the basic diasporic elements like rootlessness, marginalization, alienation and longing for home are not clearly traceable. As mentioned earlier, there is a constant movement in her work. Snakes and Ladders has an autobiographical element in the initial essays. But what is a bit strange is the impersonal tone in autobiographic description. She does not mention her home. Her parents are not named. Her uncle who was sent to Kalapani is not named either. Thus there are no psychological implications of diasporic writing. After the first chapter, the essays are on people, leaders, politics, places and so on.

Raj can be considered as Gita Mehta’s major statement on colonialism in the postcolonial terms. Her diasporic writing is innovative but her postcolonial writing is typical. There is recurrence of the
concepts of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’, of colonized-colonizer, of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’. She depicts the dominance and exploitation of the colonizers in very clear terms. The power structure is described and social injustice is narrated. The novel does not demand the long denied identity but it puts the inhuman face of the colonizers boldly:

The sovereignty of the British crown is supreme in India, and therefore no ruler of an Indian State can justifiably claim to negotiate with the British Government on an equal footing. Our supremacy is based not only upon treaties but exists independently of them. The Angrez are worse than money lenders. They steal everything we have and still say we are in their debt. (Raj, p. 395)

The psychological aspect of colonization is brilliantly portrayed in this novel. How the dominance of the colonizing culture deeply affects the native psychology and the notions of superiority and inferiority become an integral part of collective unconscious is portrayed with confident stroke. People like Prince Pratap, Tikka and Victor suffer from duality of culture and since they are in powerful position, they make others suffer as well.

In A River Sutra, the narrator is nameless and homeless. No biographical information is available except he was a bureaucratic and after his retirement he comes to Narmada Guest House for peace and tranquility. Karma Colahas numerous faceless wonderers. In Raj, Jaya is twice displaced. Once when she gets married and enters into a world completely alien to her; second time, when she is rejected by her husband. Being uprooted from Balmer in the northwest to Sirpur in northeast is a kind of internal diaspora. (Even in Snakes and Ladders, a gentleman from Chennai tells Gita Mehta that he was living abroad, in
Delhi) There is one more uprootedness in Jaya’s character. She is uprooted from her culture when the Maharajah asks her to get rid of her native culture and adopt the British culture.

Thus, as a postcolonial and diasporic writer, Gita Mehta attempts to depict India. On one hand there is a tendency to uphold the native culture; to demystify and thereby to justify it; to describe the damage done by the prolonged period of colonization. On the other hand, she herself brings out the weaknesses, issues of caste and gender discrimination boldly. It seems that while portraying present India, she simultaneously shows what she was and what she could have been.