Chapter-9
Conclusion

It is an acknowledged fact that the history of India and Indian culture is unfathomable. The deeper you go, the more wayward you sway. The temporal element of the history is as wide as life itself. What adds to this vastness is the colossal size of the spatial element. Though India is considered as a single unit and Indian culture is perceived as a singular phenomenon, the diversity within the country and culture is almost beyond comprehension. After the inception of the Indus Valley civilization, it has not remained intact. There have been upheavals. India has witnessed a number of invasions on her. The invaders brought with them their own culture and gradually there was assimilation of the races. However, their indigenous cultures were separate phenomena, but there was a cultural interchange up to considerable extent. Keeping in mind these facts, Gita Mehta commands respect from the literary cannon because in her works she has dealt with Indian culture, religions, mythology, spirituality, social aspects and political upheavals of the recent times. It is not less than a herculean task. Because of her status as a diasporic writer, it requires lot of courage, sound knowledge and clarity of thought to write about the homeland as the western critical cannon is always ready to come down heavily on things Indian with common and biased charges like ignorance, blind faith, superstition, orthodoxy and unscientific approach.

In the terms of Gita Mehta’s representation of India and Indian culture, we can draw two broad categories (however, these categories are for the convenience of analysis only). One set of works deals with India as a nation; the spirit of nationalism, transition from princely states to a
Republic and political affairs of the independent country. This category includes Raj and Snakes and Ladders. The other set deals with a topic which is intricate in nature and has multifold difficulties from the viewpoint of literary representation. It talks about Indian culture, its mythology, religious beliefs and spiritual concepts. The works that fall under this category are A River Sutra, Karma Cola and Ganesha.

In the first category, Raj captures pre-independent India. It describes the life of Maharajahs, Maharanis, Princesses and of common people during that period. She has given a minute description of the set up of kingdoms and their governance. With a microscopic eye, she looks at the pros and cons of monarchy. There is depiction of ideal kings like Maharajah Jai Singh and Maharajah Dungra whose governance, though in monarchical fashion, was not least inferior to democratic set up. The original doctrines of Rajniti—governing policies—have been upheld. She has taken pains to show to the world that the Indian concept of Kingship was not autocratic and the kings were also bound by laws and duties. The welfare of the subject, development of the state, just system and limitations of kings had been the characteristics of Rajniti. But she is not blind to the difference between the ideal and the real. She shows deterioration and misuse of power and public wealth through characters like Prince Pratap, Maharajah Victor and the Nawab of Junagadh. In the true spirit of a postcolonial writer, she has shown the British air of superiority, exploitation, savage subordination and injustice in very clear terms. The acts of the destruction of cultural pride and self-respect, and of injecting inferiority into the natives’ psyche are unforgivable. The narration of how the British sucked Indian wealth and how even the millions of people starving to death did not appeal them is quite moving. Detailed discussion of second chapter brings the fact to the surface that what India is today is because of the British rule which lasted over centuries. Gita Mehta, in the guise of a literary work,
obliquely states that India could have been better had there been no colonization of the race. The helpless situation of the princely states has been explained to the readers in sympathetic terms.

A faint flavor of feminism is discernible in Raj. The characters like Jaya, Maharani Jai Singh and some other female characters put forth the predicament of women. The situation of women in pre-independent India was pathetic. The way Jaya’s life comes to her as a ‘given’ element and the way decisions taken by male members almost ruin her life, show that to be a woman in that time was not least better than colonization of the British. The characteristics of feminine gender that emerge out of Raj are life behind purdah, minimal or no education, no exposure to the outside world, no rights to take decision and almost absolute invisibility in social and political life. However, she does not miss to show the improvement in the status of women along with the spread of nationalism. The author is not least hesitant to include savage and inhuman sati tradition to the readers (it is important to note here that majority of her audience is believed to be the West).

Snakes and Ladders capture the post-independent India. The Indian scenario after independence is not very encouraging. Though the colonial rule ended, the democratic set up could not bring major changes in the sphere of common life. As Gita Mehta wittily remarks, the destiny of the country has been at the mercy of ‘chance’ factor. She painfully notes that the initial goof ups between the priority to agriculture and industrialization harmed the progress of the nation in the very embryonic stage. Again, she does not hesitate to show the corrupt side of India as a country. She heavily comes down on leaders like Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. A clear tone of anger and a faint tone of regret is discernible in the narration of events obliquely mentioning that India, while it should have been preoccupied with progressive steps, was in fact being devoured
by her own leaders. She has also pointed to the fact that much celebrated ‘unity in diversity’ has been reduced to a happy concept only. In reality, it has been a threat to the integration of the nation. Never has it allowed to emerge India as one nation. A grave issue of poverty and the poor for which India has always been blamed gets an attention of the author in this work. She looks at the fact from various points of view. The penury and subhuman condition of the rag pickers makes the readers grief-stricken. The government which is liable for the betterment of the poor turns a cold shoulder to the reality. The upper class, like that newspaper tycoon, uses the poor but has apathy for their predicament. With reference to her status as a diasporic writer, the work is significant as it evokes a sense of romantic description of India in the later part of the book.

Coming to the other set of works which investigates into the cultural aspects of India, Karma Cola is a significant statement of the author. By referring to the influx of the Hippies and others, Mehta shows that the West has always romanticized the East and considered India as a land of mysteries. India does have sound spiritual concepts and transcendental approaches. But the requirements to pursue this spirituality are those of which the West is completely devoid. Surrender to the Brahman (the Absolute) cannot be done on the basis of rational inquiry. Even then if such attempts are made, the result will not be different than Karma Cola. She has taken pains to show that the principle of Karma is a complex matter and every Tom, Dick and Harry cannot practice it. 1970s and 1980s witnessed major influx of westerners who had come in search of self-realization, spirituality, peace and Moksha- salvation. But she does not hold only one party as a culprit. She also takes to tasks Indian fake gurus and their agents. Commercialization of spiritual concepts brings comic effect on the readers. Even the gullibility of the westerners is productive of laughter.
The rationality of a westerner is under serious question when the author shows a sweeper lady talking about the fakeness of the gurus which the so called rational creatures could not perceive. But Gita Mehta has taken care to make it sure that the light tone of the narration does not overshadow the grave reality in which millions of human lives were wasted and devastated. The disturbance of the influx on the life of common people, on the society, on the economy and on the moral aspects of Indian community has been noted artistically. Karma Cola is significant from the point of literary representation in the sense that though it is a non-fictional work, it rarely sounds to be so. The chapters are connected in a forward movement and the flow of the narration is like the one of a fictional story. This quality of fiction in a non-fiction work is worth noting.

A deliberate attempt to arouse Indian ethos has been made in her fiction A River Sutra. The framework of the novel itself is derived from ancient method of storytelling- stories within story. The prime purpose of such structure was not merely to entertain but to teach the intricacy of human life; so seems to be purpose of this novel. The dominant motif of the discourse is the River Narmada symbolically unifying India. The people who come to the Narmada are not evaluated on the basis of their religious, social and economic status. Each story takes the readers into a separate realm of culture may it be Jain philosophy, Sufi tradition, nuances of Indian classical music, concept of Naga Sadhu and so on. For example through the Monk’s story, Gita Mehta reveals the basic aspects of Jainism. In order to prevent suffering, one must be capable of suffering and the path of spiritual progression can be initiated by humility. It seems to be an effort to explain to the western readers the concept of renunciation. Another concept which has been brought out of the shell of wrong notions is that of Naga Sadhus. She has glorified the character of Professor Shankar or Naga Baba and shown to the readers
what it really means to be such ascetic. The power, both spiritual and physical, he carries is commendable. Though a general tendency may be there to laugh at such naked ascetics, they are the ones who have transcended human limitations up to certain extent. Indian mythology has often been misinterpreted as superstitious approach. The author provides a counter argument in this novel and implies that even myths are loaded with wisdom. The myth that the Narmada saves from the poison of a serpent sounds superstitious but when the serpent is seen as a symbol the desire, suddenly the real meaning is grasped. The Indian mythology as a whole is beyond the scope of a literary work, but such a remark on even a single myth removes the stigma of superstition from it. The India she describes in the novel is pristine, lively and metaphysically strong. She seems to have been in poetic mode while writing the novel. The novel is also an effort of the author to create an imaginary homeland and to revel in the ancient concepts. It may be a seen as a gratification of the desire to go back to motherland in a metaphoric manner.

Among all her works, Ganesha can be considered as a deliberate and direct attempt to explain Indian religiosity. In this non-fictional work she explains the Hindu deity called Ganesha. The way she describes the symbolism of Ganesha is worth noting. It is a clear statement of a diasporic writer that Hindu religion is not based on superstitions and supernatural concepts; nor is there total absence of rationality and logic. In fact, Hindu religion has been intelligently designed to guide human beings in the intricacies of life. It has always rescued its followers in the moments of psychological crisis. However, one needs to understand it in its true sense.

After analyzing Gita Mehta’s representation of India in her works, one has to praise her for the neutral approach she maintains in her works. In the case of a diasporic writer it generally happens that one
writes in the western framework. Thus the representation of Indian reality ultimately gets sidelined and remains marginalized or invisible. She does not exhibit the tendency to seek the western patronage. There is no denial to the fact that there she makes a deliberate attempt to explain Indian concepts of mythology, spirituality, culture and even contemporary socio-politico-economic situation. But one cannot trace undue glorification of any of these aspects. With a commendable stability she shows the good and the bad side of her motherland. For example, the concept of Indian kingship is justified by Maharajah Jai Singh and its vulnerability is characterized by Prince Pratap. With no mark of hesitation she describes predicament of Indian women. While showing the brighter side of the community of Naga Sadhus, she touches an extremely sensitive point of untouchability in Hindu community. More importantly in Karma Cola she holds both the parties, the West and the East, responsible for the anarchy. She describes the degradation of Hippies into drug paddling with the same severity as describing the conmen sadhus. The later part of Snakes and Ladders romanticizes India but the initial part heavily criticizes her. In Raj, she depicts the movement of Indian independence in a proud manner. But the time of independence is marked with partition and bloodshed of human slaughters. The communal violence in Sirpur epitomizes the barbarism of these thoughtless killings of people in the name of religions.

Her works penetrate Indian cultural aspects. As mentioned earlier, the concepts are endless and therefore she has made a ‘convenient selection’. But whatever aspects she explains reveal the real essence behind them. In A River Sutra the significance of river in human civilization has been explained. The Narmada has been regarded as a sacred river which washes away sins. If we break the apparent interpretation and refer to this quality in the light of the novel, we can say that the river bank is a reservoir of human experiences. It has
endless lessons to teach and thus one undergoes the process of enlightenment and purification. Similarly the concept of Karma has been explained in *Karma Cola*. We can add to the list the concepts of courtesans, dacoits as social rebel, possession of self by spirit (in Nitin Bose), Indian classical music, Sufi tradition, Lord Ganesha and loaded symbolism, renunciation of worldly life, ascetics, tribal ethos and so on.

A striking quality of Gita Mehta’s works is that they are accessible to everyone in the sense of understanding. The flow goes lucidly and we come across depiction of various aspects in simple terms. Whether it is spiritual, religious, social, political or economic aspect, one can easily understand it. Thus her image that emerges out of her works is that of a ‘down to earth’ author. The use of language is not full of pedantic vocabulary. Though she has employed the technique of story within a story in a novel, it does not sound complicated at all. In the terms of techniques of narration and characterization, she adheres to common standards and does not exhibit experimental tendency. Her characters are also down to earth and a common Indian can easily identify with them. There is a typical flavour of Indianness in her works. The selection of language, events, stories, interaction among characters and special setting are deeply died and steeped in Indian colours.

In reading Gita Mehta’s works, we come across various categories of literary writing; a non-fiction, a historical novel, a novel with Indian aesthetics of storytelling, and a collection of essays. These works clearly reveal the author’s faith in her own culture and traditions. But she is not unaware of the powerful influence of materialism and the trend of diminishing values. But her disappointment is colored with optimism.

As a postcolonial and diasporic writer, Gita Mehta does take the ‘central position’ and makes representation of India and her culture. From the vantage point of distance in time and space she looks at these
aspects. She has used the means of literary articulation to set herself in the role of a spokesperson of the culture and thereby she seems to be problematizing the question of cultural identity.