Chapter 1: Introduction

There have been arguments which try to portray Indian English literature as an alien element to Indian literature. One of these arguments is that it is written in an alien language; and these works are written for the foreign readers who crave for a different kind of taste. Again, they are against the notion of English being used by Indians for creative purpose. Since Indian English literature is the product of writers who are very much Anglicized either in their way of life or in their intellectual make-up, it is far removed from real Indian life, Indian traditions and Indian culture. Thus, according to them, it cannot and does not reflect Indianness or Indian problems; it is not Indian because it does not incorporate Indian spirit.

An honest overview of the contemporary scenario of Indian English literature immediately makes the above arguments cliché. Indian English literature has now started receiving serious attention of literary historians. It is a proof in itself that it is growing in quantity as well as in quality. Despite a general deterioration in the standard of English studies, more people, at present, read and understand this language and an Indian author can now largely depend on Indian readership. It is legitimate to view Indian English literature as a curious native eruption, an expression of creative genius of Indian literary scene. Indians have been writing in English since decades for communicating with one another and with the outside world for achieving self-expression artistically. From being a curious native explosion, Indian English has now become a new form of Indian culture, a voice in which India speaks. While Indian authors, poets, novelists, essayists and dramatists have been making significant contributions to world literature since the pre-
Independence era, the past few years have seen a massive flourishing of Indian English writing in the international market. Not only are the works of Indian authors writing in English soaring on the best-seller list, they are also receiving a great deal of critical acclaim.

Even when we write in English one thing is common. It is that we are preoccupied with things Indian- Indian themes, characters, life, manners and even Indian totems and taboos. It is the preoccupations of the Indian writers in English that majority of the Indian English novels have embodied the idea of propagating topical interest only. But at the same time it is because of this reason that these novels are invariably national in tone. The aim of this research work is to study Gita Mehta’s works and find out how she has replicated India in her works. But before we focus on Gita Mehta as an individual literary personality of the phenomena called Indian English literature, it is required to have a bird’s eye view over beginning and development of Indian English literature.

Indian English literature is a natural product of the Indianization of English language to express national sensibility. Thus Indian English literature is an outcome of eventual and eventful encounters between India-her society and culture on one hand and England- her language, society and culture on other. The connection of India was effectively established with England in the first half of the seventeenth century. The battle of Plassey in 1757 established East India Company as the ruler of Bengal. In the guise of their trade, they implemented their real plan of colonizing the whole country. But at the same time the efforts to shake Indian roots set the process of modernization and formed the part of Indian renaissance. Simultaneously, Indian English literature was conceived. In Sri Aurobindo’s words, Indian renaissance was “the attempt of a reawakened national spirit to find a new impulse of self
expression which shall give the spiritual force a great reshaping and rebuilding." (The Renaissance in India, p.397)

Even a precise survey of the history of Indian English Literature throws light on the various aspects of Indian English Literature. From the very beginning of Indian English Literature, it is easy to trace that the prose writings revolve around various subjects but the society, the culture and the politics in India hold the centre place among all of them. All major prose writers and novelists such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tagore, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, M. Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, G.V. Desani etc. were involved in social, cultural and political activities in one way or other and had written on the relate issues.

If we begin to focus on culture or cultural representation, we start confronting with a number of issues. On one hand the cultural boundaries are dissipating and therefore it has become impossible to talk of cultures as self-contained and authentic wholes. On the other hand the Post-colonial discourse has put this liberal concept into a margin and postulated a new paradigm on cultural encounters. At present we are witnessing a time in which we are neither able to uphold our own culture nor to compromise with the western culture. Right from the beginning, the British had uprooted our sound cultural heritage. We have gone to the extent of being ignorant of the things Indian. It is high time for us to stop and look back at the cultural heritage. At such juncture, literature can and has come to the rescue. There is a band of writers who incorporate Indian culture, history and Indian way of life into their literary works. Such works put things Indian on the universal platform.

Gita Mehta squarely fits into this frame of mind. Her works are woven around Indian themes and Indian way of life. Her birth in a family
dedicated to the freedom movement has rooted her deeply as well as firmly in the Indian soil. In any role, whether it is a novelist or journalist, she tries to uphold India and Indian culture. In whatever she does, she tries to weave the essence of Indian culture and traditions. Thematically her works deal with a number of themes like experience of languor, nostalgia, historical and political changes in India and the recurrent theme of east-west encounters. India is at the center of each work and the author is conscious enough to take care not to allow any of the themes to override and shift the focus from India.

Though the contemporary critical canon has witnessed Roland Barthes and his “Death of the Author”, I subscribe to the view that a writer can never be far away from his or her work. The works of Gita Mehta are inseparable from her life and therefore a quick glance at her biography and works in the following few pages would give us some estimate of the woman and her contribution.

Gita Mehta was born in 1943 to a family extremely active in the struggle for Indian independence. She is the daughter of Biju Patnaik, a famous Indian freedom fighter who later on became the major political leader of Orissa. At her birth, Mehta’s grandmother demanded she be named Joan of Arc, as she was born into a community of freedom fighters who were often forced to go underground because of their political actions. Only several weeks after her birth, her father was imprisoned for his political activities. Young Gita was growing up in the middle of such freedom activities. Her family’s indulgence into freedom movement often created fluid situations. She often found her father in jail and her mother kept tracing him from jail to jail. In this situation of flux, Gita’s parents were worried about stability of the family and about children’s education in particular. This worry made them take a decision to send the children-Gita and her brother- in a boarding school. Gita
received her early education in India: she graduated from Bombay University, and thereafter was sent to Cambridge to pursue her Masters in English literature. During her post graduation, she met Ajai Mehta who was to be her future husband. They got married and decided to settle down in England. Later in 1987, Ajai Mehta joined world-renowned publishing house Alfred A Knopf as the Editor –in-chief. Currently the couple maintains residences in New York, London and Delhi, spending at least three months every year in Delhi. In fact, every winter brings for them the experience of ‘home coming’. This time is reserved for family visits and get-togethers. Gita says she does not write during these visits as it is a period reserved for accumulating experiences and assimilating ideas. Because of Sonny (Ajai) Mehta’s prominent position in New York publishing industry, the couple is a central figure in the literary world of New York.

Gita Mehta had been writing journalistic pieces and directing documentaries about India for BBC and ITV before she stepped into literary career. Writing fiction, she says, is not easy, particularly if you are dealing with facts. Non-fiction writing provides a kind of ‘safety net’ beyond which one does not go; not so in fiction where imagination is at play. However, the experience of making documentaries gave her freedom to move about, to collect data and amass information. As a war correspondent with NBC (USA), she got an opportunity to tour Bangladesh and cover the Indo-Pak war of 1971. She saw the birth of the nation. She also made documentary on election in the erstwhile princely states. This firsthand experience widened her horizons further. Her family background had already molded her vision of India and had given her insight to understand India’s problems, her strength and weaknesses. When she started writing books, fiction and non-fiction both, she did it with self-confidence of an insider’s familiarity. Her
journalistic background gave her keen political insight founded on thorough investigation and not on mere assumptions. Thus her works become smart investigation into the people, ideas, history and personalities that have shaped modern India.

Mehta entered into the literary scene with the publication of *Karma Kola* (1979). It is an amalgam of Karma, an Indian concept and Cola, a western drink. This first book is a series of interconnected essays weaving her impressions of India’s mysticism with ironic wit and sarcasm. *Karma Cola* is a work of non-fiction by Mehta’s terse and brisk prose. Though it is a collection of essays, Mehta’s ability to knit various episodes into a whole gives the book the flow of a novel. In the late 1960s a great number of westerners turned to India. They thought that they did not have charm in their lives and it could be found in India. Having lived in the United Kingdom and in the United states, Mehta becomes the right figure to record the interaction of the westerners with the mystic India. Her comments become razor sharp and biting when she attempts to show what happens when the traditions of an ancient culture and long-lived society are sold as commodities to the visitors. At the same time, she also describes the devastating effect of the westerners on the rural India since they had brought with them their anxiety, a feeling of absurdity and a number of addictions. Many times this satire is artistically disguised under humour and funny observations. The book is divided into four parts and has thirty-five chapters –each showing India’s march towards progress juxtaposed with the traditional attitudes that still persist and make our country a great paradox.

*Raj* (1993), Mehta’s first novel presents India when it was governed by numerous princely states under the British rule. It is serious work of fiction dealing with the turbulent period in Indian history spanning from 1897 to 1947. The novel begins in the last years of the nineteenth
century and ends with the rise of Indian independence when the princely states were merged with the Indian Union—some willingly, others unwillingly. The novel encompasses and dramatizes within its narrative framework the important events with which the century set in—the famine of 1898, the ever increasing British interference in the affairs of the native rulers, emergence of Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders, their clarion call to the nation, the two wars, awakening of the democratic spirit and finally the independence. On one hand she weaves together elegant language and colourful pictures of India, and on the other depicts the Indian colonial life and people’s predicament. With the depiction of Indian history, she simultaneously weaves together the story of a woman—Jaya, the princess of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur—her awareness, her fight and subsequent victory. Through Jaya’s life, she paints the traditions, rituals as well as the political pressure which resulted into a helpless servitude to the British. Structurally the novel is divided into four books: Balmer, Sirpur, Maharani, and Regent. It has a “Prologue” and an “Afterword”. The novel ends with the government’s decision to abolish ransom given to the Maharajas.

Gita Mehta’s second novel, *A River Sutra* (1993), is more profound and deeply focused work. The novel is built around India’s holy river the Narmada. The series of tales can be taken as modified Sutras. The energy of the novel is formed through the deep veins of Indian culture and mythology. The prose as a whole is meditation on the country’s secular humanist traditions. Classical Sanskrit drama, Hindu mythology, Sufi poetry, Indian classical music and much more have been reflected and reiterated in the work. Though the novel creates many India, it is the perennial India that holds the interest of the author as well as the readers. The Narmada stands for the culture of oneness and the theme of the novel is integration of various religions and philosophies.
with the geography of the river. Because of the formulation of the substances of ancient Indian culture, *A River Sutra* is a modern Indian work which hints at the problems faced by the modern India. When she actually came to writing after conceptualizing the idea of this novel, she was skeptical about the subject and wondered whether it will be palatable to the western readership. She was secretive about it and wrote it privately.

In 1997 Gita Mehta brought out a collection of essays meaningfully titled *Snakes and Ladders: A View of Modern India*. The title, though in English, has indigenous allusion. She deliberately selected this title to denote the paradoxes of Indian life. The game of snakes and ladders is full of risk and factor of chance and at any time the player may go up or may scroll down through snakes. We, in our fifty years of nationhood, have seen ‘a roller coaster ride, sometimes attaining success and many times touching the ground level with bitter test of loss. In this work, she observes India in all its colours. With keen insight and by the flow of her language she is able to make the familiar appear unusual—sometimes glamorous, at others mysterious. The book also provides glimpses of her early years. Though her heart is in India, as she often confides, she is not sentimental about it, nor is she unmindful of the present day realities existing in modern India. With her incisive wit and frank assertions she paints India as it is after fifty years of independence: corruption, nepotism, chaos and self-serving politicians. Recently in 2006, she has written a collection of essays on lord Ganesha. The title of the book is *Ganesha* which discusses the importance of Ganesha.

We must note one more important point regarding the status of Gita Mehta on the literary scene. Because of her migration to England and later on in the USA she has been put into the category of ‘writers of Indian Diaspora’ along with V S Naipul, Kamala Markandaya, Vikram
Sheth, Rohinton Mistry etc. Again, since she writes about Indian culture, society, traditions, politics and the British rule, some critics consider her writings in the light of post-colonial theory. Central to the postcolonial writing is the longing to reclaim an identity and through narrative voice to counter centuries of denial and misrepresentation; central to much of diasporic writing is the longing to retrieve a ‘home’, however symbolically. Both are marked by psychological and ethical dimensions of the notion of nostalgia and reclamation of identity. Nostalgia here should not be misinterpreted as ‘home sickness’ or ‘longing for the past’. The diasporic theory also addresses the questions of recall, homeland, ancient past, the urge to return and the impossibility of return. One of the key themes in postcolonial theory is the concern with ‘place and displacement’. Here the dislocation is a probable result of migration and the consequent sense of loss is again related to diasporic writing. Gita Mehta’s attempt to come back to the cultural folds, to understand the intricacies of her shared past with her community and to transmit her version to her ‘second home’ is clearly evident in her works. She works independently, but her works are as much infused by the thought of India as by the Indian Thought and are interpreted as exemplifying Indian diaspora. We must note here that neither during her interviews nor in her works does she express the diasporic apprehension of rootlessness or longing for stability and continuity. All she does is to present India tactfully and this has been often criticized as ambivalence and imaginatively created India. It is a general observation that migrant writers create India out of their imagination- India of their mind- and Indianness is not indigenous. These writings are intended for the western readers. Gita Mehta is not a complete exclusion from this allegation. Though her literary and cultural allusions to India’s geography, religions, mysticism, history and politics are substantial and candid, at times they are too romanticized and eroticized to be acceptable to the indigenous readers. Her works, both
fiction and non-fiction, cannot immediately be categorized as diasporic discourse and yet they are diasporic in more than one ways. They are innovative in their approach to diaspora. Instead of reiterating the usual image of migration or the gendered nature of identity politics and ethnicity, they evolve different discourse to convey the notion of ‘otherness’ through soft irony directed at the peculiarities of both the motherland and the adopted culture in some works, and in others through the depiction of self appraisal. They manifest an overt attempt to preserve the individual identity of home culture and to show the meaning of India. To cut it short, we may say that Gita Mehta’s need to elucidate and explain herself to the west is an acknowledgement in itself of cultural differences felt by a diasporic consciousness.

Mehta occupies a unique position as a writer who elucidates uniquely Indian experience in a clear and intelligent voice. She relates a rich and ongoing history—its nuance, complexity, and contradiction—opening doors and windows into Indian life in ways few other writers do. While her first novel may be seen as thinly characterized and lacking in depth, the balance of her work, including her second novel, constitutes a unique and valuable contribution to the literature of the world.

If one scrutinizes Gita Mehta’s works and research done, one can easily find out that the study of India and Indian culture remains a virgin field. There have been a number of research works around the term culture. For example, there is a research with the title “Charting of Cultural Territory”. However, it focuses on her works from Post-colonial perspective only. A couple of other works talk about the term culture but their analysis is based on linguistic and semantics. There is significant research on the line of feminism. Raj in particular has been scrutinized in a feministic mode. However, the study of Indian culture as an end
itself is yet to be done. My objective in this research is to not only to figure out the image of India in Gita Mehta’s works, but also to trace the pattern in her works. It is an important question: whether she steadily adheres to the projection of Indianness or there is any variation as she gets matured as a literary personality. In addition to this I also wish to analyze whether she is neutral in her outlook or she is lenient towards her homeland. By juxtaposing the Indian culture with the western, I long to find out with a neutral approach whether our culture provides better sustaining assistance to the humanity at large or not. In the following chapter my endeavour will be to present in nutshell the yesterday, today and tomorrow of India.