Chapter-5

A River Sutra

Gita Mehta’s earlier works *Karma Cola* and *Raj* focused on the theme of East and West ideologies, cultures and interactions between the two. With *A River Sutra* the focus shifts towards Indian Culture, its diversity and other aspects related with Indian religions, mythology etc. The narrator of the story comes across different people and thereby different stories. If we look at the stories individually, they seem unconnected and the novel appears loosely knit. But reading in between the lines reveals the common theme of these stories i.e. love. In addition, the stories are bounded by three elements: love, death and the Narmada River. To an untrained reader *A River Sutra* may appear as a simple story of the narrator and protagonist who thinks that renunciation is all about physical withdrawal from the world by living in some isolated place. But it is certainly not a fact. The novel is an exposition of Indian metaphysics. The word used in the tile, Sutra, means a principle. Here the principles of life are taught by the Narmada. The river has a lot to teach about human life, about ‘this world’ and ‘the other world’, and about what life is and what it should have been. This presentation of Indian metaphysics is reinforced by the traditional Indian narrative style. From yet another angle, the novel is an explanation and illustration of Indian culture specifically designed for the western readers. As a result, sometimes it has been described by critics as a pseudo philosophical attempt to deal with a sublime theme. In short, the novel is an attempt of
an Indo-Anglo-American author to assert her cultural heritage and thereby to claim cultural identity.

There are six stories in the novel: The Monk’s story, The Musician’s story, The Executive’s story, The Courtesan’s story, The Naga Baba’s story and the Minstrel’s story. These stories present vivid pictures of Hindu and Jain ascetics, courtesans and minstrels, diamond merchants and tea executives, Muslim clerics, music teachers, tribal folk beliefs, and the anthropologists. Such mixture of different aspects is kept tightly connected by the presence of the Narmada, the theme of love and by the narrator. We find reiteration of Classical Sanskrit drama and Hindu mythology. One motif that keeps on recurring in the novel is of the raga of Indian classical music. Another recurrent motif is that of Shiva-Parvati and the birth of The Narmada. There are repeated references to Kamadev, God of Love and to the passions and mysteries of human heart. Though the novel takes the substance from ancient Indian traditions, thoughts and mythology, it is modern work of fiction. Majority of the critics have responded to A River Sutra positively. The style of narration has been borrowed from the ancient Indian tradition of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana but the complexity of story within a story of these epics is missing in A River Sutra. However, the subtle manner in which the theme of love connects the stories imparts complexity to the novel. It is also a study of the nature of life and its riddles.

To a casual reader, A River Sutra is a charming piece of exotic stories running like a river in the narration process. The initial exposition brings into picture the narrator-bureaucrat who wants to renounce the world. It leads a general assumption that the novel is about a retired Administrative officer who wants to live a life of a recluse on the bank of the Narmada. But with the progression of the stories one by one, the
novel gathers momentum and reveals vivid facets: it becomes the story of the Narmada, the symbol of our culture; of Shiva’s penance and birth of The Narmada; exposition of the tribal tradition; and of a man running around in an attempt to grasp the meaning of life. Even the narrator at the end realizes that only involvement can lead to detachment. The author also endeavours to perceive the nature of human desires like Nirvana, love, peace, luxury, devotion and immortality. Thus the novel becomes a study of life and life’s philosophy. It can be interpreted on a larger canvas: it can be read as treatise on Indian concepts of animism, materialism and spirituality, as a work portraying imaginary India, and as a text propounding the oral tradition of story-telling. Almost all the characters in different stories converge for one or the other reason on the banks of The Narmada River for renunciation, tranquility and deal with life and death.

Thematically the novel has many focal points: love, lust renunciation, ego, involvement and others. We are given many insights into different types of people who undergo physical and moral suffering in order to become spiritually purified. The Monk’s Story makes a striking statement about suffering that ‘a man who cannot suffer is not alive.’ Most of these ascetics who experience suffering are people who believe that they are living life to the full. This suffering comes from their mortality and they all strive to use the sacred powers of the river to be relieved of their chaos and suffering. A River Sutra contains a rich description of Hindu mythology, rituals and beliefs. It also puts forth to the readers the modern Indian psyche. At the same time, the text carries with it significant dialogue on dichotomies like materialism vs. spiritualism, detachment vs. attachment, love vs. its different shades and modernity vs. tradition. Finally and significantly, it eulogizes The Narmada. The narrative technique is the traditional Indian method of
story within the story told by multiple narrators- the bureaucrat, Tariq Mia, Mr. Chagla and Nitin Bose’s diary entries.

The analysis and discussion before and after the stories help the narrator unite the stories thematically. Apart from this the all-pervading presence of The Narmada is also a unifying agent in the novel. All the characters of the novel come to the shelter of The Narmada either in desperation or in quest for something essential and they get their due. There are ten characters in the novel including Tariq Mia and the narrator. Among these ten, two commit suicide, one dies, two continue their quest, one enjoys worldly name and fame and two seem to accept life after vindication while Tariq Mia accepts life as it comes. This perspective makes us think about their demands, desires and quest, analyze the result and study the strategies employed by them.

The novel opens with the story of the narrator who is a retired officer of Indian Administrative Services. He is appointed as the manager of The Narmada Guest House. He thinks that it is high time for him to withdraw from the worldly life and therefore he comes to such place to lead the life of a recluse. He categorizes himself as a Vanprasthi- someone who is trying to withdraw from the world. He has enjoyed his worldly life and fulfilled his due obligations. Thus, as a retired civil servant who has enjoyed exceptional privileges during his service is now on the bank of The Narmada in the quest for peace and tranquility. The location of the guest house is ideal as it is away from the town. The narrator’s love for the river, its surrounding, the jungle, and his minute observation of the nature around him are emblematic of Wordsworthian descriptions. The narrator has keen interest in his surrounding and in those people he comes across. The stories evoke peculiar emotions in him and stimulate his curiosity towards various elements of life. The very first story of the Jain monk makes him melancholic. He tries to brood over the lives of the
characters and their quests or puzzled behaviour. This analytical outlook of the narrator weaves the stories together and generates the energy of the novel. There comes certain moments of doubt and he turns to Tariq Mia for his expert opinion. He does not hold him as an Islamic scholar nor does everything that he says appeals to him. Tariq Mia’s remarks are sometimes subtle, serious and meaningful while sometimes vague or teasing. An important feature of the narrative technique is the perplexity of the author at the end of one story that gives the author a chance to narrate the next. Thus, one by one the stories progress. Although the narrator is out for withdrawal from the world, he is fully immersed in the lives of people he meets or hears about. At the end of the novel, he broods over the enlightenment brought about by his stay at the Narmada Guest House, ‘I stared at the flashes of illumination, wondering for the first time what would I do if ever I left the bungalow’. (A River Sutra, p. 282) The remark made by Professor Shankar is significant: ‘You have chosen the wrong place to flee the world, my friend... . Too many lives converge on these banks’. (A River Sutra, p. 286) It leads us to a doubt whether the narrator really wanted to renounce the world or he just wanted to evade the monotony of routine life.

Through the story of the narrator, Gita Mehta touches an important aspect of Indian life- renunciation of the worldly life. Renunciation has always been an important element in Indian metaphysics, culture, life and literature. The matrix of socio-religious life has evolved out of the Gita and the epics- the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The lives are governed by the precepts of The Gita and other religious scriptures. Therefore the idea of renunciation has a rapid recurrence in Indian literature. However, it is difficult to deal with the theme of renunciation for both, the character and the author. At superficial level it seems that renunciation means to physically depart
from the society and live a life of a recluse. But an untrained person undergoing such renunciation may be longing to be with the world even in seclusion. In Indian metaphysics, renunciation can be explained as achieving inner calm and bliss or it means to be above pain and happiness. To achieve such a state of mind one has to renounce the worldly possessions, worldly pleasures, love, lust, ego, desire, anger and passion. Indian Yogic tradition terms such person as *Jivan Mukta* – someone who is free from the world not physically but in the sense of being unaffected by pain or pleasure. One is expected to live among the worldly temptations and yet be above them. The ideal of achieving divine bliss through detachment and thereby achieving the highest goal of self-realization is an integral part of Indian life. In fact, the ancient divisions of life span to which the narrator refers to were specifically and intelligently designed on the line of this principle. The ancient scriptures divide the life of a human being into four parts called ashrams: Brahmacharyashram, Gruhasthashram, Vanprasthashram and Sanyasashram. From birth to completion of education, a child has to practice abstinence and concentrate on learning process in Brahmacharyashram. It is followed by Gruhasthashram when a person gets married and enjoys the worldly pleasures. In this period one has to fulfill all the familial and social duties as well. In Vanprasthashram one has to gradually begin to withdraw from the world. It is the time when one initiates the process of enlightenment. Finally, in Sanyasashram, one has to be on the path of meditation, self-realization by living a life of a recluse in forests. This design allows one to learn various aspects of life, revel in the pleasures and also helps withdraw form these pleasures.

The reason why the mentioned divisions of life are pivotal is that the ideal of achieving renunciation is difficult to the core. There are plenty of examples available in Indian literature, both written in English
and in regional languages, where a character tries to renounce the world but betrays oneself. In life as well as in literature when the concept of renunciation is implemented without being ready for it, havoc is created. Generally, as in the story of Ashok, a reader is carried away by the rhetoric and the feeling of awe and therefore the aspects like familial and social responsibility, the suffering of the family and the frustration of the character are not noticed.

Gita Mehta seems to be very conscious about portraying the concept of renunciation. She adroitly deals with this theme so as to save it from the scrutiny of the westerner’s rational mind. The characters that have set themselves on the path of renunciation cannot be blamed for deserting the family or violating the social norms. At the beginning of the novel the bureaucrat-narrator mentions that his wife is dead and does not have any children. Again, he has retired from his service. Thus he has fulfilled all his social duties and obligations. In the case of Ashok, his father is extremely proud of his decision to become a monk. His wife is too stable and detached from him to have any pang of separation. Thus Gita Mehta skillfully guards the concept of renunciation. Apart from this, the novel so full of exotic locations, caves, the tribal and the stories that the reader scarcely gets a chance to brood over pitfalls of renunciation. But, as mentioned in the earlier paragraph, it is very difficult to deal with a character that is on the path of renunciation. At the end of the novel the bureaucrat gives a thought to going back to the world. He is enjoying the presence of women in the guest house and avoids the company of Tariq Mia:

Sitting on the terrace, meditating in the darkness before dawn, I admitted to myself that I envied the archeologists for still belonging to a world I had given up. I did not want to sit with the old Mullah of a small village that seemed
frozen in time, untouched by the events of a larger world. With some alarm I realized I was becoming accustomed to that other rhythm the archeologists had brought into the rest house, the rhythm of my previous life. (A River Sutra, p. 270)

Eric Fromm describes the ‘having mode’ and ‘being mode’ in her book To Have and To Be. Thematically this concept of ‘being mode’ can be considered as a parallel of Indian concept of renunciation. In ‘having mode’ one is obsessed with worldly possessions. On the contrary, ‘being mode’ makes one free and non-attached. With reference to A River Sutra, it is not clear up to what extent the narrator is determined or willing to renounce the world. He admits that he is not a recluse. He does not have any wish to roam in the jungle. He is also not capable of undergoing any penance: ‘I know I was not simply equipped to roam in the jungle and become a forest hermit, surviving on fruit and roots.' (A River Sutra, p 01) While he broods over the concept of pilgrimage, he says that the purpose of pilgrimage is to learn endurance. But at the same time he denies any possibility of himself undertaking any pilgrimage. With such preoccupations he cannot walk on the path of self-realization. Thus the bureaucrat’s concept of renunciation is superficial.

As a Vanpratsathi, the narrator seems to be on the right track as he is striving for personal enlightenment. After being retired from his service, he had nothing to look forward to. It gives him an opportunity to flee from the consumer oriented materialistic world where a human being has scant value. By deciding to live on the bank of the Narmada, he has bargained to live in a world which is dissipated into the nature. This world is characterized by its humane element. Here whoever comes with his/her story is important because these stories carry with them some significant issues related with life. It is the human experience of life that
counts. As the epigraph asserts ‘Man is the greatest truth’. Chandidas was renowned for his secular verse through which he tried to build a bridge between Hindu and Muslim community. When one reads his verse depicted in the novel with reference to the Monk’s story and Amir Rumi’s poetry, one grasps the full significance. Professor Shankar reiterates for a number of times that he is an atheist man and is too frail to understand the intricacies of spiritualism. E. Galle elaborates how Gita Mehta reinterprets the great intellectual traditions of rationalism and the reconciliation of religion and cosmic universalism:

Conforming with the Indian doctrine of Samkhya...Professor Shankar’s humanistic position is an opportunity for Gita Mehta to extend her meditating action among the various doctrines that share her country, and also between Indian and non-Indian philosophies. Shankar’s atheism may appear to Western readers as borrowed from their own thought system, even as homage to their superior intellect. Gita Mehta suggests that is it in fact a resurfacing of ancient Indian intuitions. (The Literary Criterion, No. 3 p. 27)

In Indian socio-religious-cultural matrix, humanism does not work at a superficial level. It is woven to the core of Indian thought system and mythology. The Narmada River assures the men:

‘Bring your knowledge of mankind
And follow me.
I will lead you to next Creation’. (A River Sutra, p.278)

Throughout the novel the author is trying to say that man is a learner all his life. It is reiterated by the quest of characters including the narrator. In fact, the narrator-bureaucrat is representative of a common Indian man enmeshed in the westernized education system on one hand
and trying to grapple with the inheritance of the traditional knowledge on the other. What baffles him the most is our inability to assimilate the two. He is an eager learner and it is exhibited in his attitude when he refers to the *Upnishads* in order to persuade the Jain monk. The novel also suggests that he is a seeker and not an ascetic. Though he may be ignorant in more than one ways, he is ready to be enlightened with his childlike curiosity. When Tariq Mia hints at his ignorance, he becomes more eager to learn. Tariq Mia’s remarks are sometimes very subtle: “How can you say that you have given up the world when you know so little of it.” (*A River Sutra*, p. 50) In the larger context of the novel, its characters and stories, the bureaucrat is obviously a disciple sitting crossed legs at the feet of a guru. He is being taught by persons like Tariq Mia, Mr. Chagla, Dr Mitra and Professor Shankar. This teaching is not in the literal way but it is done in a subtle way by the unique human experiences getting accumulated on the banks of the Narmada. The chess board is a symbol of life where the pawns are human beings and the two players are the consciousness of the human race trying to grasp the meaning of love and death.

As mentioned in the initial paragraphs, there are six stories in the novel. In the analysis of these stories we will not go chronologically. Let us refer to the story of the Minstrel and Naga Baba. As against the character of the narrator, Professor Shankar seems to have achieved the enlightenment and comprehended the mysteries of life through his penance as an ascetic. For ten long years he roamed in the jungles in pursuit of his penance as a Naga ascetic. His training as a Naga Sadhu calls for extreme tolerance, will power and determination. His guru put him in two extreme conditions for a long time. He had to survive in chilling cold of the Himalayas and in the scorching heat of desert without any shelter before he was taken to the academy. Thus he had learned the
lessons of endurance a hard way. The aim of his guru was to teach him humility, social awareness and endurance. There is also a possibility to the thought whether Professor Shankar was really a seeker or he wanted to run away from the monotony of modern life. Through this austerity he learnt to consider all the human beings as equals, not rich or poor, high or low. In order to arouse the humanitarian concern in Naga Baba, his guru taught him to beg for food from door to door of the untouchables and the under privileged.

Gita Mehta touches a very sensitive point here. In ancient Indian social system, there were four divisions namely Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Kshudra. This cast system was very rigid and one’s cast was inherited from the parents. The Brahmans were assigned the duty of teaching and propounding the knowledge and wisdom generation by generation. The Kshatriyas were the brave people who had to protect the society from external attacks. The Vaishyays were the businessmen who generally indulged into various businesses. The Kshudras were considered to be the lowest cast whose job was to maintain cleanliness in the society. They had to clean gutters and toilets of the other three classes of the society. Thus they were considered the untouchables. They were not allowed to live in the town. Their residences were on the outskirts of the town. Never were they allowed to mix up with the mainstream. They were denied education and thus were always kept uneducated. Even their entry into the temples was prohibited. The marks of this cast system are so much embedded in the society that still some particular casts are considered untouchable. Though there are laws of equality and provision for reservation, the resistance within the society does persist and the upper casts are still reluctant to mix up with these underprivileged. Gita Mehta narrates the same scenario as the Naga Baba goes to such localities. They complain to Naga Baba about uneven
treatment of the society towards them. It vindicates the author’s neutral approach towards her homeland as she is not hesitant to unearth such issues of inequality to the highly critical western eyes. However, Naga Baba’s guru has taught him to respect the humblest and to see divinity in the most depraved of fellow human beings. This was his real initiation into the realm of wisdom. Naga Baba learns this concept the right way and justifies his social enlightenment when he rescues a girl from the brothel. He not only gives her an altogether a new identity but also endows her with a new life of spirituality. The girl is renamed as ‘Uma’ meaning peace in night and thus she gets rid of her previous life and its nightmares.

Uma is set on the path of devotion and spirituality but this path is not an easy one. Naga Baba knows the importance of austerity and penance in the process of learning and therefore he makes it sure that Uma also learns it that hard way. He knows that when she is initiated on the path of self-realization and spirituality, her previous life should be totally annihilated in all respect. Baba’s treatment to her is as stiff as his guru’s:

The Naga Baba grabbed her, his breathing harsh above the stems breaking under his feet as he carried her through the darkness toward the river. ...suddenly he gripped her arm and lowered her into the water.

The paralyzed child stared into the ascetic’s eyes. Then the water closed over the child’s head and she heard only the sound of her own blood pounding in her ears. She no longer even had the will to scream, knowing she could do nothing to prevent herself from being drowned... . (A River Sutra, p. 253)
This treatment hints at a suggestion that the enlightenment has all the pain of death and rebirth.

By describing minutely the Naga Baba’s training imparted by his guru, his penance, austerity and humility, Gita Mehta seems to refer to an important element of Hindu religious matrix. The author seems to be making a deliberate attempt to erase misconceptions regarding this community and raise it to its due level. The community of Naga Baba is not a cult of naked ascetics but they carry with them a lot of energy derived through penance. Their aim is not to eat human flesh on cremation ground and scare people. They are more humble and humane than the so called high class members of the society.

The Naga Sadhus are often misunderstood by the western people and media and therefore they jeer at them. In fact, these sadhus are epitome of renunciation. The Naga Sadhus do not bother whether they are misunderstood or called naked ascetics of India or ash smeared Hindu saints. They represent human beings in a pure form and are representatives of Lord Shiva. Jagatguru Shankaracharya had first organized the Naga Sadhus to protect the Sanatan Dharma (Hinduism). They never bother about the materialistic world and practice celibacy. Their ultimate and the only goal is to escape from the cycle of birth and death and to merge with the Brahman. As they belong to Shiva sect, they have matted locks of hair and their bodies are covered in ash. Gita Mehta has described the right reason for smearing of ash on their bodies. It is because it naturally protects them from scorching heat and cold. The Naga Sadhus are a warrior class and are divided into regiment in an army. They have no fear of death. Referring to the history of India, Gita Mehta rightly mentions that during Indian mutiny about twenty thousand Naga Sadhus had come down from the Himalayan valley to
fight against the British rule. She also describes their physical strength in these words:

At the academy he had learned the arts of a protector sadhu. He had performed yogic contortions to gain physical prowess for exceeding any wrestler, hardened his hands and his feet so they could kill a man with a single blow, practiced mind control to disarm an opponent without touching him, and he was called a Naga. (*A River Sutra*, p. 242-243)

Thus it seems that by portraying the Naga Baba in *A River Sutra* the author tries to project a true picture of this sect in order to correct the western perception.

The break up in the chronology of the stories enables us to see the movement in the terms of the theme of love and its progression. Between the stories of the narrator and the Naga Baba there are five stories. If we perceive them in the terms of love, this viewpoint allows us to see them as the stories of love, anguish, detachment and attachment. As Ashok mentions in a subtle manner, love and renunciation are the main motifs of the Jain Monk’s story. The opening and closing of the story are loaded with meaning. The Jain Monk begins the story by saying that he has loved only one thing in his life. What baffles the narrator most is the concluding statement that he is too poor to renounce the world twice. In between these two lines moves the story of renunciation. The analysis of Ashok’s character is interesting and will help us understand the above mentioned remarks with authenticity.

Being a son of a rich diamond merchant, Ashok had all his desires fulfilled. Apart from this he never had to struggle to run his family or think about expenses. He mentions that he has had all the pleasures of
life so much so that they were not able to tempt him anymore. Luxurious cars, pubs, films and the ‘silken caresses’ were not thrilling for him anymore:

Gradually my life of unremitting pleasure ceased to satisfy me, leaving me exhausted from the last indulgence while anticipating the next. At the age of twenty six I had already become fatigued by the world, knowing that even at the moment of gratification, the seed of new desire was being sawn. (A River Sutra, p. 29)

When asked by his father, he marries a woman totally stranger to him. She does not have any interest in the pleasures of life and the relation becomes totally formal after the birth of two children. So this relation has neither any emotional attachment nor any temptation for physical pleasure. Initially Ashok thought of his father as a man dignity. He thought his dignity rested on his hard work and on his widely recognized genius as a merchant. He believed that his father had personal adherence to the principle of non-violence – Ahimsa. He also liked his father’s huge charitable deeds. But his tour with his father and some close encounters turned this image topsy-turvy. The predicament of the miners, their inhuman treatment and poverty did not appeal to him. Ashok begins to realize the hypocrisy of his father as he had concern for the blameless germs around him but calmly neglected the poor condition of the miners. He gave away a considerable portion of his earning in charity but he was completely lacking in empathy and concern for the needy. Thus his father’s behavior made him repel the wealth and his father’s pretention as a believer in non-violence initiated on the path of renunciation:
...wealth had excited my father’s emotions, freeing him to examine people as if they were abstractions. His benevolence had a cold mathematics that left him unmoved and without curiosity about those he helped. The inhuman nature of his philanthropy had frightened me. ... I had an undercurrent of fear that in inheriting my father’s business acumen I might also inherit his inhumanity. (A River Sutra, p. 25-26)

Ashok’s interaction with the monk and his subtle remarks proved to be the final thrust for Ashok to decide to renounce the world. There was restlessness within him and the monk was very serene and calm. His voice had a soothing effect. Thy monk teaches him that the secret of a human heart is the desire to be free. But many people die before this desire unearths itself. Ashok feels that the monk really has some wisdom and secretly desires learn about human longing for freedom in order to break the numbness that has covered his sense of existence. The monk talked to him about nihilism and skepticism, described emotions with greater accuracy than his ability to experience it and predicted exactly how he would feel long before he actually arrived at that emotion. The monk had so profound appeal to Ashok that he thinks that he was convinced the monk had some unusual power and he wanted to possess it. He comes to an understanding that in order to prevent suffering a man must be capable of suffering. Thus he decides to take the path or renunciation and set himself on the pursuit of learning the secret of a human heart.

During the ceremony of initiation Ashok realizes that it is easy to decide to renounce the world but it is difficult to negate the self. One must learn the principle of humility (as the Naga Baba learns it perfectly) and understand the importance and sacredness of human life before
attaining divinity. Ashok’s life turns from one extreme to the other. From his life full of all the worldly pleasures he sets himself on the path of austerity, endurance negation:

- You will be a social outcast
- You will be insulted
- You will be hounded (A River Sutra, p. 57)

One may wonder what gives courage to Ashok or what allures him to renounce such luxury. The answer lies in the following gain:

- You will be free from doubt.
- You will promise stability.
- You will protect life. (A River Sutra, p. 41)

It is this desire within Ashok that leads him on the path of renunciation. But it is made very clear that one cannot run away from one’s duty towards the self and the others. The above mentioned indoctrination does not promise Nirvana or enlightenment. But it is clear that though Nirvana lurks on the horizons, it is attainable through humility. The difficult life style of a Jain monk and the training of the Naga Baba suggest the same.

In The Monk’s story the theme of renunciation is dominant. But by referring to the renunciation ceremony, the Jain monks and few Jain principles, the author by and large is referring to Jainism. Evidently Jainism believes in reincarnation. The body is just a cover of the soul and the soul never perishes. It preaches that one should not focus on bodily comforts. One should try to bring out the real qualities of a soul. This path of liberation can be attained only by discipline so that one’s soul is not or least affected by the bodily pleasure and pain. In fact, there is a lot of emphasis on bodily pain in the lives of the Jain monks. Ashok
seems to be a bit hesitant during the time of renunciation ceremony because the life of a Jain monk is full of severe austerity. They do not take food after sunset and before sunrise. They walk barefoot irrespective of the distance or weather. They move from home to home and take little food from each place. Twice a year or at least once a year they undergo the process of Loch. It is the process of plucking hair manually and it is considered as a kind of austerity where one bears the pain calmly. The entire life of these ascetics is directed towards the welfare of their souls. All the activities of their lives have only one aim, namely, self-purification for self-realization. This lifestyle is reverberated in the chanting of the Jain monks while Ashok’s renunciation ceremony:

You will depend on strangers for your most basic needs.
You will be heartsick.
You will suffer pain from constant walking. (A River Sutra, p. 38)

Though the author has tried to present a gala picture of the renunciation ceremony, it does not appeal much. After reading of the story what remains in the mind is the question: what has he loved and how he is expected to renounce the world twice? Perhaps the answer is that Ashok has loved freedom of human beings. He has once renounced the world of pleasure, luxury and self-centered life and joined the cult of Jain monks. Thereby he attains humility and understands the fellow-feeling. Now only that group of monks is his family or his world. Therefore he may be scared to leave his fellow monks. That is why he would have said that he was too poor to renounce the world twice.

The bureaucrat is baffled by these ambiguous statements and therefore goes to Tariq Mia for the answer. Even Tariq Mia does not have
interpretations of the statements. But he has another story which he thinks might satisfy the inquiry of the narrator.

The story told by Tariq Mia is the Music Teacher’s story. In this story, Gita Mehta weaves the theme of love and presents various shades of love. The music teacher’s relationship with the blind boy and his love for him can be put in the category of Guru-Shishya tradition. The Music Teacher, Master Mohan had a promising voice in his childhood. As a child singer he had gathered a lot of fame. But unfortunately his voice sank on the day of recording and his career was over there and then only. His love for music was so strong that he could not separate himself from the field of music. He did not try any other profession but decided to be a music teacher. His father’s attempt to marry him to a daughter of a wealthy man has a boomerang effect and thus his married life is miserable. His poor financial condition is not an exceptional story of an artist.

Master Mohan is excited by the voice of the blind boy at Amir Rumi’s tomb. He finds the boy’s voice so promising that he decides to take the boy home in spite of his wife’s resistance. What helps Master Mohan resist the inhuman treatment of his wife is the hope to see the boy at the pinnacle. Thus it is the story of a music teacher’s love for a promising but helpless child. The prominent question here is the nature of this love: is this love selfless? To a major extent, it is self-less love for the boy as the teacher does not have any gain from teaching the child. This view is vindicated when Master Mohan does not accept the money but asks the lady to keep with her and hand over to the boy’s sister. He is also not allured by the lucrative offer of the ‘Sahib’ who wants to listen to the boy in isolation. But to an extent this love is not self-less. The obvious reason is the teacher’s wish to see the boy achieving success and thereby getting himself a self gratification. He knows the reality of the
music industry that it takes a very long time for a poor musician to cultivate fruitful relations with the owners of recording studio.

After his failure at the recording studio, Master Mohan has sunk to an ordinary life of a music teacher characterized by namelessness and poverty. Now he finds enormous potential in the boy Imrat and decides to support him. The reason behind this kindness is that he does not want to let such talent go in vain: in other words he would not like to create one more Master Mohan. Although his efforts to help and train the child are magnanimous, in his latent psyche Imrat becomes a means to revive his lost self and to relive his own unfulfilled childhood. There is also a desire to show his critics and particularly his wife that after all his life is not an utter failure. He hopes that Imrat’s brilliance will illuminate his life again.

Master Mohan’s wife is wonder struck by the offer of the ‘Sahib’ and literally drags the boy to his bungalow. The boy’s murder leaves the teacher grief stricken. He was so attached with the boy and with his musical genius that he feels that along with the boy some integral part of his self is also dead. The loss is beyond his comprehension and he becomes paranoid. He becomes a wonderer. In Imrat’s company, he was attached; his death has left him detached. But this detachment is not a healthy one. It is full of remorse and pangs of separation. His guilt ridden consciousness overpowers him and he starts blaming himself for the boy’s murder. After handing over the piece of music to Tariq Mia he commits suicide. He is so unfortunate and so much a failure that he even does not get good fortune to commit suicide in the Narmada. As per the myth, had he died in the Narmada, he would have been purified of his failure, guilt and misfortune.
One of the striking features in The Teacher’s Story is the song of submission sung more than once:

I prostrate my head to Your drawn sword  
O, the wonder of Your kindness  
O, the wonder of my submission.  
In the very spasm of death I see Your face  
O, the wonder of Your protection  
O, the wonder of my submission (A River Sutra, p. 49)

This song was created by Amir Rumi and it is categorized as a Sufi poem. The Sufi poets perceive Allah or almighty as a beloved than a Creator. Love is used as a means to loose oneself in the divinity of Allah. Therefore all the actions are directed to please Allah. In the song ‘you’ is with ‘y’ capital and ‘love’ with ‘l’ capital. These capital letters refer to the almighty and not an ordinary woman. This unusual relationship between the lover and the Beloved produces subtle feelings; sometimes these feelings are so subtle that they transform into poetical utterances. This poetry tries to explain the inexpressible love. In this regard Sufi poetry is meaningful as praiseworthy literature; at the same time with embedded metaphors and similes describes the spiritual progress of the disciple as well. Under the spell of creativity ecstatic songs are produced which raise one to the higher spiritual stance and seek divinity in humanity. There are some lines sung by Imrat which show the disciple’s love for Allah:

Do not turn in loathing from me.  
O beloved, can you not see  
Only Love disfigures me? (A River Sutra, p. 71)

The narration in between the stories also works as a binding agent for the overall plot of the story. Sometimes the narrator is baffled with the story and broods over the possibility. In some cases the events in
these chapters help us recover from the tragic end of the previous story while sometimes it becomes a prelude to the next story. The tragic end of the Music Teacher’s story leaves the reader in a state of gloomy but the narrator’s perception of Vano women, the reference to Kama and the exotic pleasure of the jungle immediately take us away from the gloom. At the same time it becomes a prelude to the story of Nitin Bose’s lustful love. Titled as ‘The Executive’s Story’, it is a tale of physical consummation; it devourers everything- love, poise, fine sentiments, peace and sanity. At the same time it gives a picture of the modern society with all its vices. The city life of so called modern people is deeply stained with alcoholism, batting and sexual perversion. When money overpowers love and it becomes a game, we can see love being sold and purchased as a commodity. The only suitable word for such element seems to be lust. The major projection of the story seems to be a hint that when lust penetrated one’s psyche, the equilibrium of the self is lost.

Nitin Bose’s life in Calcutta is full of all vices. He sleeps with women as if it were a casual event. It seems that his modern life has all the luxury but the charm is missing. Whether it is a one night’s stand, gambling, reading or doing work, the life operates like a machine. When Bose gets a chance to get a transfer to the tea estates in northern east, he is fascinated by its isolated life, ‘To me, suffocated by sheer weight of Calcutta’s incapable humanity, the solitude of the tea estate was its most attractive prospect.’ (A River Sutra, p. 114) When he decides to go to the isolated tea estates, his decision is coloured by the romanticized version of the tea estates. He had an expectation that the wilderness of that region will give him an opportunity to flee from the mundane life style of Calcutta. But he was ignorant of the fact that the region is full of ‘the forbidden pleasure’. The visit of the garden boys to his office reinforces his romanticized version:
Our tea garden colleagues were young, good looking Indians, bursting with energy. We listened to their boasts of rogue elephants tracked, man-eating tiger shot, hot-blooded women tamed, and envied the cow boy quality of their headlong pursuit of pleasure during the weeks they spent in the city. (A River Sutra, p. 184)

The initial period at the tea estate goes very well for Nitin Bose. He enjoys his work and the rains help him produce the best crops. He revels in reading the books given to him by his grandfather. He also reads the Puranas and their stories thrill him the most. He rarely consumed alcohol and never slept with a woman. He seems to be enjoying the beauty of the Wordsworthian Nature. But the visit of his friend, Ashok, colours his state of mind. Though he rejects the management’s offer to be a member of the board of management, he starts desiring a woman. He falls a prey to a woman named Rima and enjoys physical pleasure with her almost all nights. He is so engrossed with the woman that he even does not mind that she is a married woman. He admits some magical element in his union with Rima. When Nitin thinks about going back to Calcutta, Rima is grief stricken and casts a spell of black magic on him. Thus Nitin Bose becomes a possessed soul and looses his equilibrium. In such insane state he comes to the rest house. He says he has to go to the shrine of the goddess to get himself rid of the possession.

Rima can be considered as an extension of Nitin Bose’s own lustful self. He got so obsessed with her that he became possessed. As the story tells us, he is cured by the Narmada. He is not only cured but also regains his mental equilibrium that he writes a treatise on the Narmada. The curing of Nitin Bose can be considered rational with the following arguments. Away from the consuming psychology of the city and from his friends he comes to the soothing environment of the river. The river’s
tranquility helps him divert his attention from sex to creativity. He concentrates on his research and writing and thus is cured of his possession. Thus he sublimates his lust and regains the lost balance and intelligence.

In the following chapter Mr. Chagla tries to explain to the narrator about the immersion ceremony. He also explains that desire is the force of life. Nitin Bose is punished for not respecting the mighty force of this element. There is a myth about the Narmada that it cures one of a snake’s venom. Here snake is not to be taken in the literal sense. Snake is a symbol of desire and its venom is the harm of desires on human existence. Thus the pilgrims pray to the Narmada to protect themselves against the force of desires. It seems that the author is trying to say that myths are not to be interpreted in a literal sense but should be analyzed in proper context. In fact these myths reveal some essence of human beings’ lives.

Dr Mitra’s presence in the story is also important. Perhaps he stands for reason. Sometimes he voices and sometimes clarifies the doubts and skepticism arousing in the mind of the reader. He does not believe in the stories woven around the river but accepts that the river has been a source of a battle between instinct and reason. He does not accept the claims that the river cleanses the sins of the devotees but acknowledges the magnanimity of the river. As he mentions in his conversation with the narrator, the Narmada has had influence over the human life since primordial times. The pre-Aryans were the people whose philosophy was based on profound respect for nature and interdependency of life. Since the bountiful Nature sustained their lives, they worshipped Nature. The invasion of the Aryans brought along with them the influence of reason. They possessed knowledge derived out of
pure reason. The truth of nature or instincts did not have any importance.

After Master Mohan, the next to commit a suicide is the courtesan’s daughter. We cannot deny the tragic element in this suicide but it is not a pathetic event. The relieving aspect is her suicide in the Narmada. As her mother asserts, she will be purified of all her sins. The reason why this young woman commits suicide is that she does not want to fall in the hands of the police and be tortured and humiliated by them. Because of her training as a courtesan and her status of being a wife of the legendary Rahul Singh, she finds it below her dignity to be behind the bars and interrogated. Her story is reminiscent of the Robin Hood scenario.

Courtesans formed an integral part of the kingdoms in ancient times. Certain qualities were expected of them. For example, they were supposed to be beautiful, intelligent, and amicable. They should always be anxious to acquire and obtain experience and knowledge. They should be free from avarice. The primary duty of the courtesans was to train the princes to refine their perception and sharpen their senses and thereby impart delicacy in their behaviour. The courtesan in the novel describes vividly how she was trained and refined.

While narrating her story, the courtesan refers to the bee lore. It is a myth that the immortal Aryan still lives in the core dense jungle. If a bee from this part of the jungle stings, one becomes immune to the police. The team members of Rahul Singh believe that he has been stung by one such bee and therefore police cannot do anything to him. Rahul Singh, the dacoit, abducts the courtesan from a bazaar place during daytime. He thinks that she was his beloved in his previous life and therefore wants her again in this life. His love for her is passionate love.
Though he is a dacoit, his manners are rough and has crude appearance, his behavior toward her is gentle and caring. He never forces himself upon her. But his patience and unrewarded care is appealing. The courtesan insults him and sometimes neglects him. After realizing that he would never be violent with her, she starts seducing him. It gives pangs of desire to Rahul Singh. She describes his pursuit thus ‘...watching me as if trying to prove there was a greater art than all my arts, the ability to love someone as he loved me....’ (A River Sutra, p. 208) In this idyllic surrounding Gita Mehta creates an opportunity to weave the hypnotic magic of the exotic wilderness. The black power of Rahul Singh, life in the impenetrable dark jungle, the tribal culture, the bee lore, and the description of the cave where they live arouse the sense of romantic atmosphere. What adds to the glory of Rahul Singh is the faith of local people in him and their assertion that he is a soldier of Indo-Pak war.

From the point of view of justice it seems that it was necessary for Gita Mehta not to show a criminal above the law. In spite of the bee sting, Rahul Singh is shot by police in a raid. Few days later he dies in the lap of the courtesan. She also commits suicide in the water of the Narmada. Thus poetic justice conquers over the tribal tale of immortality. But there is also a clear indication that society is responsible for turning a dedicated soldier into a dacoit.

In the story of Nitin Bose sublimation of his desires helps him get rid of his sickness and works wonder as he regains his lost equilibrium and intellect. But the musician’s daughter is not granted this sublimation. Indian classical music plays a pivotal role in the Musician’s story. The language is rhythmic and the ugliness of the musician’s daughter is beautifully concealed by the minute description of various musical notes and by the extent to which she revels in music. The
bureaucrat meets her in bazaar by chance and starts conversation. She narrates to him the birth of veena. Musicians believe that one morning Shiva was so moved to the tenderness of Parvati’s slender figure while she was asleep, that he created a veena to immortalize her beauty. The description of the painting of veena is full of sexual imagery. The two globes of veena are the breasts of Parvati. The neck of veena is her slender arm. Her glass bagels are symbolized by the frats of veena and the music of veena is Shiva’s revelation of his love. A clear indication is that such great love as Parvati’s love for Shiva can give birth to music. Then the story of love, betrayal and music starts.

She describes her father as a great musician. He was a sensitive musician but he was not sensitive to the presence of other human beings. The ugliness of her appearance did not allow her to be part of her friends and family. This despair was sensed by her father. Her description of despair is very subtle:

You see, despair is an emotion, and the emotions were like shoals of brilliant fish swimming through his melodies. Or coloured gases floating through the ether in which his music dwelt. (A River Sutra, p. 202)

Her training is nothing less than a penance. For one year her father does not allow her to touch the musical instrument. She is asked to notice and listen to various sounds. Thus her sharpness to perceive the notes clearly does increase. She learns various notes from natural sounds. The musician’s attachment with music is also appealing. For him art is something sublime and says that when one chooses to be a musician, one enters into a pact with Lord Shiva. Thus the musician’s daughter learns to listen to the music of the rippling waters, the whispering tress, the rustling leaves, and the chirruping of the birds. But
unfortunately she could not listen to the false notes of a human heart. A young man starts learning music along with her. After initial resistance he starts arousing amorous feelings in her tender heart. At the age of eighteen, she falls in love with her father’s young disciple. After the music concert on *Shivaratri* her father relieves him from his promise to marry his daughter. Though the young disciple informs to keep his promise, he flees away at the first opportunity. She is left with a severe wound. Her father consoles her saying that she should consider herself married to music and not to a musician. But jilted in love, she does not have capacity accept such consolation. She rightly asserts, “...it is an impossible penance... to express desire in my music when I am dead inside.” (*A River Sutra*, p. 286) The musician has faith in the waters of the Narmada because of Shiva’s correlation. As the Narmada is the daughter of Shiva, it will cure her of the attachment and resultant anguish. She is supposed to regain her tranquility and subtle refinement in order to pursue music again.

The river may or may not cure her but the author has a conviction that the time spent in the soothing company of nature helps heal a wounded heart. It was not her ugliness that led her to grief but it was being rejected by someone that tore her to the core. It was a deceit of her lover. On the part of the musician, it was failure for him both as an artist and as a patriarch. The author has artistically dealt with the theme of love in this story. Her love for her father’s disciple was a means to escape her ugliness. The disciple’s love was coloured with selfishness and opportunism. It is only the sublime quality of love of nature that can be redeeming and curing element. It also narrates an artist’s love and dedication for a form of art and how this love makes a human being sensitive to everything around. Thus the theme of love interconnects
these elements in this story: the elemental Nature, human nature and
the forms of art.

Along with the bureaucrat narrator, there is one more element
which abides the loosely knit plot and reinforces the theme of love. It is
the presence of the Narmada both in the stories and in-between the
narration as well. It is a persistent symbol of immortality, love and
rationality. The entire drama of the novel is enacted on the banks of the
Narmada. It stretches from Madhya Pradesh to Gujarat travelling about
eight hundred miles of distance. The river teaches to be helpful to others
and is also a symbol of Nature’s bounty:

... O Narmada:
Defend me from the serpent’s poison. (A River Sutra, p. 137)

In the Indian mythology only The Narmada River is endowed with the
power to cure from a serpent’s poison. As discussed earlier, serpent is
not to be taken in its literal sense. Here serpent means the force of desire
which lurks beneath our existence. This force functions as a barrier in
the way of self-realization. The marathon course of the river and the
meaning of the word The Narmada (laughter) urge us to be optimistic in
our pursuits and to laugh away our sorrows:

The River is named after laughter.
The Narmada means the delightful one.
‘Soother of desires’. (A River Sutra, p. 145)

In the course of the novel lot of people come to the banks of the river and
contemplate in different ways. The immortality of the river is in the form
of human experience – the experience of the world around and the
experience of living on the banks of the river. Thus, the river is the
repository of human experiences of different shades and therefore is
significant for the human existence. The Naga Baba tells the wonderstruck bureaucrat:

If anything is sacred about this river, it is the individual experiences of the human beings who have lived here....it is an immortal river. It has never changed its course. It is a sustained record of human existence in the same place – that is immortality. (A River Sutra, p. 264)

The presence of the Narmada is not only in the physical perspective. It penetrates the psychology and consciousness of the characters and thereby the consciousness of the readers as well. In the beginning of the story we are told that The Narmada is the daughter of Shiva, the Supreme Ascetic. Lord Shiva is considered as the Creator and Destroyer of the world. Once he was in an ascetic stance and it was so strenuous that the flow of his perspiration took the form of a stream and began flowing down the hills. The stream took the form of a woman. But this woman was not an ordinary one. She was the most dangerous of her kind. She was a beautiful virgin innocently tempting the ascetics to pursue her. She could inflame the lust of self-controlled ascetics. At one moment she appeared as a lightly dancing girl, at another a seductress showing her exhaustion. Her inventive variation amused Shiva so much that he named her The Narmada, the Delightful One. He blessed her with the following words: ‘You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible.’

Since the Narmada is a collection of human experiences and is also a record of human existence, it is bound to be a source of mythology. There is a folk lore that The Narmada protects one from a snake’s poison. Another myth says that a suicide in the waters of The Narmada is not a sin. On the contrary, the river purifies all the sins. The narrator has come down to the lap of n/armada to tranquilize himself. For him, the
river is an object of contemplation. It appears in various forms to him. It is playful and placid. During rains it appears dramatic. At night its form is dark and fearsome. At the daybreak it looks colourful. The narrator’s approach is a rational one who like a nature lover adores various forms of the river. In her song, the mistral sings the praise of The Narmada: ‘grace of the earth’, ‘a dancing deer’, ‘the beautiful one’, ‘damsel of beautiful heaps’, and ‘river born of love’. There is altogether a specific culture that has sprung around the river. She has rich association with Shiva, Time Ascetics, jungles, bards, gamblers and cheats. Whoever comes to the shelter of The Narmada finds consolation. The author deliberately keeps Lord Shiva and the river associated with each other.

The Narmada River is a primordial image in the history of human existence. In fact this river is the archetypal mother to the mankind. She stands for peace and plenty. Through different stories and through the discussion among the bureaucrat, Dr Mitra and Professor Shankar the author depicts the constant struggle between the traditional and the modern. This tussle is also a clear indication of contemporary India which is moving fast toward the western rational and yet tied down to the old beliefs:

...evokes the profound presence of tradition and desire along the banks of the holy river The Narmada. For all the horror and passion of the tales, the bureaucrat remains little moved until book’s end. Readers too may be more intrigued and edified than moved. As in folktale, the stories’ dynamics dominate their characters who serve primarily to illustrate cultural and religious forces.

([http://www.amazon.ca/river-sutra/gitamehta](http://www.amazon.ca/river-sutra/gitamehta))
The character of Professor Shankar acquires a lot of importance after revelation that he was the Naga Baba himself. As an ascetic he seems to have been steeped in the divinity and greatness of the river mentioned in religious scriptures. But this view is denied by Professor Shankar himself as he denies the divinity of the river while talking to the bureaucrat. It epitomizes the ambiguity in the contemporary Indian thought system. We find ourselves on a threshold. On one side we have traditional thinking highly influenced by religion. On the other side there is a rational approach which completely denies the traditional outlook. In this regard, the views of Professor Shankar regarding the river are ambiguous. In a way, it is not the dilemma of the character, but it is a dilemma of the author, Gita Mehta. She seems to be confused whether she should uphold the cultural values and traditional thinking of her mother land or she should give up to the western thought of being rational. But she comes out of this dilemma successfully and shows us how our thought system is an amalgamation of both.

As the title suggests, the Narmada is the organizing principle of the novels. The six loosely knit stories give the novel multiplicity but the river secures unity for the novel. The Narmada Guest house is the place of brain storming. People from different background come to this place and add to the richness of human experience. The river with its mythology, superstitions, religion, spirituality and archeology represents the traditional, primitive and modern Indian. If the traditional wisdom chants, ‘O the Narmada defend me from the serpent’s poison,’ the rational mind interprets it as the serpent of desire.

The river presents love in its different forms but sustains love in its higher form. What it teaches through the stories of love is not to be moved by frail human passions but to perceive it in its divine sense. This argument gets vindicated by the story of the Musician’s daughter. The
musician’s love for music is divine. He asks his daughter to meditate on the waters of The Narmada which is a symbol of Shiva’s penance, ‘...until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed. ...he says I must understand that I am a bride of music, not of a musician...’ (A River Sutra, p. 226) Along with the all-pervasive presence of the Narmada, there are recurrent motifs in the form of Lord Shiva and love. The highest manifestation of love is in the form of Shiva’s love and his love has many shades. His love for Parvati is sensuous. For The Narmada it is fatherly love and yet it is unattached. The story does not condemn love but insists that love should be uplifting. The saga of Naga Baba’s love for the girl whom he rescues from a brothel house is philanthropic. Master Mohan’s love and his commitment to see him succeed is his attachment in the Guru-Shishya tradition. The love of the musician’s daughter is in the form of longing while Nitin Bose’s love leads to decay. Thus the thematic structure and aesthetic framework revolve around love. Gita Mehta has depicted the divine love in the form of allusions to Kamdev, the reference to Parvati’s penance to get Shiva’s love, the story about the origin of veena and the seven notes of music. All these aspects elevate the concept of love to its divine standards. The lyrics of the great Sufi poet Amir Rumi strengthen the image of love.

A River Sutra is praised and criticized for arousing Indian ethos. The narrator displays appealing descriptive power. A Publisher’s Weekly opined that the novel beautifully incorporates the art of story telling and music is an integral element of the novel:

As characters reveal the pleasure and pain that have shaped their lives, Mehta discloses the wonders of the country – the Jain religion; savoury samosa and pickled mangoes; bazaars from where one can choose from glass bangles, cloud of spun sugar or a bar of soap with a film
star’s face on the wrapping. It is a charming book not only for its stories that reveal the complexities of India but also for its fascinating and irresistible text. (Publishers Weekly, p.33)

In fact the depiction of the river and the inter-related stories repeatedly draw attention toward the theme of love and renunciation and the impact of Indian ethos is so powerful that it dominates the narrative. Because of this reason we tend to neglect some of the important issues like the use of myths, the portrayal of women, the residual colonial culture and the implicit sexual imagery. With reference to the twentieth century literature, myths have helped the writers to look back and reconstruct the past. It offers a supportive base on which the writers can build up a new perspective. A common reader does not look for the intricacies of the plot or the credibility of the character or the style. What one enjoys is the familiar presence of myths or fantasy. Gita Mehta has made a profound use of myths and taken support of popular legends, beliefs and mythological stories. The Narmada’s presence in the novel inseparably associates it with Shiva. Thus allusion to one fetches allusion to the other. Towards the end, she suddenly repudiates the myth of immortality by making Professor Shankar deny the river’s myth. It is her attempt to give a rational touch suitable to the contemporary mind. But whether she will be able to erase the profound image of river left in the minds of the reader still remains a question.

The novel is replete with archaic beliefs and superstitions: the legend of the tribal hero and the bee sting; the tribal faith in the goddess who can cure the possessed; and a conviction that a man can become mad if he walks out into the jungle during the eclipse of the moon. It is interesting to read Nitin Bose’s venture into the jungle in a dark night of eclipse and Rima, a tribal from Assam tea garden working a black magic
spell on him. What is more unlikely myth is that the priest of the remote area of Assam knows about the Narmada’s capacity cure the insane and the possessed. The character of the bureaucrat seems to be stable as he does not question these stories and beliefs nor seem to believe in them. Another belief is that gray-green oval stone found in the river is Shiv-lingam. Professor Shankar who refuses to believe in the divinity of the river may have some scientific or archeological explanation of this phenomenon. Unfortunately he is never asked this question.

Professor Shankar’s character is mystifying. It is neither because of his background as a Naga ascetic nor because of his being a knowledgeable archeologist. The only reason is that his motives are ambiguous. There are certain pertinent questions: Why did he renounce the world and became an ascetic; why after attaining certain height in asceticism he came back to the worldly life; what happened to his family meanwhile; after coming back to the world how did he get back his government job? After coming back into the worldly life he is not engaged in any social or fruitful activity. Thus his decision to renounce the ascetic’s life is almost a regression on the path of spirituality. Gautam Budhha wondered from ascetic to ascetic. He was disappointed everywhere but did not abandon his search. Swami Vivekananda travelled room guru to guru till he found Swami Ramakrishna. Both of them persuaded the path of self-realization and got enlightened. But Professor Shankar surely lacks such dignity.

Gita Mehta belongs to the band of writers categorized as the writers of Diaspora. The diasporic experience is one of being on flux, marginality and the annoying sense of hybridity and ethnicity. On the contrary, *A River Sutra* dwells in the psychological realms of conscious, subconscious and unconscious. It also upholds the ideology that ‘Man is the greatest truth/ Nothing beyond’. In this situation, what justification
can we find and apply to the novel in order to unearth diasporic discourse and the pertinent resistance? In the present postcolonial discourse the terms like marginality, hybridity and ethnicity have lost much of their negative connotations. But in the field of diaspora, still the major concern is the nostalgic consciousness and the longing to connect with the motherland persists. It produces a resistant counter-discourse. For example, Karma Cola was the result of Gita Mehta’s annoyance at the remark of a westerner. It analyzes and mocks at the western craze for instant spirituality. Through literary articulation the author becomes the spokesperson of his/her country, the thought system and cultural identity.

The strong inclination to look back to the roots and the will to reconstruct the past produce a possibility to seek imaginative or aesthetic solutions to the problems of diaspora. In A River Sutra, Gita Mehta draws heavily from her cultural heritage, mythology, history, and geography in order to provoke the reader to think about her motherland from the eyes of a migrant. Such text epitomizes the nostalgic structure of the immigrant writer and seeks to resolve the tension between the ‘home’ and ‘not home’. The diasporic longing is not only retrospective but also prospective. These writings reach deeper into the nature of past and at the same time broods over the possibility-emotional, psychological and physical that the future holds. Physical inability is related to impossibility to travel back to the motherland or to communicate with one’s people. The obvious result is the sense of being trapped in some ‘foreign surrounding’. However, in the present scenario of global village and hi-tech communication, this sense has declined considerably. The Mehtas are in a position to move about freely across the continents. They also enjoy their reunion with the motherland at regular intervals and also at their wish. In short, diaspora does not mean for her the colonial
migrant’s nostalgia for the ‘home’. In *A River Sutra*, she consciously constructs and deconstructs her diasporic identity and uses matrix of Indian culture to claim the significance of Indian culture, mythology, spirituality and history. The novel attempts to dispose off the pre given western identity and thereby tries to fix cultural differences. Usha Bande in her paper “India of Her Mind” writes ‘...by recreating the ancient myths in contemporary terms the author deconstructs some of the predefined western notions about India.’ *Modern Indian English Fiction*, 125

The Narmada River has profound impact on the collective psyche of Indian people. Therefore the concept of the river’s immortality or spirituality is beyond scrutiny. But for the western readers, their comprehension of the river’s immortality or spirituality depends on how the concept is explained. As mentioned earlier, the diasporic longing is one of nostalgia and alienation; there is always an urge to re-establish the bond with the homeland. If the Indian mind personifies and even resists the river, there is no need for explaining it to the western mind. Postmodernism, post colonialism and diaspora have established a trend to favour the traditional presentation without explanation. Studies conducted during the later half of the twentieth century hold the ecological care of the traditional folk practices. Scholars are trying to integrate folk wisdom with the modern technological practices. Professor Shankar’s denial of spirituality or the local myths may provide him with the status of a rational and educated western mind but it cannot wash away the tribal ethos from the Indian psyche. The tribal ethos has been assigned a limited role in *A River Sutra*. One of the significant features of the tribal culture is the worship of the rivers and the mountains as gods and goddesses. The reason behind this perception is very clear. It is done because they are grateful to the Nature for its bountifulness. In the
absence of modern means of life, almost all of their requirements are fulfilled by the mountains, rivers and other elements of the Nature.

The portrayal of women is not a major concern of the novel. Whatever limited role has been assigned to them portray them as scheming, grabbing, sensuous, arousing man’s lust and hence dangerous. This is what Rima does exactly. As Nitin Bose thinks, if she is real and not a part of his sickness, she is the dangerous type. If she is seen as a force of desire, her influence is as poisonous as the serpent’s. In this regard, Master Mohan’s wife is also venomous from another angle. She is ill tempered, uncompromising and greedy. It will not be an error to call her inhuman. She deliberately turns her children into devil to make it sure that the helpless blind boy is ill treated. Master Mohan’s economic crunch could have been tolerable had he an understanding wife. The musician’s daughter is a pathetic figure. Her physical appearance does not have any vitality and she thinks she is a failure. His father is also a failure in the terms of a musical genius. Had he been a real genius, his music would have aroused ennobling passion in the heart of his disciple. The young disciple represents the male psychology that the primary duty of a female is to be beautiful. The courtesan’s daughter is the shadow of Rahul Singh. Neither the mother nor the daughter has a separate or individual identity. They are bound within a small sphere of their duty to make the princes stylish. They do not have a significant social role other than this. This reality is brilliantly revealed by the author as she puts the following words in the courtesan’s mouth.

The city is owned by men who believe that every human being has a price and a full purse is power. Trained as scholars, artists, musicians, dancers, we are only women to them, our true function is to heave on the mattresses and be
recompensed by some tawdry necklace flashing its vulgarity on a crushed pillow. (A River Sutra, p. 167-168)

The only woman character who stands apart from the above mentioned women is Uma. But being an ascetic she has a limited role in the active social life. She appears toward the end of the novel and sings the Sutra.

To relate the river to the mentioned female characters, we can say that the Narmada is the most enduring figure in the novel. However, it is worth noting that she has been described as a dangerous woman who can tempt even ascetics with her charm. It seems to be the reason why Lord Shiva endowed her with divinity. In the Narmada Sutra, she is described as Delightful One, Damsel of beautiful hips, Surasa, Reva and Laughter but not as a mother. Though it is a river, it is not a mother but an enticing woman. However, when we look at the Narmada what strikes us most is the culture which has sprung around her banks.

At the end of this chapter it will be rewarding to see the characters, their quests and the effect of the Narmada on them and on their pursuit. The narrator is in search of tranquility. He flees from reality and escapes into an isolated place. At the end he acquires a sense of fulfillment. The Jain monk was in search of Nirvana. He left the world because of duplicity and luxury of life. He continues his search of Nirvana. Master Mohan lost a chance of self-fulfillment in his childhood. He tries to overcome his filial and family vacuum by vicarious satisfaction. At the end he is detached and commits suicide. Nitin Bose tries to escape from tedious modern life. He comes to the Narmada in order to cure himself of possession. He undergoes sublimation and earns name and fame by writing a treatise on the Narmada. Rahul Singh wants his beloved of previous birth and also wishes to take a revenge on the society. After enjoying a short time with his wife, he gets killed. The courtesan’s
daughter had a life of luxury. She commits suicide in the Narmada. The musician’s daughter sought for beauty and selfless love. She wanted to escape from fear of ugliness and pangs of being denied. She seems to be initiated into the process of sublimation on the bank of the Narmada. The Naga Baba went out in the search of enlightenment. He returns to the worldly life and gets involved. He moves towards fulfillment. Uma is in search of devotion, peace and purity. She has already undergone sublimation. She accepts life as it is and her quest continues.