Chapter -I

Introduction

There is nothing that her eyes do not light upon, and certainly nothing that they do not illuminate. To encounter her writing is virtually to make a fresh discovery of India.

Pradyumna S. Chauhan
Chapter-I

Introduction

A. A Survey of Indian English Novel

Novel, the most acclaimed artistic form of fiction was the last to arrive on the Indian English Literary scene. It came to India a century and a quarter ago. In the West, prose fiction started flowering during the eighteenth century and within a short period, novel came out to be the most popular crafted prose. X.J. Kennedy writes:

Among the forms of imaginative literature in our language, the novel has been the favourite of both writers and readers for more than two hundred years. Broadly defined, a novel is a book-length story in prose, whose author tries to create the sense that while we read, we experience actual life. (213)

By absorbing a very large part of creative energy, the novel, thus becomes a vehicle of ideas as well as means of amusement. Writers of different schools of thought employ their general criticism of life which becomes an inevitable thrust in shaping the complex modern world. According to Walter Allen the contemporary novels are:

… the mirror of the age, but a very special kind of mirror, a mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, the coursing of
its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it. (16)

Through writings, indelible contribution of the novelists has always been directed to the welfare of society and its reformation. Roger D. Spegele in his article *Fiction and Political Insight* has discussed the uses of novel. According to him the uses are:

Critical, that is the analytical and usually, realistic examination of a society’s claims and practices. The second is ethical, an attempt to clarify the moral values implicit in particular ideas and behavior. The third is therapeutic, in the psychological sense of achieving a higher level of self knowledge and the fourth is conceptual, the use of the novel to construct a hypothetical model embodying some general ideas about society and politics. (5)

Like novels, every form of literature serves to complement society. Literature being an art of words perpetuates sensitivity to language through understanding and expression of words. It serves as cause and effect of society through monitoring human significance in changing social structure. Every aspect of life can be traced by keeping a vital record of experiences in the form of literature. In *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*, William Henry Hudson expresses:

Man, as we are often reminded, is a social animal; and as he is thus by the actual constitution of his nature unable to keep his
experiences, observations, ideas, emotions, fancies, to himself, but is on the contrary under stress of a constant desire to impart them to those about him, the various forms of literature are to be regarded as only so many channels which he has opened for himself for the discharge of his sociality through media which in themselves testify to his paramount desire to blend expression with artistic creation. (11)

Literature gives tongue to the hopes, aspirations, dreams and culture of a nation. In India, a sub-continent of diverse cultures, several literatures are flourishing on the ground of provincial differences in languages like Assamese, Bengali, Guajarati, Kashmiri, Oriya and many more. All these voices have pulled off Indian literature to immeasurable heights ranging from literature of ancient time to modern Indian English Literature.

Ancient works like the Vedas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Chilappadikaram and Manimekhalai all are precious treasures that mirror the great Indian, Aryan and Dravidian culture with accuracy. Earlier works were written in verse which meant only for religious and didactic purposes simply to quench the quest of eternal life. All such ancient literatures of the world have been authentic sources of inspiration for every great literary work. The relationship between predecessors and successors can be estimated through the words of Hudson in *An Outline History of English Literature*: 
Whatever seems new in literature is found on examination to have roots stretching back into a more or less remote past. However fresh the shoots or strange the blossoms, their nourishment has come from the soil and the air which gave life to things that may now seem finished and done with. (289)

During the British rule, a totally alien language and culture was introduced into India through a tiny number of educated Indians. This awakened the enlightened mind of Indians and insisted them on importation of English education, ideas and technique. It resulted in an unprecedented awakening and transformation of society. As the people of India were eager to experience exotic events of the West; the Westerners too were eager to explore complex India “… a place of exquisite decadence, occultism, mysticism, sensuality and sudden death” (Williams 1). This brought an understanding and acted like a bridge between the two great cultures.

This mutual assimilation gave birth to a new stream of literature “Indian English Literature” into the vast ocean of Indian literatures. Iyengar has rightly acclaimed Indian English Literature as “a Janus-faced Literature” born of “a cross fertilization of two faithful cultures” – Indian and European (35).

Nowadays Indian Writings in English has attained a distinctive status by the virtue of its richness and strength. Since the time of acceptance and absorption of English Literature into the mainstream of
Indian culture it has become inseparable and complementary to each other. It can be stated, “… a tree has sprung up on hospitable soil from a seed that a random breeze had brought from afar” (Iyengar 15).

In the eighteenth century after the Battle of Plassey (1757) when the British who came to India as traders decided to rule, felt the requirement of the spread of English. Their efforts started burgeoning in the nineteenth century and gave birth to the period of Indian renaissance. In early phases strong resistance was encountered but later on received intellectuals’ inclination. Raja Rammohan Roy who had been attracted to the West, prompted English education and became the pioneer of social reconstruction of the nation. His essay “A Defence of Hindu Theism” (1817) may be regarded as the first original publication in the history of Indian English Literature. His efforts had been appreciated by Rabindranath Tagore as “… the inaugurator of the modern age in India” (Naik 14).

Raja Rammohan Roy was the only acclaimed prose writer of the mid and late nineteenth century. During this period poetry of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was flourishing. Poetry was next to prose to appear on the Indian English scenario and continued to dominate for many years. Then appeared Indian English drama and fiction arrived lastly on the literary scene. Earlier fictional works were tales which later on took proper form of novels.
The first Indian English novel *RajMohan’s Wife* was written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and serialized in the Calcutta Weekly as *The Indian Field* in 1864. After this, Indian English novel stepped into the process of evolution. The subject matter of early novels was social and a few historical modeled upon the British fiction. It is very interesting to know that the era when people of India were less aware of female education, the three women novelists appeared on the scene and surprisingly overshadowed other writers before the end of the nineteenth century. Among these writers stand Toru Dutt’s unfinished novel, *Bianca*; Krupabai Satthianadhan’s *Kamala* and *Saguna*, and Shevantibai M. Nikambe’s *Ratanbai*.

With the commencement of modern period, many socio-political changes ushered refreshing new ideas which not only shook the Indian way of life but also Indian Writings in English. The end of First World War (1918) and the Gandhian whirlwind (1920-1947) came out to be the period for epoch–making developments in Indian English literature. After the First World War, the whole world was shocked with its grim carnage. It stirred the conscience of the people but at the same time awakened nationalistic spirit which has been reflective in the literature from 1921 onwards. This crucial period also proved determining for India as Mahatma Gandhi appeared on the national scene with the promise of total independence. This period of change stimulated new ideas and prompted writings on varied themes like the freedom struggle, East-West
relationship, the communal problems, untouchability, poverty, economic exploitation, and oppressions of various kinds. Before the nineteen thirties many works had been translated and written in English.

In 1903 P. Ramakrishna attempted a historical novel *Padmini* in English. Afterwards, the journals of fiction started with the writings of the earliest novelists like K.S. Venkataramani’s *Murugan, the Tiller* (1927), *Kandan the Patriot: A Novel of New India in Making* (1932), A.S.P. Ayyar’s *Baladitya* (1930) and Krishnaswamy Nagarajan’s *Athavar House* (1937). This pace suddenly geared up with the appearance of the great trio: Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao on the scene of Indian English fiction. Among them, Mulk Raj Anand has been the most prolific writer. He had published his first novel *Untouchable* in 1935. R.K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* also appeared in the same year but Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* came into existence in 1938. During this period the wind of total resurrection was blowing which gathered momentum with the writings of great novelists, who contributed in social reformation through their works. About Mulk Raj Anand’s creative style, K.R.S. Iyengar writes:

He wrote of the people, for the people, and as a man of the people. It may be said that these, early novels reveal an aim and a sense of direction much as an avalanche or a flood shows a fury of momentum, a surge of force, a heady rush towards the goal. Evidently a novelist in a hurry who must
say all that he has to say as quickly, and as effectively, as he can. (333)

Unlike Anand, R.K. Narayan has portrayed all the finer shades of feelings of common people through his characters. He seldom incorporates controversial politics and has conveyed thoughts in English with masterful ease. His latest releases are *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), *Talkative Man* (1983), *The World of Nagraj* (1990) and *Tale* (1992). Through his writings he has succeeded in universalizing a local town Malgudi. M.K. Naik has compared the art of two eminent writers as, “... Narayan’s delicate blend of gentle irony and sympathy, quiet realism and fantasy stands poles apart from Anand’s militant humanism with its sledge hammer blows and his robust earthiness” (160).

As Narayan has portrayed local happenings with no great heroes, Raja Rao has presented local beliefs, myths and culture. In his writings he has revived the ancient Indian style of story-telling. Raja Rao’s passionate attachment to the Indian ethos and Gandhian thoughts evolved him as one of the finest novelists in Indian English fiction. M.K. Naik shows similarities of expression between Mulk Raj Anand and him, “Like Anand, Rao also boldly translates Indian words, phrases, expletives, and idioms— this case from his native Kannada—into-English and uniformly brings a touch of a poet to his style” (167).

The selection of subject matter and the major trio’s own characteristic way of expression made the new style of novel popular
among the Indians. William Walsh rightly says, “It was in 1930s that the Indians began what has now turned out to be their very substantial contribution to the novel in English and one peculiarly suited to their talents” (66).

Till independence, the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi on contemporary Indian literature had been an anxious preference. K.S. Venkataramani’s Murugan, the Tiller and Kandan the Patriot expounded Gandhian economics and Gandhian politics respectively. Kamala Markandaya’s Some Inner Fury (1957) depicts later phase of Gandhian Age covering the Quit India Movement of the early forties. The influence of Gandhi was so keen that R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand introduced him as a character in their novels. In Narayan’s Waiting for the Mahatma and Anand’s Untouchable and The Sword and the Sickle Gandhi occupies central place with his inspiring words. Raja Rao’s Kanthapura is also remarkable regarding the impact of Gandhi’s ideas and visions on a south-Indian village. Bhabani Bhattacharya’s So Many Hungers (1947) which was published within few months of Independence also shows influence of Gandhi and Tagore, and expresses social realities of that period.

The tradition of social realism established during the Gandhian age continued its tradition even after Independence. Along with the great joy of Independence, India experienced great sorrow of partition. The incidence created chaos in the nation and the Indian history witnessed
communal riots, bloodshed and unending lines of refugees. Witnessing this, the contemporary novelists portrayed the pathetic description of India-Pakistan partition in their own ways. Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Manohar Malgoankar’s *Distant Drum* (1960) and *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) represent the painful realities and sufferings of the two nations. It was the period of the nineteen fifties and the early sixties. Up to this period the renaissance in Indo-Anglian literature had achieved its flowering. P.P. Mehta aptly remarks, “The toddling Indo-Anglian novel, inspite of the handicaps, has by now learnt to stand firmly on its own legs. A conscious and decisive artistic pattern has evolved itself” (95). This period became more remarkable with a notable development in emergence of an entire school of women novelists. The Dominant figures were Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai.

These women writers altered the creativity of writings through shifting their interest from public to the private sphere. They concentrated on the individual’s quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms of problems. The earliest of the women writers Ruth Prawer Jhabvala deals with the East-West encounter and comedies of urban middle-class Indian life in undivided Hindu families. Her works *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder* (1960) and *Get Ready for Battle* (1962) manifest the picture of urban middle-class society while the other novels namely *Esmond in India* (1958), *A Backward Place* (1965),
A New Dominion (1973) and Heat and Dust (1958) offer the conflict between the East and the West. In her treatment of the subject she brings out her observation with gentle irony and good humoured satire.

Kamala Markandaya being an expatriate writer handled the subject of East–West encounter in two different ways; firstly, through direct interaction between Indian and British culture and secondly; through the impact of westernized urban culture on traditional Indian life. Other than this, her novels reveal woman in different life-roles with a variety of themes, settings and characters. Her first novel Nectar in a Sieve (1954) illustrates all these characteristics. Her second novel, Some Inner Fury (1957) is a political novel depicting Quit India Movement. A Silence of Desire (1961) and Possession (1963) exhibit Indo-British relationships and conflict between Indian spiritualism and Western modernism. All her writings exhibit her intense expertise in the same theme except The Golden Honeycomb (1977). In this novel, she has attempted historical fiction, covering a period of about a century from 1850 to Independence. All these impressive novels in distinctive individual style put her among the leading women writers.

Nayantara Sahgal is well known for her political fiction and is regarded as an exponent of the political novel. Her upbringing in the political atmosphere provided her with all the natural pre-requisites. Besides this, modern Indian woman’s search for sexual freedom and self-realization are the subjects of her creativity. In her first novel
A Time to Be Happy (1958) she has dealt with the social and political realities of newly independent India along with the female character Maya’s refuge into extramarital arms. This Time of Morning (1965) contains political portraits, Storm in Chandigarh (1969) deals with political unrest with the division of the Punjab into the two states of Punjab and Haryana. The other novels are The Day in Shadow (1971), Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power (1982), Plans for Departure (1985), Rich like Us (1985), Mistaken Identity (1988), A Situation in New Delhi (1989) and Lesser Breeds (2003) establish Nayantara Sahgal as a master of fictional art in her arena.

The appearance of Anita Desai on the Indian literary scene has added a new dimension to Indian English Fiction. In all her writings she has preferred the interior landscape of the mind rather than the external realities of politics and society. Her first novel Cry, the Peacock (1963) revolves around the world of Maya’s emotional intensity, her emotional restlessness regarding the astrological prediction and fear of ending of their marriage became the cause of her husband’s death. Voices in the City (1965), Fire on the Mountain (1977) are the tales of alienated individuals. Most of her novels deal with the inner realities of the protagonists except Bye–Bye Blackbird (1971). Only in this novel, the novelist has preferred social and political realities to the state of mind. Anita Desai’s sensibility of delineating human moods with subtlety and perfection keeps her in the fore-front of the prominent women writers. As M.K. Naik remarks:
If her fiction is able to advance from the vision of “aloneness” as a psychological state of mind to that of alienation as a metaphysical enigma—as one hopes it will—Anita Desai may one day achieve an amplified pattern of significant exploration of consciousness comparable to Virginia Woolf at her best. (243)

During this period a few more women novelists appeared but offered their creativities in one or two each. Venu Chitale’s *In Transit* (1950) is a description of three generations of a Brahmin joint family. Zeenuth Futehally’s *Zohra* (1951) and Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) deal with the lives of Muslim families while Perin Bharucha’s *The Fire Worshippers* (1968) deals with Parsi life.

The most prominent novelists of the late sixties and the seventies are Arun Joshi and Chaman Nahal. Arun Joshi’s *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) and *The Apprentice* (1974) present protagonist’s alienation from the surrounding society, while Chaman Nahal has portrayed painful odysseys in different contexts. Chaman Nahal’s *My True Faces* (1973) is a novel of love, sensuality and sublimity; while *Azadi* (1975) which has won the Sahitya Akademi Award, gives an account of migration of a grain merchant and his family to India within fictional description of the partition. Among women novelists of the seventies stand Bharati Mukherjee, Gita Mehta, Rama Mehta, Shashi Deshpande and a few more. Bharati Mukherjee is a familiar voice in the Indian literary diaspora. As the spokesperson of a minority
Compulsion (1975). In 1976 Kamala Das, a well known poet published a novel Alphabet of Lust which failed to impress readers like her poetry.

The period of 1970s produced less literature and has been evaluated by Meenakshi Mukherjee as, “... the 1970s were a relatively barren decade, and for a while it almost seemed that this sub-genre of the Indian novel had run out of stream and come to natural end of its brief life. But then came the explosion of the 1980s” (85).

As the decade of 1970 witnessed many political upheavals it directed the novelists towards a fresh theme of fictional creativity with the new writing technique. As Viney Kirpal states:

... the 1970s were also the gestation period for the revolution in fictional technique and national sensibility that was to occur in the 1980s. Politically speaking, the crucial years were 1975-77 when the Emergency was imposed in India. The period (1975-77), therefore, marks a watershed in the psyche of the Indian who saw it as the return of the repressive, ‘colonial’ rule and resented it fiercely. (68)

After 1980 Indian Writing in English experienced the emergence of new fiction. This period signaled a new trend in writing with giving voice to multicultural concerns. The contemporary writers broke the old classical forms of writing and chose much-debated topics as their subject of writings. Salman Rushdie’s novel Midnight’s Children (1980) bugled the voice of change in the Indian English Literature. His other works
upcoming future. Upamanyu Chatterjee, the novelist embraces success outside India with his debut novel *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) which portrays realistic India with great sense of humor. His second novel *The Last Burden* (1993) is about celebration of life in an Indian family. The sequels of these two works are also produced by the author. *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000) is a sequel to *English, August* and *Way to Go* (2010), his recent publication is a sequel to *The Last Burden*. His one more contribution to the contemporary literature is *Weight Loss* (2006).

The emerging new voices of the decade two-thousand are Chetan Bhagat and Aravind Adiga. These young writers have captured the world literary scenario with their great sensibility and expression.

Chetan Bhagat, an Indian author, columnist and speaker has authored five books. His works are *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005), *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) and *Revolution 2020: Love, Corruption, Ambition* (2011). Out of five, the four books have inspired film making. *Five Point Someone* and *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* are set around the story of three friends. *One Night @ the Call Centre* deals with the anxieties and insecurities of the rising Indian middle-class people. *2 States* is partly autobiographical depicting love and marriage between two persons of different states and *Revolution 2020* is concerned with a love triangle, corruption and a journey of self discovery.
Aravind Adiga is another reputed Indian writer and journalist whose debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008) won the 2008 Booker Prize. In this novel the author has dealt with the contrast between Indian modern global economy and poverty of its working class due to widespread endemic like corruption, religious tensions etc within Indian society and politics. His other works are *Between the Assassinations* (2008) and *Last Man in Tower* (2011). Both the works deal with problems of transforming modern Indian way of life. Among these leading novelists, the women writers who share the same platform are Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri.


Some other prominent women novelists are Shobha De, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, Kiran Desai and Rupa Bajwa.
Shobha De, a columnist, author, editor and novelist secures the place among India’s top best-selling authors. Being a prolific writer she has written seventeen books till now. A few renowned works are *Socialite Evening* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1989), *Sisters* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994) and the latest one *Shobhaa at Sixty* (2010). Her books though praised a lot by readers in India and abroad, seem to belong less to serious literature.


One more popular Indian English writer is Anita Nair, who got her book *The Better Man* published in 2000 depicting man’s psyche with a flavour of local culture. It was followed by the appearance of *Ladies Coupe* (2001) a powerful feminist novel about a woman’s search for strength and independence. *Mistress* (2005) a tale of changing traditions of Kerala, deals with the closed world of an Islamic village. The latest one *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) is a heartwarming story of redemption and forgiveness. In this work she talks about the role of a corporate wife in urban India. Apart from novels, she has also written a play and published collection of poems, travelogues, and children’s writings.


Among these eminent women writers stand an emerging young talent Rupa Bajwa, whose first novel *The Sari Shop* (2004) received great accolades and won the Commonwealth Award in 2005 and Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006. *The Sari Shop* is all about her hometown Amritsar and the class dynamics of India.
After a close inspection we can conclude that the genre of literature “novel” although being last to appear on the literary scene has established itself deep into the soil like an ever perpetuating green laurel tree. It became possible only through consistent and combined efforts of both the men and women novelists of the past. The determined efforts of these early writers have nourished literature up to this existing enriched form. Earlier the contributions made by women writers were not very remarkable but today they have overpowered others by grabbing the scene. It happened during the last four decades, when the contribution of women writers altered the image of women in fiction and evoked new consciousness in the stratum of society. On the role of the woman writer Dr Usha quotes Rosalind Brachenbury’s words:

Nobody writes in vacuum, away from the political and social structures in which we live. We breathe the air of today’s thought, we digest it in everything we read and consider; also, we create it. This is largely the role of women today: to create, present and consider a new world. (207)

The part played by desperate women in total transformation of a male-dominating society has been acclaimed by Rabindranath Tagore in these lines:

*Amid my own untidiness I think in wonder:*

*In the heart of Creation*

*Flow these two streams of Man and Woman.*
Man gathers round him rubbish,
Woman comes and constantly cleanses it away. (199)

B. Gita Mehta: A Fascinating Personality

Gita Mehta is an internationally renowned writer and journalist who stands among the eminent, intelligent and witty writers of English. Being a notable Asian-American writer she has authored five books which portray the contemporary India with all its perspectives and variations. Her remarkable literary skill is not only reflected in her fiction and non-fiction books but also in her journalistic articles, television documentaries and film compilation. This exceptionally bright star in the firmament of Indian English Literature was born when our country was making a decisive move towards independence, and so her grandmother named her as “Gita” or Song; the Song of Freedom.

Gita Mehta was born in the capital of India, Delhi in 1943 in a well-known family of freedom fighters. She is the only daughter of the most prominent politician of Orissa, Bijoyananda (Biju) Patnaik. Her father was an aviator in his early days and later became a good businessman. During his youth he ventured into the politics and participated in the freedom struggle. For his activism against the British Government he was imprisoned for four years. Biju Patnaik formed a regional political party of Orissa-Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and was also appointed as the Chief Minister of Orissa in post-independent India.
Gita Mehta’s mother Gyan Sethi Patnaik hails from the paradise of India, Kashmir and had been raised strictly according to North Indian purdah culture. Her mother received all her tutorials and trainings in seclusion. She got thorough training of Sitar, classical Sanskrit and Persian quatrains but lacked modern skills. After marriage, she learned all the modern skills under the guidance of her husband Biju Patnaik who had always encouraged the progress of women. He worked hard on his wife’s inadequacies and taught her everything about ballroom dancing, card playing and bicycle riding. He made her morally strong to combat with every evil situation and to rub shoulders with the contemporary society. With such sincerity and passion Gita Mehta’s parents involved themselves in independence movement and their residence in New Delhi was famous among freedom fighters as “Absconder’s paradise” (SL 3).

In Snakes and Ladders, Gita Mehta has also mentioned contributions made by two of her paternal uncles in the freedom movement. Her uncle, a nineteen year old poet, Dev Prashad Gupta preferred to die on the steps of British Armoury at Chittagong rather than surrender himself and his younger brother Ananda Prashad Gupta aged fourteen years, had been sentenced to the life time hard labour imprisonment in fetters at the penal colony of Kala Pani.

Gita Mehta is the only sister among two of her brothers. Her elder brother Prem Patnaik is a Delhi-based businessman and her younger brother Naveen Patnaik, is a much loved Indian politician. Presently, he is
serving the nation as the Chief Minister of Orissa which is his third consecutive term. He is also the Chief of Biju Janata Dal (BJD). Naveen Patnaik’s personality also reflects affinity for art and culture which is evident through formation of Indian National-Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and publication of three books *A Second Paradise*, *A Desert Kingdom* and *The Garden of Life*.

Unlike other children, Gita Mehta’s childhood was unconventional and unsteady. Just three weeks after her birth, her father was imprisoned with charges of keeping pistols. This period proved to be the toughest for her mother as she had to get rid of ammunitions with them and also had to manage two little kids all alone. In order to avoid rigorous punishment like “Kala-Pani” her mother decamped with arms and experienced narrow escape. Afterwards she followed her husband jail to jail dragging both the children. At the age of three Gita Mehta was sent to be raised in a boarding school in Kashmir and her mother devoted her next two years for the curtailment of the period of her husband’s imprisonment. In an interview with John Walsh Gita Mehta recalls her childhood:

… being sent to a convent when I was barely three, because my parents were in jail—my father actually inside, my mother trying to get him released. I remember the nuns saying, when I cried, “We don’t allow crying here” … My brother and I spent the entire time trying to escape. We once collected biscuit tins,
waited until 9 pm and tried to stack them up by a wall and climb over it, but...

After schooling, Gita Mehta travelled to England for higher education and earned her University degree at Cambridge University. There at Cambridge she met the impossibly stylish Ajai Singh “Sonny” Mehta and married him. Regarding their marriage she told John Walsh, “Mine was an arranged marriage ... because it was all arranged by the Girton girls. They insisted I had to meet him.”

Presently, Sonny Mehta; who stands amongst the fifty most influential Indians of abroad, is a publisher and editor-in-chief of an International publishing house, Alfred A. Knopf. Sonny Mehta began his career from London, where he co-founded Paladin Books and was the editorial director of Pan Books. In London he spent more than a decade and a half as one of the most prominent figures in the British publishing scene. In 1987 the couple moved to New York when Sonny Mehta joined as editor-in-chief of Alfred A. Knopf. Recently, he had won The London Book Fair Lifetime Achievement Award for 2011, for his valuable and quality contribution to the International publishing industry. In New York’s literary-publishing world, Mehta couple are among the central figures. Although Gita Mehta always remains under the publishing limelight, she has emerged as a writer of her own. This well-known couple has a son and they divide their time among New York, London and India.
On the privilege of living in three continents she expressed her feelings to Wendy Smith in the interview:

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

    Gita Mehta’s admiration and love for India is not only limited to her statements and writings, but is an inevitable part of her personality as C.J.S.Walia noticed during an interview, in California, just before the public reading of *Snakes and Ladders*:

    ... she came across as a very self-assured, articulated, and charming person. Elegantly sari-clad and wearing a bindi, she spoke with a distinctly Oxbridge accent, developed, no doubt, during her convent schooling in India and her Cambridge years. Yet, at the end of her reading ... she chose to speak to me in classic Hindi.

    She has always felt proud of being an Indian inspite of her long period of being the resident out of India. She has mentioned an incidence,
when an immigration officer at New Delhi airport asked her, “And after all these years, you are still carrying an Indian passport, Madam? May I ask why?” Gita Mehta replied, “... because this is my damned soil. And don’t you ever forget it!” (Upfront Daughter)

Before expressing herself in the form of books, Gita Mehta spent her time as a journalist, writing for Indian, British and American magazines. As a Journalist she has covered a number of significant world events including Indian events and produced and directed more than ten television documentaries. These are produced for British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and National Broadcasting Company (NBC). She had also covered the most happening and historic event of independent India, the first general election in former Princely States. During 1970-71 she worked as a war correspondent for the U.S. television network N.B.C. and covered Bangladesh War. She told C.J.S. Walia in the interview:

I made four films on the Bangladesh War-- I was with guerillas, the Mukti Bahini, inside Bangladesh. Later, for NBC, I covered the Indo-Pakistan War that led to the creation of Bangladesh. I also made films on the elections in the former Indian princely states....I would charge into the offices of BBC and NBC and ask them, ‘Why don’t you let Indians make films about India?’ They were astonished and let me do the films.
Her film compilation of Bangladesh revolution, *Dateline Bangladesh* was shown in cinema theatres both in India and abroad.

Back from the history we can trace that journalism plays a pervasive influence on writings. Our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, whom we acknowledge as a writer of books, also wrote as a journalist for the *National Herald*. T. S. Satyan quotes the views of Chalapati Rau:

Nehru knew the nature of journalism. Writing to him was a part of self-expression as a man of action, and at his best, he gave it a literary touch with his sense of rhythm. If journalism consists largely of the capacity to react and express that reaction quickly and effortlessly, Nehru, like Gandhi, was a great journalist. At times he surprised us with his grasp of the mechanics and technical aspects of journalism too. (252-253)

All such journalists-turned-writers have created a revolution in recent years by phenomenal depiction of naked facts. Many expatriate writers of India who have made significant contribution in describing India are Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry and others. Works of these brilliant writers have attracted an increased number of foreign authors to publish India-centric books and explore Indian culture, religion and everyday life but lack the desired lusture. As these writings have been influenced by the personal perception of a foreigner, they are devoid of desperate authentic descriptions which tend to distort the facts.
Gita Mehta being an Indian daughter of revolution and of witty-opinionated mind overcame these constraints experienced by the foreign authors. Through her smart investigations into the history, culture, religion, people, ideas and personalities of modern India, she has produced five books both fiction and non-fiction. Her balanced perception, frankness and unique ability to focus India make her every effort a masterpiece in its own. About her own writings she says to Wendy Smith, “I am a camera, and the reader can see through my eyes.” Pradyumna S.Chauhan glorifies her works as:

In the panoramic vistas of her fiction and nonfiction, one can as easily come upon a princess as a tea picker, upon fakes as well as fakirs, upon seekers of salvation and of wealth. There is nothing that her eyes do not light upon, and certainly nothing that they do not illuminate. To encounter her writing is virtually to make a fresh discovery of India. (150)

Among the contemporary women writers of the world, Gita Mehta has won worldwide recognition for her works *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1979), *Raj* (1989), *A River Sutra* (1993), *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India* (1997) and *Eternal Ganesha: From Birth to Rebirth* (2006). Her works have gained unique viability, vibrancy and vitality attracting a remarkably wide readership and universal acclaim. She stands among the first generation Indian authors who found success outside India. Her first non-fiction *Karma-Cola* was a huge success, while
her first novel *Raj* was on the best-sellers’ list in Europe. Due to wide popularity, her books have been translated into 21 languages and published in many countries of abroad.

*Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1979); Gita Mehta’s first creative work was the result of a sudden outburst over the remark made in a publishing cocktail party. In an interview with Wendy Smith she explained the situation which stimulated her to become an author, she says, “Somebody grabbed my arm and said, ‘Here’s the girl who’s going to tell us what karma is all about....I said, ‘Karma isn’t what it’s cracked up to be.’ And Marc Jaffe, who then ran Bantam Books, said, “Write it.”

These two words echoed in Gita Mehta’s senses and she banged out *Karma Cola* in just three weeks. To explain *karma* she picked up the subject of contemporary American journalism with realistic representation of hippies’ pilgrimages. *Karma Cola* can be read as a brilliant depiction of mammoth exodus of the Westerners towards the East in search of spirituality during 1960s and 1970s. The urgency to gobble up Hinduism created many avenues for the charlatans to become wealthy. The book produces a wickedly witty satire on spiritual aspirants as well as the crooked gurus. Through *Karma Cola* the author has produced her personal experiences from a journalist’s point of view. She has made a diligent dissection of the fraudulent made by hucksters and casualties encountered by the spiritual seekers.
She has also portrayed the East-West encounter as a conflict between the claim of the body and of the mind–materialism and spiritualism. Through *Karma Cola* the author has suggested that Hinduism is a long devotional service to the transcendent Lord and can only be achieved by prolonged complete surrender. Examples of various steadfast spiritualists provide us with an opportunity to improve the vision of India which the Westerners commonly use to portray. Pradyumna S. Chauhan comments upon her work:

> Evenly critical of India and the West, the vignettes that make up the book are in the nature of highly confident and sensitive woman’s diary kept on her travels through India. The sketches reveal an intellect well honed and a mind bemused by human credulity and contradictions. (150)

After *Karma Cola*, Gita Mehta signed a contract with Simon & Schuster to write a novel and produced *Raj* (1989) after painful nine years. She told Wendy Smith, “The problem with *Raj* was that I was being bent all the time to a kind of fictional American shopgirl reader. I think Simon & Schuster’s idea was that I would write this blockbuster, which I’m not capable of doing--I’m not good enough to do it!” As per the publisher’s wish *Raj*, could secure its place among Europe’s the bestsellers’ list.

Gita Mehta’s first fictional presentation *Raj* is a well-researched representation of Indian history dealing with human relationships in a Colonial society. Within historical framework the story of Jaya Devi is
weaved which determines her destiny. *Raj* can be raised as a saga of the triumph of democratic principles and of protagonist’s transformation according to socio-political changes. Indian historical events of 53 years have been dealt with in the story which begins with the famine of 1898. Other major happenings are the development of freedom movement in Royal India, emergence of Gandhi, chronological freedom struggle, awakening of democratic spirit, India-Pakistan partition and finally Independence.

Jaya Devi, the protagonist of *Raj* is the Princess of Balmer who later becomes the Maharani of Sirpur. She faces much turbulence in her life which provides us with an opportunity to understand the transformation of Royal India into Democratic India. Throughout the novel she remains a mute observer and oscillates between tradition and modernity until the time demands. By means of Jaya the author has projected the strength of Indian woman who is capable of achieving the highest by her high moral values and devotion to duties or *dharma*.

After dealing with Indian history Gita Mehta picked up Indian culture, myths and ethos as the subject of her next writing. In *A River Sutra* (1993) the author has probed into the world of Indian metaphysics and spiritual beliefs through six short sketches – The Monk’s Story, The Teacher’s Story, The Executive’s Story, The Courtesan’s Story, The Musician’s Story and The Minstrel’s Story which are brought together by a narrator who speaks in first person. The world presented by the author
revolves around the river Narmada where a retired bureaucrat chooses to become the manager of the rest house as a *vanaprasthi*. Here, the river Narmada is the setting and the organizing principle which provides unity while the six stories give multiplicity.

After every story the bureaucrat seeks help of his friend and guide Tariq Mia who explains him reminding the style of the Upanishadic narration. About her unique style of narration she explains C.J.S. Walia in the interview:

I talked with the professor of Sanskrit at Hindu University. I told him that I had put the narrator in the novel later. I was trying to bring mythological time, historical time, contemporary time, and narrative time–all into say one paragraph. And he said that, you know, the “Sutradhar” of classical Sanskrit drama was there precisely for this.

*A River Sutra* is packed with the decorum of myths and taboos of native tribes around the river Narmada. Various myths of Shiva, Origin of Narmada, Origin of ragas and many others have been dealt with in the novel. Shankaracharya’s composition “The Song of the Narmada” establishes the relation between nature and human desire. Thus Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* can be estimated as a perfect work of art bringing out the eternal expression of love through diverse cultures. She has expounded the very famous teaching of Bhagvad Gita on *karmayoga* and also affirms faith in quest rather than static, dedication rather than
alienation and survival rather than renunciation. Through the subplots the author reveals the mysticism of life to “meet” life, not “retire” from it. Pradyumma S. Chauhan acclaims, “... if Mehta had written nothing but this one novel, she would have ensured for herself an honorable place as a contemporary Indian novelist of English” (151).

Gita Mehta’s *Eternal Ganesha: From Birth to Rebirth* (2006), her latest publication, also presents the mythical India in respect of much loved Hindu deity Lord Ganesha. In this book she has expounded her regards to the Lord of Beginnings and presented him as a ubiquitous Hindu deity with the talismanic powers. She has diligently worked at the philosophies and myths associated with Lord Ganpati regarding his origin, his head, trunk, hands, belly and ride. She feels that he symbolizes Hindu philosophy’s fundamental law the unity in diversity and represents hope, optimism, good will, health, tolerance and magnanimity in this fractious world. He is the OM-kar, the origin of the universe.

In India, Lord Ganesha’s birthday is celebrated as Ganesh Chaturthi which lasts for ten days and culminates with the immersion of Ganesha’s idols. It symbolizes the cycle of death and rebirth which also frames the subtitle of the book. Gita Mehta suggests that the world is thought to have reached a nadir of wickedness and it is the time for Ganesha to appear. She feels that he has already incarnated among us on 21 September, 1995 when the incidence of Ganesha idols’ drinking milk occurred.
After dealing with varied subjects of Indian culture, history, religion, and spirituality Gita Mehta chose to write on politics, conveying the ups and downs of India’s progress. *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India* (1997) was published to celebrate the 50th anniversary of India’s independence. The book contains thirty six essays, which begins with the author’s birth in pre-independent Delhi and ends with the glimpses of modern India. The essays in *Snakes and Ladders* are unflinching assessment of modern India concerned mainly with leading politicians, their policies and their impact on nation’s progress. The collection of precise prose is arranged in four different sections dealing with autobiographical notes; economic condition of Independent India; evils and shortcomings of implemented policies and the activities of people that shape modern India. She sets out her pieces in such a way so as to take the reader down the decades from the years of independence to present time. Gita Mehta explains Wendy Smith, “In *Snakes and Ladders* even though it’s a series of essays, my hope was that they would have an accretive effect, so that by the time you finish the book and I’m telling you what it is that I love about India, it has become familiar to the reader”.

The title of the book reminds us of the traditional Indian game where the player sometimes moves upwards climbing ladder and at the same time slides down with snakebite. In the same manner the author has highlighted the virtues and vices of the policies determining the nation’s progress. She explains to Wendy Smith:
India is a place where worlds and times are colliding with huge velocity. We’re putting satellites into space and we have bullock carts; there’s that constant tension and contradiction of immense sophistication and an almost pre-medival way of life. I thought the only way I could describe that collision was anecdotally, by taking snapshots, as it were.

On her purpose of writing she tells Wendy Smith, “… I wanted to make modern India accessible to Westerners and to a whole generation of Indians who have no idea what happened 25 years before they were born.”

Gita Mehta being an exceptionally intelligent journalist, an exuberant world class writer and a person of fascinating personality presents humble views on her writing skills. She confesses to Wendy Smith, “I feel I’m still an apprentice…. I may have to write many more than seven books before I’m prepared to say, ‘Okay, I think I’ve got a grip on the craft.’”