

Redemption through the Journey of Dejection: A Panoramic View of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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Abstract

Gita Mehta, having excelled in her writing on Indian culture, has given voice to the problems of the contemporary society in various aspects. *A River Sutra* emphasizes India being the site for an amalgamation of varied religions, cultures, traditions and practices. In the book, she has employed major themes like renunciation, love, lust and quest for personal and social space with the backdrop of tragic reality of life and offers distinction between detachment and attachment, spiritualism and materialism and modernity and tradition. The paper makes an attempt to explore the characters' struggles to redeem themselves from dejected and desperate situations in the contemporary society of India. Though some characters end up succeeding in

their attempts directly or through other means, some fail to redeem themselves. However, their battles for redemption amidst dejection are noteworthy.

Keywords: Redemption, dejection, Narmada, Tradition, Culture

Gita Mehta, one of the renowned writers in Indian English Literature, has excelled in her writing on Indian culture explicating exclusively Indian experience in a lucid voice. As an Indian writer who has lived for some time in England and the United States, Mehta's vibrant use of language interlaces India, its history, politics, and cultures and the western perception of it. While her first novel *Raj* seems to lack depth in the storyline, the remaining works remain a treasure to the literary world. She mainly focuses on religious, economic and socio-political conditions of India.

A River Sutra is a book of six interconnected stories blending mythology and contemporary reality and widespread traditions of Indian aesthetic thought. Through the book, Mehta emphasizes India being the site for an amalgamation of varied religions, cultures, traditions and practices. With the purpose of incorporating an overall message of morality to her readers, Mehta chooses a unique, lucid technique of narration by which she has woven six different stories in one thread (sutra). She has employed major themes like renunciation, love, lust and quest for personal and social space with the backdrop of tragic reality of life and offers distinction between detachment and attachment, spiritualism and materialism and modernity and tradition. An unnamed civil bureaucrat who has retired from his service to run a government-owned inn on the river is the thread loosely weaving the six tales together with Narmada, India's holiest river as the background. The references to various pilgrims like Jains and Hindus visiting the holiest river imply India's secular tradition.

The paper seeks to probe into the characters' struggles to redeem themselves from dejected and desperate situations. Though some characters end up succeeding in their attempts directly or through other means, some fail to redeem themselves. However, their journey for redemption amidst dejection are noteworthy.

The first story "The Monk's Story" focuses on the Jain monk Ashok's mutated life from a luxurious son with all worldly comforts to renunciation of them. Being the son of the owner of one of the largest diamond companies in the world, Ashok's life was bedecked with wealth and power. He had little knowledge about impoverishment. He had been exposed only to pleasure, wealth and luxury since his childhood. During his life in England, Ashok had pursued delight in squandering his wealth in fashionable discotheques, and enticing beautiful women with his sport cars. Ashok, while narrating his past life events to the unnamed civil servant, says, "Knowing my years of pleasure in Europe were limited, I had seized on my irresponsible life with hectic delight. Beautiful women were lured by my fast sports cars, the wealth I squandered in fashionable discotheques, and by myself—for I was thought to be handsome with my aquiline features and my slender, muscular body" (19). However, this life at ease had transformed him to be indolent.

Ashok's vision about his future became clear after he had learnt about the truth of life. He was shocked to know how diamonds were taken from mines at the distress of the poverty of miners. In contrast with his father's adherence to the principle of nonviolence, he was practically unmoved by the conditions of the destitute who were toiling arduously in the mine fields. Regardless of his admiration on his father more than any man alive, he questioned his father, "How can you worry about a dead insect more than you care about a human being? (17). Ashok wished to redeem himself and the society in which he lived. He had gradually comprehended the other phase of the bitter reality of life. He did not want to be in the comfort zone anymore. Instead, he gave up worldly pleasures to seek spirituality, hoping that he would attain redemption from the exhaustive life he had been living so far. His decision to renounce the world shocked everyone but he overcame all the struggles and insults to attain salvation in the name of spirituality. He believed that living a humble life as a Jain monk abandoning all worldly comforts could redeem him from all the manacles of life.

The second story "The Teacher's story" highlights the relationship between the music teacher Mohan and the blind boy Imrat. As a man who came from musical background, he endeavored hard to become a great musician. But all the efforts he and his father had taken were in vain. He ended up being an ordinary musician struggling to meet his expenditure. His father's struggles were endless.

For four years Master Mohan's father had pleaded for assistance from the wealthy families at whose houses his son sang on the occasion of a wedding or a birthday. For four years he had stood outside recording studios, muffling his coughs as tuberculosis ate away at his lungs, willing himself to stay alive until his son's talent was recognized, urging the boy to practice for that first record which would surely astonish the world. (36)

Even Master Mohan's children and his wife despise him and his music. He continues playing music wherever he gets opportunities although he is hated in his family circle. Even amidst dejected circumstances, he lives hopelessly secluding himself in the small roof terrace of the house to escape his family's contempt. His hope makes him meet the blind boy Imrat in a small concert and thereafter his life changes as his desire to make the boy a great singer increases. Master Mohan, by seeking redemption for the nine year old boy, gets satisfied. He takes a lot of efforts to train the boy only to make him a prey to the jealousy of the sahib. In the world of despondency, his trials have become futile and end up as a defeated man. His pursuit of redemption has failed. Eventually, he committed suicide since he was guilty of Imrat's death.

The third story "The Executive's Story" is an account of a young executive Nitin Bose who had been bewitched and maddened by a woman named Rima. She seduced him with her tribal songs and enchanted Nitin in the tea estate where he worked as an executive. When Nitin realized Rima to be the wife of a railway coolie, he stopped meeting her. But Rima had cast a spell on him that he should never leave her. He is possessed and can be cured only by the river Narmada. He has been trapped by the woman and so he cannot redeem himself from the

manacles of the possessed woman. He needs the help of others though he himself battles for his personal redemption. Through his uncle, he gets the favour of the unnamed narrator. According to the narrator, it is "... Nitin Bose a foolish young man who attracted misfortune" (95). In search of redemption, he is told that only the Narmada river has the power to cure him. It is his ignorance of the power of desire that has punished him. At the end, when he realizes his mistake, he attains his redemption from the possessed woman.

The fourth story "The Courtesan's Story" focuses on a bandit named Rahul Singh's abduction of Rudra, a courtesan in the Vindhya. She had been his seduction and persuaded her to wed him. Even though their married life had been happy, his life ended soon. He was shot dead by the police and died falling in the Narmada river. After his demise, the courtesan remains there in the Vindhya with the memories of her husband. She firmly believes that she can seek redemption only in nature where her husband spent most of his lifetime. She is not ready to seek refuge in her mother. The memory of her life with her husband has become the redeeming remedy to soothe her mind and she finds a way to battle for her redemption in despair. Though she battles hard till the end, she drowns mysteriously escaping recapture from the police in the Narmada river. Her attempt to redeem her life has failed.

"The Musician's Story" is the fifth story in which a woman's desire to marry the one whom she loves becomes a daydream and so she has lost her hope in life. She learnt music from her father along with the young man on the condition that he will finally marry her. She was left dejected and disappointed when she came to know of his marriage with another woman. It was quite difficult for her father to console her. Understanding her overwhelming grief, he persuaded her to seek shelter in the Narmada river which can cure her from deep attachment towards the young man and marry music. She says,

He says that I must meditate on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance, until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed and can become again the ragini to every raga.

He says I must understand that I am the bride of music, not of a musician. But it is an impossible penance that he demands of me, to express desire in my music when I am dead inside. (145)

Her attempts to seek redemption do not help her. She is totally hopeless of her future and is in despair. The narrator also feels pity for the woman who is completely heartbroken. He pities, " 'I suppose all this emotion alarms me.' I ended lamely, 'Broken engagements, unrequited love, that poor musician. It all strikes me as somehow undignified' " (146). While comparing her with other characters, she pursues redemption only because of her father's insistence. She is not able to come out of her shell. Instead, she sinks herself in her grief.

The final story "The Minstrel's Story" is about a Naga monk who saved a girl child from a brothel colony and freed her from a wretched life of violence. She is named Uma by him. As an ascetic of Shiva, he teaches her that the Narmada river is her mother and refuge. " Placing her

on the wet mud of the river-bank, he reached up to wind his matted locks on top of his head. Suddenly he gripped her arms and lowered her into the water. ‘The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become a daughter of the Narmada’ ” (163). The child has redemption from prostitution through Naga Baba. He is the God to her. He encourages her to sing at temple festivals. Seeking higher enlightenment in a cave, Naga Baba has left her to follow her own footsteps and get enlightened.

The six stories interwoven in a thread are narrated with multiple narrative directions. The unnamed narrator who has sought refuge in the Narmada river to live a serene life is interrupted by a stream of pilgrims including the Jain monk Ashok, the teacher Master Mohan, the young executive Nitin Bose, the courtesan Rudra, the musician and the minstrel Uma. Even though most of the protagonists try to escape from everyday reality, they all should face the hard realities and battle for their redemption amidst despondency. The narrative technique employed by Gita Mehta captivates the readers’ passion to read the novel at a single-sitting.

References:

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