

## **An Exploration of Narrative Technique in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra***

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Gita Mehta is one of the well-known contributors in Indian English Literature. Indian English Literature has a long tradition of women writers such as earlier novelists Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, etc. Compared to these women novelists Gita Mehta's contribution is though quantitatively less but it is qualitatively significant because of her handling of the subject-matter and form. As a diasporic writer, she dedicated her writing towards Indian culture and society. Her first work is *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* published in 1979 and this first book is a series of interconnected essays weaving Mehta's impressions of India's mysticism. Her first novel *Raj*, published in 1989, is a thorough and colorful historical story that follows the progression of a young woman born into Indian nobility under the British Raj. The novel is a magnificent mixture of history and fiction. Later on she published another novel *A River Sutra* in 1993. The novel centers on India's holiest river, the Narmada. It is in the form of interconnected stories. She published another non-fiction *Snakes and Ladders* in 1997 which is a collection of essays about India since Independence. She defines her India through insightful, intelligent and often witty eyes with a smattering of personalised anecdotes that define it not so much as a set of essays, but a collection of lives.

The present paper seeks to study the narrative technique of Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra*. The novel is a saga of interlinked stories which flows with same theme and same subject-matter. The writer situates the novel on the banks of the river Narmada. The river is associated with the religious faiths and beliefs of Indian people. People worship

the river and get salvation in her company. The river is a motherly figure for them. Therefore, frustrated and nervous people come on the banks of the river for getting solace of mind. In this novel Gita Mehta uses intricate narration or metanarration technique in which there is not only one narrator but sub-narrators. Much of the variety and vitality of this novel is due to its having more than one narrator. A narrative contains story elements which are narrated by a narrator who is a speaker of that narrative but not always a character in the work. An author's choice of point of view influences the kind of narrator used. The ancient Indian tradition of story-telling helps the novelist to present a crowded world in the novel. In ancient times story-telling was a skill. These stories give moral lessons to the people. The novel may appear to be a didactic work on account of its content and narrative technique. On the surface level it seems to be a collection of short stories but after reading these stories, the reader cannot separate one story from another. The technique of the novel is partially similar to the epic *The Mahabharata*. Vyasa wrote *The Mahabharata* but he himself is not involved in it as a character. He plays a role of *Sutradhar* who narrates the stories from his point of view. In the same way the narrator of this novel plays a role of *Sutradhar* who narrates the stories sequentially and filled the gap between each story through his story-telling skill.

In the novel there are six stories: *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*. These six stories are divided into sixteen chapters and the last chapter *The Song of the Narmada* is a sequel to *The Minstrel's Story*. Gita Mehta uses multiple narrative technique and at the same time she fills the gap between each story. The characters of each story appear only once and carry on the same subject-matter from one story to

another. Each and every character of the novel represents a particular community. At the beginning of the novel, the nameless narrator enters with the details about his life and career from the first person point of view. He is a retired bureaucrat and joins the post of a manager of the Narmada rest house. He is trying to get this job because he wants to escape from the humdrum of bustling city life and live a peaceful life. After getting a job in Narmada rest house, he becomes a close friend of Tariq Mia, an old Muslim mullah. The nameless narrator hears the stories and at the same time gives background to each story. He seems to be a catalyst who describes all the stories objectively.

The narrator while going towards Tariq Mia's ashram meets the monk. In *The Monk's Story*, the monk is a narrator who narrates his story in first person narration. As a representative of Jain religion the monk tells about the Jain principles and Mahavira, the pioneer of Jain religion. The narration of this story shifts from the narrator to the monk. The monk through his story explores the principles of Jain religion such as non-violence which is considered as a sharp weapon of Gandhian ideology. The monk, as a son of a rich diamond merchant enjoys every moment of life and thinks that life is a blessing of God. He travels all over the world for fulfilling the purpose of trading. He returns from his journey and decides to renounce the world because he observes and feels the depth of poverty and hunger. He thinks after returning from his journey, life is not a smooth path but it is full of difficulties and sorrows. He is confused when he observes his father's ill-treatment to his miners because he is a strict follower of Jain principles and breaks those principles while treating his miners. Through the character of the monk, Gita Mehta builds the image of Mahavira in reader's mind. The monk is a mirrored figure of

Mahavira and follows the footsteps of Mahavira. For making the narration reliable Gita Mehta chooses the monk as a narrator of this story.

Each story of the novel completes in another chapter and the writer before telling any story, first creates suitable atmosphere to the story. In *The Monk's Story* the monk says to the narrator, 'I have loved just one thing in my life', (p.14) but he forgets to answer him. The narrator after his departure thinks about it but he cannot get its answer therefore he asks Tariq Mia about it. Tariq Mia is a narrator of *The Teacher's Story*. He wants to tell the narrator the secret of human heart i.e. 'The capacity to love' (p.48). For explaining the secret of human heart, Tariq Mia tells *The Teacher's Story* which is experienced by him. Tariq Mia is an old mullah who is attached to the verisimilitudes of the human life. Compared to the narrator Tariq Mia is a philosopher and like a torch for those whose life is in darkness. The narrator looks at each story on a surface level at the same time Tariq Mia observes the details of each story and tries to explain the philosophy of life. The writer chooses Tariq Mia as a narrator of this story because he is a witness of this event. Master Mohan is a music teacher with unfulfilled desire of being a famous singer. He meets an orphan Imrat and feels that he is his own self therefore he gives him music lessons devotedly. Unfortunately Imrat's murder leads him towards a path of madness and he comes on the banks of the river Narmada for the solace of the mind. Tariq Mia cures him from his madness but while returning home he commits suicide. Master Mohan is a sensitive man who is totally involved in Imrat and cannot imagine life without him. Tariq Mia tells the narrator, 'Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind child'. (p. 91) Tariq Mia narrates the story from third person point of view and makes the narration omniscient.

*The Executive's Story* is another story which is narrated through the diary of Nitin Bose, an executive. The writer uses a different technique for this story. Nitin Bose while staying in a tea estate falls in love with a tribal woman. His love for the tribal woman is a materialistic love so when he returns from the tea estate, every night he dreams of her. In this failure of love he loses his mental balance. He is attached to the tribal woman for fulfilling his sexual desires. His relation with her is immoral and he is afraid of the regulations of the society because according to the society his act is a sin which is not excused by the people. Therefore he buried his immoral act in his mind and the effect of his suppression resulted in his utter madness. Afraid of society's regulations he cannot confess his immoral act to anybody else so he confesses it in his diary. Diary is one of the means of confession through which one can get mental relief. Nitin Bose after writing his diary gets mental relief and is cured from amnesia. The story reflects the Indian psyche and tradition in which these kinds of acts are not allowed and if someone did it unconsciously then he is afraid to confess it. Nitin Bose as belongs to the same tradition suppresses his desire and wants to hide the truth from people. The writer, before telling the story, describes the myth of Kama, God of Love which is very helpful to create a suitable atmosphere. No one can confess his sin before anybody else so this technique is uniquely used by Gita Mehta. Through diary Nitin Bose narrates his story in the first person point of view and makes the narration reliable.

In *The Courtesan's Story* the mode of narration is again changed from one narrator to another. The Courtesan narrates her story in the first person narration and also includes the information about her daughter's kidnapping by a murderer Rahul Singh. The writer wants to provide the detailed information about Courtesan's life through this

narrator. The Courtesan represents the particular group of courtesans which is neglected by the society. The courtesans are not considered as human beings but they are used for entertainment only. In this story there is another narrator i.e. the Courtesan's daughter. She describes her life with the bandits to the narrator. She also tells the reason behind Rahul Singh's act that Rahul Singh kidnaps her because he thinks that she has been his wife in so many lives before that one. As a witness she describes the life of bandits in the state of solitude. After marriage she and Rahul Singh live a happy life and he also decides to live a life of common man but the society may not be able to forget his deeds and he is killed in police encounter. At last the Courtesan's daughter commits suicide because as a murderer's wife she cannot return in society. Gita Mehta, through the character of the Courtesan's daughter, expresses the mentality of society. It also tells that many a times innocent person also becomes a victim of the regulations of society. Rahul Singh is not a murderer but society forces him to do the murder and at the same time the Courtesan's daughter who marries a murderer is forced to commit suicide. Both these are victims of social ethos. Even though the narrators are changed in the same story, the writer uses the first person point of view because no one can express the deep feelings and emotions of a particular person.

In *The Musician's Story* the musician's daughter describes her story to the narrator in the first person. Through her story she tells about her father and their popularity in the field of music. Her father is a devoted music teacher and cheated by his disciple. The disciple promises him to marry his daughter after learning the art of music but when the purpose is fulfilled he marries another girl. The musician's daughter is ugly that's why the disciple rejects her. His love is a materialistic love which gives importance

only to external beauty. The musician's daughter cannot tolerate his rejection but the musician convinces her that beauty is a passing thing and it lies in the eyes of the beholder. In her narration she describes the details of every raga which can be told only by a person who has knowledge of music so the writer chooses her as a narrator of this story. The writer with the help of this narrator describes the selfish and materialistic world.

In the next, *The Minstrel's Story* the narrator is Tariq Mia. He meets Naga Baba a few years ago and get acquainted with him and a little girl who is saved by Naga Baba from the clutches of the prostitute. Tariq Mia who is well acquainted with Naga Baba describes the details of an ascetic's life. An ascetic is an alienated man who avoids the company of human beings and lives a lonely and peaceful life in the state of solitude. In the story Naga Baba is a representative of ascetics' community. The story also describes how people are victims of superstitions and religious faiths. The last chapter of the novel *The Song of The Narmada* is a sequel to the *The Minstrel's Story*. This chapter narrated by the nameless narrator in the third person narration which focuses on Naga Baba's reappearance in the role of Professor Shankar. Professor Shankar plays the role of Naga Baba because he is trying to change the bad practices in the society with the help of people's religious faiths and beliefs. The writer with the help of these two narrators tells that because of some beliefs the little girl is left in a brothel by her father and at the same time Naga Baba saves that girl from the clutches of prostitute through the beliefs.

In the narrative technique the nameless narrator provides background to each story. The writer uses flashback technique in the novel. The writer's purpose of providing the background to each story is to create suitable atmosphere which captures the reader's

psyche. The use of narrative technique in this novel is different from the regular concept of the novel. Generally the novel includes a saga of events related to the central character's life but the novel comprises different characters and different events. The novel highlights not only one character but with the help of various characters Gita Mehta expresses the psychology of human mind. Human mind cannot deny the influence of culture, religion, faiths and desires on him and at last surrenders before it. So, the technique of this novel is considered as unique one.

### REFERENCES

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