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Feminist Perspective in the Novels of Gita Mehta

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Indian English literature originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under colonial rule. In recent years it has attracted widespread interest, both in India and abroad. It is now recognized that Indian English literature is not only part of Commonwealth literature, but also occupies a great significance in the World literature. Today, a number of Indian writers in English have contributed substantially to modern English literature. The legendary and hugely venerated Indian English literary personalities like Rabindranath Tagore's *Sadhana*, R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days*, and the later writers like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Manohar Malgaonkar's *The Devil's Wind*, V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*, etc. have ceaselessly captured the spirit of writing and establish a distinct identity. Besides them Indian women writers have also contributed a notable signification in English writing. Indian women writers have begun to gain international recognition since the publication of the Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in 1997. In the last two decades there has been an astonishing flowering of Indian women writing in English.

Indian women novelists are popular for female subjectivity and their works depict their own identity. In the mid-nineteenth century, more women started to write in the English language. Women writers have incorporated the recurring female experiences in their writings and it affected the culture and language patterns of Indian literature. Over the years the world of feminist ideologies begun to influence the English literature of India. In ancient India, we find many times women's rights and dignity are honoured. In the *Shri Brihadaranyakopanishat* – 'Gargi is honoured as the spiritually advanced woman.'¹ Even Manu, the first lawgiver of Hindus has insisted to honour the women:

"Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, desire (their own) welfare."²

"Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards."³

Feminists insist on women's liberation from patriarchal social structure and thinking. They boldly demand human rights and dignity of women who remained dumb and docile for centuries in the male-dominant world. As Sarala Palkar writes about the feminist movement:

"This women's liberation movement was initiated in the 1960s by women who were politically committed – women who were active participants in the civil rights movement or in the protest actions against the war in Vietnam or those who belonged to the various progressive or Marxist groups. It was their bitter experience of the blatantly sexist attitudes that were evinced by their male associates in these politically progressive movements that finally led women to form their own groups and association."⁴

Thus emerged the western feminism. Media plays a very significant role to spread the feminist ideology. It becomes now the global phenomenon. Writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal and Gita Mehta have chosen the problems and issues faced by the women in today's male dominated world as the main theme of their books. Among the other writers experimenting with the feminist ideology in Indian writing in English, Gita Mehta has a unique place in the literary world. She is uniquely Indian and her use of words presents the customs and traditions of the people of India. She does not write for the foreign readers. She is basically Indian and writes for the Indians. Gita Mehta, an eminent novelist has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focusing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them. Gita Mehta uses this point of view of present social reality as it is experienced by women.

Gita Mehta was born in 1943 in Delhi. She belongs to the family of freedom fighters. Her father Biju Patnaik was an industrialist, flying ace, and the most renowned political leader as well Chief Minister of Orissa. Her younger brother Naveen Patnaik is presently the Chief Minister of Orissa. She took her early education in India and completed her higher education from the Cambridge University in UK. She started her career as journalist. During 1970s she was the television war correspondent for the US television network NBC. She also produced and directed 14 television documentaries for UK, European and US television networks. Her famous four documentaries on the Bangladesh revolution, *Dateline Bangladesh*, were shown in cinema halls both in India and abroad. She has also made films on elections in the former Indian princely states.

She started writing to share her varied experiences earned from her political and journalistic background. She married famous Ajai Singh "Sonny" Mehta, head of the Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. publishing house, which helped a lot to begin her writing career. Most of her writings are based on Indian culture, history and Western perception about it. Her books have been translated into 21 languages and been on the bestseller lists in Europe, the US and India. Set on the border between modernity and tradition, where personal freedom and cultural identity are at stake, Gita Mehta is convinced that her books are about the merging of cultures. Because of her journalistic background all of her books feature keen political insight and because of her family history- she is the daughter of Biju Patnaik- her books are smart investigations into Indian ideas, history, mythology and personalities. She has the unique opportunity to collect the richness of living on three continents and it is this rarity of perspective that gives her a uniquely witty and frank ability to define her vision of India through her work. Though Mehta's narrators are predominantly men, her themes often centre on expectations for women. The male narrator is an appropriate choice for a feminist perspective as it highlights the disparity in power between Indian men and women. She recognizes her power as a storyteller without trying to draw the reader to her side while she projects and defines a set of ideas, places, smells and traditions that make up modern India. In her writings, Mehta wrote two essay-collections: *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* and *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India*, muse on things Indian, from politics and social unrest, the endless clash of religions and cultures, spirituality, and the Indian textile industry to Indian literature and film, and so on. She also wrote two novels: *Raj*, a historical novel set during the early stages of India's struggle for independence from

Britain, and *A River Sutra*, a modern amendment of prevalent traditions of Indian aesthetic and philosophical thought.

Raj, Mehta's first novel, highlights the issues of Hindu women in pre-independent and post-independent India in the very realistic way. *Raj* is evaluated:

"Gita Mehta weaves the story of Jaya, the princess of Balmer and Maharani of Shirpur. It is intricately interwoven with the political events but it has the tears and romance of a woman's existence in India which saves the work from being a mere record of the all-too-well known history of our freedom struggle, or a racy account of the grandeur and frivolity of the exorbitant life-style of the princes."⁵

Raj is a historical fiction but under the veil of historical event it represents a woman's – Jaya's – constant struggle to live with dignity. She learns the lesson from the Renaissance in her childhood. After marriage she struggles very hard as her husband does not treat her as a genuine life-partner. Eventually she loses her husband and her son also. But she is not disappointed. Ultimately she identifies her identity as a human being in the 'New India'.

In *Balmer*, the first book of the novel, Maharaja Jai Singh is the ruler of Balmer, the small state of Rajsthan. Jaya Singh is the intelligent, beautiful, and compassionate daughter of Maharaja Jai Singh and Maharani of Balmer. When Jaya was born, her birth was not celebrated in a traditional way as her brother's (Tikka's). As a matter of fact the birth of girl is not celebrated due to orthodoxy. But Maharaja Jay Singh has different opinion on female-child birth. When Tikka, Jaya's brother was tickling with a long peacock feather the baby cries but Jay Singh says: "This is not the sound of a crying baby. That is a battle cry. If the name is auspicious, let call her Jaya, Victory."⁶ While Maharani has different approach regarding her girl-child, Jaya. As a mother, she thought and insisted that Jaya should be educated in the traditional manner of the princesses of Balmer. She thought that the princess should be brought up in a traditional way so she could adjust in her married-life. Maharaja wants to break the traditional ways of following Purdah. He thinks that Purdah is like an imprisonment in a beautiful veil, like a nightingale in the golden cage. So he wanted that his daughter, Jaya, was not to be raised in purdah. As a result of maharaja's order, Mrs. Roy taught Jaya English language. Jaya also learnt polo and shooting. Not only that but she shot a tiger when she was at her ten.

Maharaja could see the future of his state and daughter in danger, so he wished Jaya must learn *Rajniti*, the lesson of *Saam*, *Daam*, *Dand* and *Bhed*. On the other hand Maharani wished Jaya must learn the knowledge of *Solah Shringar*, the sixteen arts of being a woman, as Jaya was at her twelve. The concubine taught Jaya about the status of woman in man and woman relationship;

"No one understands how the attraction between a man and a woman is born, Bai-sa. Even worse, no one understands why it suddenly dies. We poor creatures must use every aid to keep a man's affections constant."⁷

Thus Jaya is taught that she is a woman and woman's duty is to please her man. As the time passes, very drastic changes occur in Jaya's life. Her brother, Tikka, and her father, Maharaja Jai Singh, died and Maharani became widow. It is a harsh reality of our tradition that the widow is not treated with honour. Soon after Jaya's marriage was arranged by Raja Man Singh with Prince Pratap. And thus Jaya is removed from her birth-place, Balmer in helpless condition. Maharaja's extreme wish to train his daughter as a modern woman is not materialized.

The second book of the novel *Sirpur* is about the marital life of Jaya and her husband, Prince Pratap, in Shirpur, a small state in Assam. In this book we can find the shifting of Jaya from a dry and dead land of Balmer to a fertile land of Brahmaputra. Here, in Shirpur, Jaya felt various dreadful experiences from her husband as well as from the Maharani of Shirpur. She realized about her status in her husband's heart when Prince Pratap told her, "Remove you vile, Princess. Michel is my personal attendant. Please treat him exactly as you would one of my grandmother's eunuchs."⁸ Not only that but many times she was treated without human dignity by her husband. When Prince Pratap meets her first time after his arrival in Shirpur, he walked slowly around her looking at her breasts and says her, "Wash all that nonsense off your hands and feet. And change out of these Christmas decorations."⁹

Jaya could also understand about the place of woman in society when Maharani brought her to the Kamini Temple and also asked that; "May your homage to the Goddess bring fruit to your womb and may you enrich our house with son."¹⁰ Jaya as a devoted wife obeys everything whatever told by her husband. She started to learn the art of living life in a western way to please her husband. Eventually, Pratap was allowed to go to England along with Jaya. In England Jaya was known as the 'Black Lotus' who has rare smile on her face. Meanwhile, Victor, the elder brother of Pratap committed suicide and Prince Pratap has to return to India. At the end of the book, Pratap is declared the king of Shirpur and Jaya becomes Maharani.

In the third book *Maharani* Jaya became the Maharani of the state Shirpur. In spite of being Maharani Jaya does not remove her pains. She expects eternal love, satisfaction of life, and human dignity from her husband. She realized the bitter truth that her husband only touches her when he is in drunken state. For Pratap Jaya's love and status are no more important than a concubine. With the hope of love Jaya convinced the child and became a mother of a male-child. But her maternal rights are not allowed to her. Pratap exploits her and prevents her to feed her son, Arjun. Jaya tells her condition to lady Modi who taught her the art of living life in a western way:

"he can't touch his own wife until she is turned into a toy who no longer represents a woman. Or until he himself is so drunk he can no longer pass for man. He shrinks from the sight of his wife giving breast to his son, but not from wearing his ancient crest on his feet to visit a brothel. Is this the conduct of a husband? Of a king?"¹¹

Jaya passes her life miserably. Her son is the only hope of her pleasure. Soon after, Pratap's extramarital affair with the dancer became scandal. Jaya also realized that this is the time to demand her rights as the regent Maharani of Shirpur. Pratap also realized and he gives it in written. In due course, the freedom movement led by the Nationalists was going in full swing. The Britishers and their policy were strongly opposed. The worst situations emerged for the royal family of the state due to their favour to British. Meanwhile, Pratap met an accidental death and Jaya became widow. To follow the custom she broke her bangles for the acceptance of widowhood. Four years old Arjun is officially declared as the king of Shirpur and Jaya as the Regent Maharani of Shirpur.

The title of the forth book of the novel is *Regent*. It is a tragic time for Jaya because Raj Guru of Shirpur tries to keep Jaya away from the administration and from her son, Arjun declaring her as an unclean. Her widowhood was the curse on her. She was treated thus:

“There were no bangles to be slipped onto her wrists; no long minutes spent combing the thick hair that had once fallen to her knees, no sindoor to mark the circle of matrimony on her forehead. She did not even have to cover her shaven head. A widow was not considered desirable, only unlucky.”¹²

Jaya knows very well that she is not accepted as Maharani but she taught of her son who was child-Maharaja of the state. She purifies herself in Holy River at Banaras. When she met her mother, Maharani of Balmer after ten years, her mother cannot tolerate the widowhood of her daughter. She conveyed her daughter to be strong and reminded the words of Sati Mata of Balmer; *Ram Nam Sat Hai*. Meanwhile, the National Congress of India launched ‘Quit India Movement’. It was the tough time for Sirpur and Jaya, also. Arjun, the Maharaja of Sirpur became victim of the riot and lost his life. It was a great loss of Jaya. She lost everything and became lonely. When she went to meet Raj Guru of Balmer to get advice, Raj Guru reminded the lesson of *Rajniti*, the wish of her father, Maharaja Jai Singh. Jaya followed the advice of Raj Guru and by taking the leadership of Sirpur, she allowed Sirpur State to merge with the United States of the Republic of India. In the Republic India She contested as the representative of her state as an independent candidate. The novel ends here.

Here we can find that Right from the Beginning to the end of the novel, Jaya suffers a lot. She struggles constantly throughout the whole novel. Mehta portrayed Jaya as a woman with resources and education raised half in and half out of the traditions of purdah and Hindu ritual that reigned unchanging for generations before her. In her childhood her father trained her in such a way so that she can overcome the crises. Many times she became the victim of injustice due to male dominant and orthodox society. She cannot oppose her husband Pratap even if he indulges in extramarital affair with another woman. She cannot resist Raj Guru of Shirpur when he declared her unclean due to her widowhood and kept apart from her son. But gradually, her education, lessons on modernity strengthen her to overcome each and every divert circumstances and make her able to raise her voice against injustice. As a result she is declared as the Regent Maharani of Shirpur. Not only that, but, at last she emerges as an independent woman of the Republic of India whom the Hindu orthodoxy cannot unjust. Thus it is not only the historical fiction only but a story of woman’s struggle to set her identity as a human being.

Mehta, in her second novel *A River Sutra*, throws light on Eco-feminism. Again she focuses on feminist issues in her novel. Before going forward, it is needed to explain the term ‘Eco-feminism’. The term is believed to have been coined by the French writer, Francoise d’Eaubonne in her book, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. ‘Eco-feminism’ is the social movement that regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected. More recently, eco-feminist theorists have extended their analyses to consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature (including animals), and also racism and social inequalities. Consequently it is now better understood as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature. In short, Eco-feminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment, and argues that there is a connection between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society.

The concept of Eco-feminism receives a new different cultural context, in the hands of Indian women novelists. It is all about the woman’s equation with nature, and her act of reaching out to nature in her crises and despair. Coming close to nature, the woman imbibes the serenity

and strength of this unchanged, 'immortal' nature. In her novel, Mehta beautifully portrays the Narmada as a young and attractive woman. The river is presented as an organic being full of human emotions as the narrator tells us:

"I can hear the heart beat pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at last to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank of Amarkantak."¹³

And then,

"The stream took the form of woman – the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetic to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, as yet another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another a seductress loose limbed with the lassitude of desire."¹⁴

In *A River Sutra* Mehta mainly explores the nature-woman relationship from a special context which also represents the essential Indianness of the novel. Last three stories among the six of the novel underscore the above theme in different ways. Particularly the last story of the novel, *The Minstrel's Story* is remarkable in the context of present study.

The Minstrel's Story is divided into two parts: the first part is about a girl-child and a Naga monk who saved her from a brothel and gave her new birth. Where as the second part of the story is about a minstrel (the grown up girl) and the Naga monk who re-enters mainstream life as Professor Shankar. In the beginning, the girl is just an exploited, abused child, who does not even have a name. She was just called 'misfortune' by her father because her mother had died on her birth. She belonged to a poor labourer's family. Her father and three brothers worked breaking stones by the roadside. The child narrates – quite unemotionally – a story which is a grim reality so common in such homes:

"I was never allowed to eat until everyone else had eaten. So I was always hungry. And I was beaten by my father."¹⁵

Then the girl was sold out to a brothel. Here she had been sexually abused in spite of being a child. The customers called her 'Chand'; because, they said, her skin was 'soft' as moonlight. It suggests that the child's body had been touched, examined and enjoyed by the customers. Even the monk's first glimpse of the child also evidences this. As he came to the brothel to take alms on the light of Shiva, he found that a child was cowering behind a plastic-covered sofa, her face twitched with pain as a man gripped her chin in one hand. With his other hand the man lifting the child's small body to bring her lips close to his own.

Somehow, the child was saved by the monk and then taken into the dense jungle far away from locality and finally taken across the Narmada. Here, she starts her new birth, new life, learns many new things in the lap of nature (Narmada), and is endowed a new name 'Uma'. Monk helps her to take her plunge in the cold water so that she can be the daughter of Narmada. After a holy dip a new life begins for the child. Gradually, she grew up into a minstrel of Narmada and respected as a 'singer-saint' at temple-festivals. Her songs on Narmada also suggest the equation of the two. Both are twice-born. Narmada is twice-born: first from the water and then from Shiva's penance. And Uma also, like the river Narmada, is twice-born: first from the monk's penance and then from his love. There are many descriptions we can find in the novel which makes similarity between Uma and the river. Mehta describes the river as a desirable woman like Uma, who yearns to meet her Lord of Rivers (like Uma yearns to meet her husband). Later, the Naga Baba re-enters as Prof. Shankar in Uma's life after three years. He came back to her to fulfill all her desires. At the end Prof. Shankar takes her to her husband, Rudra.

The Courtesan's Story told by the courtesan and her daughter to the narrator. The story is about a mother, a courtesan and it manifesting the situation where the woman is treated as a consumer's goods, an instrument of pleasure, and a priced commodity. The courtesan narrates how she failed to protect her daughter from the growing indignity around her. Her daughter is abducted by a dangerous bandit, Rahul Singh, a victim of this heartless society, and finally, they two come to love each other. Their only shelter is the forest on the banks of the Narmada. Eventually, Rahul Singh dies of an injury through an ambush with the police. The helpless girl ends her life in the Narmada and even her mother takes it lightly as if it were a perfectly normal thing. The girl reaches out to the river Narmada because Narmada is the only shelter for her to avoid all the terrible situations. She is scared to imagine her life 'the life of a courtesan' and 'the life of a bandit's wife', so she turns to the Narmada (nature) as the only escape to avoid her despair and crisis.

The Musician's Story reflects the identity between the pursuits of a woman and the spontaneity of river (nature). In this story the musician tries to focus similarity between nature and music. As the musician teaches her daughter to sing, he instructs her to "imagine a raga as a river bed. You must think yourself as the water washing over stone, shaping it with the relentless touch of your love."¹⁶ Soon after she herself tried to be the water to the river of her beloved's raga. Later on (after being jilted) she reaches out to the river Narmada with the hope to get restored to her inspiration and still she hopes.

Thus, the woman and the nature have been made to appear extensions of each-other. The woman so long as she is under the clutches of the cynical society is crushed, tortured. But once she is allowed to come to nature, as ascetic, she is restored to the process of being, becoming, and fulfillment in which she becomes a representative of the great river itself.

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