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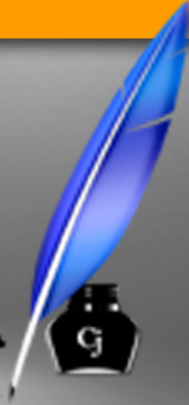
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**Human Elements in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*****Dr. T Narayana**Professor & Head  
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Gita Mehta's '*A River Sutra*' is a journey of a writer's soul into the deeper channels of human psychology which showcases the positive and negative elements of life. She links Indian heritage and culture by referring to mythology and deals with one of the most significant elements of nature i.e. water. The protagonist of each story suffers from a unique problem and their lives are connected to the holy river the Narmada. They take the refuge of the river and could overcome the difficulties or find solutions.

**Keywords:** elements, psychology, holy, the Narmada, culture and heritage.

The legacy of Indian culture and heritage is so great that it inspires us to consider everything in nature is holy and powerful. Man is at nature's mercy, if he goes against its will, the cruel punishment he receives might range from depriving him of his legitimate livelihood to death! Hindus believe that, the entire creation, including the life of the humans is made up of five elements; (1)'Prithvi' (the earth), 'Aapaha'(water), 'Tejaha'(Fire or effulgence), and 'Vaayahu'(air), 'Aakaasha'(the aetherial sky, the infinite space above). After death, the human body dissolves into these five elements of nature and thereby balances the nature's cycle of 'Srishti' (creation) followed by 'pralayam' (extinction or annihilation).

(2) In Hinduism, a very prominent belief is that, water cleanses all the ailments of human body and it is the symbol of fertility without which human existence becomes impossible. Most of the holy places are located on the banks of the rivers, sea shores and mountain ranges. They have special significance and they are considered sacred. It is the goal of the Hindus to bathe in the waters once in their life time, to be cleansed of their wrong doings. (3) The Hindus have a close and sentimental pious attachment to all the rivers in India. The Narmada is one of the most sacred rivers of the seven holy rivers, originates from the Maikali ranges at Amarkantak in MP and flows between the mountain ranges of Vindhya and Sathpura. Gita Mehta, a post colonial writer, meticulously weaves the stories and connects the lives of the characters to the holy river the Narmada in her book, '*A River Sutra*'. 'Sutra' means thread that connects, 'River Sutra' means river that connects. Throughout the book, one could notice the same notion.

(4) Mehta with her first book, '*Karma Kola*'; *Marketing the Mystic East* (1979), joined a growing number of critically and popularly acclaimed female Indian writers. 'Raj' (1989), and '*A*

River Sutra'(1993) seek to create a deeper understanding of Indian history, culture and mysticism. In 'Snakes and Ladders; Glimpses of Modern India(1997), Mehta returns to her critical examination of Indian culture, focusing on Indian history since the end of British Rule. (5)'Eternal Ganesha' (2006), is a succinct pictorial compilation of the significance of mythology and modern evolution of Ganesh.

'A River Sutra' is a great tribute to the Narmada River. Mehta clearly showcases the holiness of Indian rivers and its (India's)'Unity in diversity'. She speaks through the character Nawab of Shahbad in the courtesan's story".(6) "Bathing in the waters of Jamuna purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the Saraswathi in three, in the waters of the Ganges in one , but the Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters." (ARS-p163 A River Sutra) Courtesan says about the ruler's integrity and their respect towards secular state. The book consists of sixteen chapters in which six stories are carefully designed. The thrilling twists and the interesting conversations create curiosity in the reader.

The first chapter deals with the myth that is related to the Narmada river's birth and its importance. A retired bureaucrat is the narrator of the stories describes his work place, the villages surrounding the river. Slowly towards the end of the first chapter, 'The Monk's story' evolves out of the conversation between the narrator and a Jain Monk. The monk happens to meet the bureaucrat when he was in pursuit of the route to Mahadeo. The bureaucrat gets his doubts clarified when the monk answers satisfactorily by saying that, to tonsure the head is to avoid human vanity, covering the mouth with a muslin cloth is to avert killing blameless insects by sudden inhalation. The writer expresses her disgust towards hypocrites who, in the name of religion disguise themselves as faithful and honest. Those who are really pious and trustworthy get affected by the unfaithful.

'The Monk's Story' is about a young man Ashok, who decides to renounce the world. The main reason for his renunciation is his father's hypocrisy and his indifference towards the miners who lead a miserable life. His Father, owner of a diamond company, spends a lot of money for his renunciation. The ceremonial renunciation reminds the readers of vardhaman Mahaveera's renunciation. The story discusses not only Jainism but also the life style of the rich, their inertia, the true meaning of love and the secrets of human heart. The monk realizes the secrets of human heart-the capacity to love and it can be increased by renouncing the world. The undeniable facts about Jainism and ahimsa, which the writer discusses are,(6) "They only endure pain until they no longer fear it.....to prevent suffering, a man must be capable of suffering, that a man who cannot suffer is not alive!"(ARS-p34,35) She discusses the human element that rules our life is love with which the entire universe is filled.

The next story is, "The Teacher's story", in which the writer deals with devotion, kindness, jealousy, ambitiousness, greed and exploitation. The story is about a teacher and a student which is pathetic and heart throbbing. The writer's creativity in giving shape to this story is laudable as it deals with both positive and negative elements of human beings. The story is narrated by Tariq Mia to the bureaucrat when he asks him to clarify his doubts about the Jain monk as he thinks that he too renounced the world. But Tariq Mia who is a major character and acts like the mouth piece of the writer, explains him that he knew too little about the world and narrates the story of the teacher.

Tariq Mia starts the story by playing the gramophone and asks the bureaucrat to listen to the heavenly voice of the singer. He gets surprised to learn about the story of the singer Imrat and his teacher Mohan. The teacher is a symbol of kindness, gentleness and meakness. The boy, who is blind, is a symbol of purity and innocence, whereas the teacher's wife symbolizes greed and ambition. The rich man stands for jealousy and cruelty. The teacher and the singer fall prey to the greed and the jealousy of the teacher's wife and the rich man. The boy's life ambition is to sing before AmirRumi's Tomb but that becomes an unfulfilled dream as Master Mohan's wife is offered a bait of 5000/- for the boy and takes him to the rich man in spite of Master Mohan's appeals. The rich man out of jealousy slits the boy's throat. Master Mohan goes to the tomb of Amir Rumi and hands over the recorded songs of Imrat to Tariq Mia. But, Master Mohan feels guilty and throws himself under a train. The story is simple, but reveals the deeper channels of human psychology. The sudden twist shocks the reader when the rich man slits the boy's throat. The riches bring only power, not the sanity of mind. The rich man is deprived of human heart which aids the art. But it attracts poverty to exploit them. She says, (6) "poverty had reduced them to pandering to the vices and whims of wealthy men" (ARS- p80).

The next story is "The Executive Story" in which Gita Mehta discusses another human element "desire" which is unconquerable. She cleverly connects this to 'Vano' village which is by the river forest. She says 'desire is the first born seed of the mind.' The source of the story is a diary by which the story is evolved. The Protagonist Nitin Bose is an executive of a tea estate. He writes the incidents that happened in his life in a diary. He is offered two options of joining tea estate or going on an executive training course. He chooses tea estates manager post and leads a solitary life for two years. He is successful in yielding the best crop. The Chairman congratulates him and sends a member of the board to invite him to return to Calcutta as a Director of the company. This incident leads to too many unexpected incidents. He loves a woman and when the time comes to leave her, he experiences unbelievable incidents. He was enchanted by the woman. Finally, he takes refuge of the Narmada River. He goes to Vano village and performs the ritual of immersing the idol of vano village goddess in the Narmada River. He gets cured of his psychic disorder. Readers' curiosity is kindled throughout the story, by the myth and the magic spell. She says,(6) "Mythology might at any moment become reality." (ARS-p93)

In the executive's case, it becomes true. To believe it to be true or false depends on our faith in it. Faith emerges from our experiences which makes us think that our beliefs are real. So, experiences are governed by our beliefs. This is proved to be true in every aspect of life. She says, (6) "The Goddess is just the principle of life." (ARS-p142 )When the idol is immersed, the villagers chant, "Salutations in the morning and at night to thee, Oh Narmada, defend me from the serpent's poison.(6)"(ARS-p145) The villagers believe that, Serpent's desire is its venom is the harm a man does when he ignores the power of desire said by Mr.Chagla. The bureaucrat could understand the power of belief which makes people lead a peaceful life without doubting nature's potentiality.

The Courtesan's story' enlightens the readers with the real lives of courtesans. They have to be experts in all the sixty four arts, which make them certainly more accomplished than any other woman.(6) "The essence of all their arts is a single art of teaching nobleman good manners and educating heirs to India's mightiest Kingdoms." (ARS-164) Courtesan explains the art of their living and she wants her daughter keep away from getting soiled in men's arms as

their lives have been changed in due course of time. Their lives are like air bubbles, which will be busted at any time..... She says that her daughter is an angel who became famous not just for her beauty but for her modesty. But her worry, special concern for her daughter is in vain, when Rahul Singh a bandit abducts her daughter and takes her to the forest which is near the Narmada River. Though her daughter rejects him first, accepts him for his goodness of heart. The courtesan's daughter and Rahul Singh get married but their happiness is short lived when he is shot dead by the police. Fearing the insults and the police interrogation, she decides to jump into the Narmada River to get purified. After taking her mother's consent, she jumps into the river.

The first half of the story is narrated by the courtesan until her daughter's abduction. The next half is narrated by her daughter. For both the situations the narrator is the spectator. The story is entirely different of its kind by its sudden and interesting twists. The final twist is her daughter's decision and the courtesan's consent which shows their courage and strength of their mind. Courage shows solutions for our problems. Rahul Singh and the courtesan's daughter are symbols for purity and true love. The writer presents the relevance of virtues and how mythology helps man to be virtuous. This story features humbleness, true love, importance of sixty-four arts, the lives of the courtesans and mythology.

'The Musician's Story' takes the readers to a known world with unknown powers in which the reader takes a musical dip in the ocean of music, The story is awe inspiring as it educates the readers with the essence of 'Samaveda'. The story is about a musician. The main characters are Father and Daughter. The father wishes his daughter to overcome from the pain of being ugly by learning the art of music. He wants to give her in Marriage with music, the creation of Lord Shiva. He wants to fulfill a father's responsibility whereas, his wife, who is a worried mother, always try to find a hand for her daughter. As a daughter, she does what she is expected to do. The story is narrated by the musician's daughter to the narrator and later it is narrated by Tariq Mia.

The story begins with the introduction of the musician's daughter at the market place of Mahadeo where the narrator meets her. The narrator is shocked to learn that she is deprived of physical beauty. Later he feels sorry for his foolishness when he knows about her ingenuity. She explains him the first sound of the creation 'OM', the syllables it consists of, and its meaning. One could understand the concept of Hinduism, 'Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram'. The writer's intention in creating this story is perhaps to showcase the power of music by which everything can be understood. She says, (6)"Music is the mathematics by which the universe could be comprehended" (ARS-p210)

She emphasizes on the point, that music is an art that teaches humbleness, concentration, comprehension, pragmatism, expression and emotion. These are highly essential to lead a successful life. The musician's father is portrayed as genius who teaches his daughter the nuances of music by taking her to woods where she could listen to the musical notes in nature by which the entire universe is filled with. He says to her daughter, (6)"Do you know why birds sing at dawn and at dusk? Because of the changing light, their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is true music". (ARS-p203)

The mastery of the writer in explaining the teacher's skill in making the student sustaining competence is vivid. The writer describes the seven notes of the scale and the creation of the universe as described in the Classic texts. They are like the OM of music. OM is the first

sound of creation that led to the primary scale 'sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni'. Sa-peacock's cry, re-calf calling its mother, ga-bleating of a goat, pa-the song of the nightingale, dha-the neighing of a horse, ni-the elephant's trumpet. The vividness of the expression astonishes the readers and the catholicity of music is mirrored. It is said, "sisurvetti, pasurvetti, vetti ganarasam phanihi". She says,(6) "man is a fool to believe that only human beings respond to music". (ARS-p204)(6) "The six ragas, Megh, Deepak, Vaulika, Desi and Thodi sustain the harmonies of living things. When they are combined together, they become the beat of Lord Shiva's drum bringing destruction". (ARS-p206) Arts are not to be treated so lightly, as they are Lord Shiva's gifts to mankind and they have the power of destruction too.

"The Minstrel's story" features the Naga Sadhu's life with dramatic twists. The story as usually evolves out of the conversation between Tariq Mia and the bureaucrat discussing the power of the Narmada river and the 'Song of the Narmada' a poem written by Sankaracharya. The story begins with Naga Baba's search for the cremation ground as the nine days that precede the night of Shiva is approaching. Naga Baba has to dwell at the cremation ground for nine nights and take alms from the dirty and x-rated houses which are decided by the society. When he visits the house of a brothel, he accepts a child as alms. He teaches her the song of the Narmada, who later becomes a minstrel. They live on the banks of the Narmada for three years. The first part is narrated by Tariq Mia and the next part is continued in the sixteenth chapter "The Song of the Narmada". The reader finds the answer to the opening lines of the book, which is a song by Chandidas.(6) "Listen, o brother, Man is the greatest truth, Nothing beyond".(ARS) This reminds us of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet'. Hamlet in one of his monologues says that,

(7)"What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a God! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?....."

The writer twists the story dramatically, by which the reader gets surprised to learn that, Naga Baba is none other than Prof. Shankar and the minstrel is none other than the small child whom Naga Baba trained. Naga Baba re-enters the scene as Prof. Shankar along with his assistants to conduct an archeological dig, forty kilometers from the Narmada Rest House. The bureaucrat poses too many questions to Prof. Shankar. The reader gets satisfied with the satisfactory answers of Prof. Shankar as they too get the same doubts. The bureaucrat contemplates upon the words of Prof. Shankar and his stay at the Narmada. He recollects Prof. Shankar's words. (6)"I am only a man", "The soul must travel through eighty four thousand births in order to become a man, only then can it return to the world". The bureaucrat realizes the relationship between myth and life, the power of belief, the true essence of life and the world. He understands that, "destiny had brought me to the banks of the Narmada to understand the world".(ARS-p268)

According to Indian mythology, a river is sacred. It is the personal experience of an individual to prove it to be true. The writer is successful in enlightening the minds of the readers to understand mythology, the intricacies of human life, human elements and the power of karma which is the essence of 'The Gita'. Gita Mehta says, (8)"I am a camera, and the reader can see through my eyes". Her language is lucid and the ideas are vividly expressed. Each story has its own significance with their unique themes. The Writer's great insight into human psychology and the positive and negative aspects of life are revealed. The writer's mastery in sketching out

six completely anomalous stories in sixteen chapters is analogous to that of Chaucer. As an Indian, she could understand, digest and try to showcase the Indian culture and heritage is quite inspiring.

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