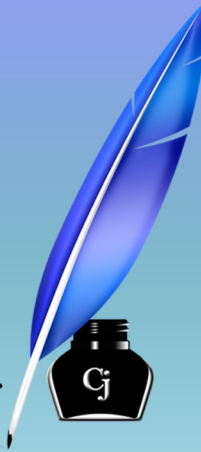


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Love as Theme in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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Human beings are distinguished from others on account of their capacity to love. Love is the ultimate thing for existence of life on earth. Gita Mehta in her novel, *A River Sutra*, focuses her view on love and its different forms like love for mankind, mother's love, patriotic feelings and sexual love. Further the novel explores the diversity of cultures within three things: the Narmada River, the theme of life and the narrator's inability to understand the various tales of human heart. The river itself is described as a lover, flowing to meet her bridegroom, the Lord of Ocean. In the words of R.S. Pathak "The novelist has presented passion or desire as a cleansing force that has the power to inspire and make a person whole again." The varieties of love that touch the heart are as endless as the stories of the river Narmada. The stories are about love in all its forms: lust, madness, redemption, sacrifice, care and sorrow. In varying degrees, the protagonist of the novel, the bureaucrat comes across six independent stories. In each story, the point of concentration is love: the love of money, the love of beauty, the love of music, the love of flesh, the love of truth and the search for it that can lead to transcendence. The river Narmada serves in the novel as a connective thread which holds together the main story and the six sub-stories. While the six independent stories give the novel multiplicity, the Narmada River provides it unity.

The thread of love that runs in the life of all the living beings holds the whole race on earth together. A kind heart can easily comprehend the sufferings of the poor; so does the heart of the Jain Monk. In "The Monk's Story", the monk is probably only thirty years old, and yet he has already tired of a world that offered him anything he wanted: extreme wealth, a loving family, and the opportunity to better other people's lives through charity. According to the Jain Monk, "a slender figure robbed in white muslin" (10), love does not have any symbol that can be exchanged between man and woman. His compassionate nature makes him to be bold enough to raise questions against his father. He asks his father: "How can you worry about a dead insect more than you care about a human being?" (25).

Love is the only principle that can help people to realize others' feelings. Mehta, in her novel *A River Sutra*, through the narrator and the old Mullah Tariq Mia shows love in the track of friendship. Tariq Mia, an old mullah, is an acknowledged Islamic Scholar. He is a kind-hearted gentleman. It is Tariq Mia who makes an attempt to explain the role of passions and their place in lives of human beings and makes the narrator aware of the need for the relevance of being this-worldly to reach his goal of realization. Even though Mia is older than the narrator, he treats him as a good friend and calls the narrator 'little brother'.

Life of Master Mohan in "The Teacher's Story" is a story of love, love for music and a blind boy. This story, like the monk's, is meant to show the secrets of the human heart. A music teacher, Master Mohan fell in love with the sound of a blind pupil's perfect voice. Imrat's music represented a haven to Master Mohan whose own life had been filled with disappointment.

Braving the wrath of his family, who despise him, he adopts the boy and nurtures his gift. He selflessly helps to further the boy's singing career, seeking no financial gain for himself.

In spite of his unfulfilled ambition, Master Mohan wants to impart all his knowledge and love to Imrat. He loves the boy than anything else in the world. Out of revenge and greed his wife arranges for the boy to sing for a wealthy patron. Wary of the man's motives and seeking to protect the boy, Master Mohan had refused the rich man's request for a private concert. Tragically, Master Mohan's instincts were correct. As Imrat sings his devotional Muslim songs in front of the wealthy man, the man slits the boy's throat. So, he cannot live without the boy in the world. The life of Master Mohan has become the story about the human heart, which is filled with love for the blind boy. As Tariq Mia says, "Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind boy. I don't know the answer, litter brother. It is only a story about the human heart" (91). Master Mohan keeps his promise to the boy by bringing the recordings of his voice to be played at the tomb of Sufi saint. His love for the blind boy leads him to commit suicide.

Love is everywhere and it makes man more civilized and realize his self. In *A River Sutra*, The Musician's daughter is another character known for her kindness towards other beings. She comes to the river Narmada to come out of the attachment over the man who promised to marry her and to fulfill her father's wish that is to become a Ragini of music. She also seems to have kindness for others. The Musician's daughter bends down to collect the glass fragments so that they will not cut the foot of a passerby and she does not even show her anger towards the child who shoves her from behind and becomes the reason for the breakage of the glass painting. She immediately takes the money from her bag and pays for it. Though the Musician's daughter does not have the outer beauty, she has the inner beauty of love and caring. This incident brings out the compassionate love and adds beauty to the heart of the ugly daughter of the Musician. The narrator explains her kindness: "Seeing the woman stoop to collect the glass fragments before some passerby cut his foot, I went to help her" (194).

Love takes a different angle in "The Minstrel's story". Mehta shows compassionate love towards others through the character of Naga Baba, an ascetic, who later turns out as Dr. Shankar, an archaeologist. He rescues a child from a brothel and names her Uma, which means 'Peace in the night'. Naga Baba is kind enough to console the small girl, asking her not to have fear of any man. His love towards other beings can be seen in his activity of separating the food, which he receives as alms, into four equal portions – one to be kept aside for the animals, one for any stranger who might need a meal, and saving the remaining two portions for Uma and himself. The Naga Baba's selfless love makes him to take Uma along with him through his hideous journey. By making her learn the songs of Holy Narmada, Naga Baba transforms Uma into a beautiful minstrel woman who travels about, completely free and liberated to make her own way of life.

In "The Executive's Story" the theme of love is built on instinct. Nitin Bose, a young executive, who, suffocated by the sheer weight of Calcutta's inescapable humanity, voluntarily exiles himself to a tea estate at the foot of the Himalayas. There he loses his mental balance after falling in love with a tribal girl during his stay in a tea estate. He is put under spell by the woman Rima and possessed. Nitin Bose narrates: "You will never leave me now, no matter how far you go", she said triumphantly, waving her trophy in front of me" (134). The young executive's love for Rima makes him sick as he has been pierced by all the five arrows of the God of love, Kama. His infatuation towards Rima grows so intense that he cannot spend his life without her. Being inflamed with lust and pierced with enchantment, he falls a victim to the magical power of Rima. He compares her to a magician and says:

Like a magician, she drew me into a subterranean world of dreams her body teaching mine the passing of seasons, the secret of rhythms of nature, until I understood why my grandfather's books called hills Kamarupa, the kingdom of the god of love.(129)

Love has the power to melt a stone heart. In "The Courtesan's Story" it is for the love of the courtesan's daughter, Rahul Singh, a wanted bandit, abducts her forcefully and keeps her in a cave. That love, the noblest passion, drives the bandit to risk his life and makes him to bring her the costly gifts from the bazaar. He says: "Don't you know? You, who have been my wife in so many lives before this one? Don't you know?" (181). In order to please his beloved, Rahul Singh risks his life by bringing her costly gifts. His patience makes him to endure the courtesan daughter's insults and hatred. His kind-heartedness can be seen through his words. He requests the Courtesan's daughter to forgive him: "I ask forgiveness for what I have made you suffer" (180).

Love inspires the heart to the height of greatness. But the same love when thwarted or jilted turns into hatred and vengeance. Rahul Singh's love for his family makes him a bandit and makes him swear vengeance on his family's murderers. Justifying Rahul Singh's actions, the village woman says: "Denied justice, Rahul Singh only did what any man of honour would do. But he has never harmed anyone who did not deserve it" (182).

Love is a function of freedom. Through the character of Mr. Rahul Singh, a patriot turned-out bandit, Mehta exhibits a vision of life in which he occupies a greater importance. The love he had for his motherland makes him to participate against the two Pakistani wars. His patriotism was thus explained by the village women as, "He has the highest decorations for his valor in two wars with Pakistan. When his soldier's commission ended and he came home, he found his family dead and his lands stolen" (182).

True love never fails. Rahul Singh's humanity and strong love changes the heart of the Courtesan's daughter and makes her to surrender herself to him. After her husband's death she says, "I wanted to return to Shahbag and discover who had wounded Rahul Singh. Then I planned to take vengeance on the men who had killed my husband and my born child" (187). Instead of returning to society's luxurious life as a courtesan, she willingly drowns herself so that their love could remain untarnished. Her love for her husband drives her to end her life by drowning herself in the river Narmada.

Mehta, through the characters like Jain Monk, the bureaucrat and the Naga Baba, portrays the desire of people to renounce the worldly duties and enter into the world of enlightenment. The mind must be completely free of evil intentions and this would be possible only if the act of ahimsa emanates the development of love and an absolute morality exhorts the development of positive virtues.

Ashok, who later becomes the Jain monk, decides to give up wealth, wife, children, friends and all the comforts of a luxurious life to seek Nirvana. He is taught Ahimsa, the practice of non-violence from his childhood. His love for heavenly pleasures makes him to give up his liking for worldly pleasures. It is not very easy, because, as the old monk says: "The human heart must conquer many hurdles to recapture that vision until ahimsa can become a way of life" (35).

Later Ashok's life becomes a quest for understanding 'the secrets of human heart' which essentially rests in knowing 'Love' in its completeness. His act of renouncing the world is an

action bounded to his urgent inner desire for getting out of all the questions related to human emotions. In order to seek higher enlightenment, Ashok, who later turns out as a Jain Monk, renounces his worldly pleasures and joined a sect of Jain Monks.

Through Chagla, a minor character, Mehta narrates the importance of love and the concept of desire and passion. Passion and desire are the cleansing forces that have the power to inspire and make a person whole again. Chagla says that, “Without desire there is no life. Everything will stand still. Become emptiness. In fact, be dead” (142).

Chagla realizes that desire is the governing principle of life. He views love through the mother Goddess. Chagla explains that desire is the main cause for the origin of life. He says:

The goddess is just the principle of life. She is every illusion that is inspiring love. That is why she is greater than all the gods combined. Call her what you will, but she is what a mother is feeling for a child. A man for a woman. A starving man for food. Human beings for god. (142)

Mehta portrays parental love in “The Courtesan’s Story”. The Courtesan loves her child more than anything else in the world. Her love for her daughter makes her to teach all the arts that a woman should learn. She compares her daughter to the angel because of the love she shows innocently towards others. The immeasurable love of the mother governs her daughter. She introduces her daughter only in weddings or the birth of a son or before family celebrations. The Courtesan says: “So jealously did I guard my daughter’s reputation that I succeeded in creating an aura of awe around her until she became famous not just for her beauty but for her modesty” (169).

In “The Monk’s Story”, the father character stands apart for his love for his son. Though he loves wealth and pleasure, it is his love for his son he tries to persuade his son to return to the common world. The Monk recalls this during his narration as, “My father puts his arm around my shoulder. I see tears welling in his eyes” (33).

Mehta has portrayed certain characters like Master Mohan’s wife, the Monk’s father and the Sahib for their love of money, greed and jealousy. In “The Monk’s Story”, the Monk realises that his father’s dignity rests on his widely acknowledged genius as a merchant and his private adherence to the principle of non-violence. But very soon his attitude to his father changed. The Monk recognizes for the first time that wealth had excised his father’s emotions. His stone heart fails to be moved by the conditions under which the diamonds were mined and he is blind to the distressing poverty of the miners. Rather the monk’s father argues:

What about our trusts? Are they for insects? Do you know how many people are assisted by me every day who would otherwise die of neglect? Fed and clothed, their hospital bills paid, their dead cremated. We cannot solve the problems of the world. We can only help those within our reach. (25)

In “The Teacher’s Story”, Master Mohan’s wife is known for her greed. Because of her love for money, she accepts the offer of five thousand from a great sahib and makes the blind boy Imrat to sing at the Sahib’s home. She says: “I have agreed the brat will sing before the sahib tonight. See, they have already paid me, Five thousand rupees will cover a little of what I had spent on the blind beggar over the last year” (84).

Another character known for his greed is the Sahib in “The Musician’s Story”. His greed to possess the voice forever leads to a swift and tragic denouement. He says: “Such a voice is not human. What will happen to music if this is the standard by which God judges us?” (89).

Mehta further portrays love through minor characters. The Paanwallah in “The Teacher’s Story”, is another character who is known for the love for the blind boy, Imrat. He proves his love by helping Imrat in receiving the letter from his sister. The Paanwallah is noted for his kind-heartedness. He is the only person who comforts Master Mohan when he is in trouble.

When Chagla is known for his human kindness, Dr. Mitra is noted for his love for mythology and archaeology. He is much interested in talking about the river Narmada. His love for history and archaeology leads him to do research about the old myths. He loves the river Narmada for its immortality. This can be known from Chagla’s words:

It is odd that someone as skeptical as Dr. Mitra should enjoy the stories of the river, but his wayward temperament seems to delight in unraveling the threads of mythology, archaeology, anthropology in which the river is entangled.(152)

Music reflects love of humanity. Music is considered as a subtle divine thread capable of linking the individual soul with the supreme one. Mehta in her novel, *A River Sutra*, deals with music almost in all the sub-stories. Teaching music involves the imaginary process of identification with the Gods and the cosmos which embodies them. It is Master Mohan’s love for music makes him to accept Imrat as his student. He teaches Imrat the songs of Kabir and Mirabai, of Khusrau and Tulsidas, of Chisti and Chandidas. Master Mohan praises Imrat’s voice as “a sound only heard in dreams ... Such purity of tone was something that could only be imagined but never realized by the human voice” (61). Listening to the purity of Imrat’s voice, Master Mohan feels himself being lifted into another dimension and he is moved to dance by such music.

Through “The Executive’s Story” Mehta has chosen Kama, the God of Love, the mythical character, to give reference for the desire of mankind. The novelist has given the hint about Kama’s power and its influence on the Ascetic and also on Lord Shiva. The narrator says:

Then Maya, the illusion of the Worlds, had appeared- the only woman capable of arousing the lust of the Destroyer of Worlds. Enraged at the destruction of his meditation, the Ascetic had opened his third eye, the Lotus of Command, and reduced Kama to ashes, even as he himself was being consumed by Desire. (97)

In “The Executive’s Story”, Bose is fascinated by Rima’s tribal songs to the extent that he is left with no option except to surrender himself to her. He falls a victim to the magic of Rima’s tribal songs. He says:

She seduced me with tribal songs in a language that I could not understand so that I heard only the sweetness of the melodies. She told me tales of a great serpent kingdom lying inches beneath the soil. She spoke of me of charms that gave men the strength of elephants in rut and of magic performed during the eclipse of the moon when a man’s soul could be captured inside the two halves of a coconut. (126)

Love propels action in the world and makes life valuable. Through “The Musician’s Story”, Mehta gives insight into the music of India. Music is the only saving grace of life. The great Musician’s daughter is born ugly: her survival has become a challenge. He tries to make his daughter feel free from her ugliness. She gradually learns the secret of music that is love for humanity. Life revolves around the seven swaras, which carries harmony to the living beings of the world in its own way. It is the love of music and beauty that offsets the ugliness of the Musician’s daughter and makes her life more valuable. Through music her father tries to free her from her own image. About her father she says: “Through music he tried to free me of my own image. So I could love beauty wherever it was to be found, even if it was not present in my mirror” (211). The Musician wants his daughter to become the Ragini to every raga. He teaches her that not only human beings, but animals also will respond to good music. He transforms his daughter’s unrequited love to the love of divine music.

The Musician teaches his daughter the great love between Lord Shiva and Parvati, which gives birth to music. She is invited to imagine raga as a river bed and to think herself as water washing over stone. According to the musician, the true music is a spontaneous response in the universe erupted into being as Lord Shiva danced:

There was no art until Shiva danced the creation. Music lay asleep inside a motionless rhythm – deep as water, black as darkness, weightless as air. Then Shiva shook his drum. Everything started to tremble with the longing to exist. The universe erupted into being as Shiva danced. (205)

The musician explains his daughter about the six mighty ragas Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni and their existence in the universe. It is the musician’s love for music, that makes him give his daughter in marriage to music. His daughter becomes the bride of music and not of a musician.

The young man in “The Musician’s Story” is also marked for his love for music. The love of music urges him to accept the condition of the musician, to marry his ugly daughter. His love for music and respect for his guru never change till the end. He even expresses his desire through his songs without bothering the presence of the musician. As the Musician’s daughter says:

Slowly, oh how slowly, the stranger’s music began responding to the request of mine until we were no longer conscious of my father’s presence in the room, only hearing the pleading of my ragini to be the wife of his lordly raga, the silences between our notes growing electric with desire. (222)

In *A River Sutra*, River Narmada is personified as a beautiful woman. Being so beautiful, she innocently tempts the Ascetics; she appears for one moment and disappears for another. She is acting as a seductress with the lassitude of desire. For her inventive variations, she is named Narmada, the delightful one, by God Shiva. As the river remains immortal, love remains eternal: it always exists in the world.

Gita Mehta, through her characters, gives different perspectives on love. One strong strand of the novel is love-in-its many facets – the love of wealth, the love of nature, the love of tranquility, the love of music and the love of worldly pleasures.

Mehta views life in the light of love. Love becomes a basis for the existence of the earth. Sometimes it is born out of reason, but sometimes it may not have any reason and comes out as a compassionate love. Gita Mehta, through her various characters, expresses love in its myriad forms. Thus, Mehta, in her treatment of love in *A River Sutra*, has shown that man is born with the natural bliss of love and compassion. She is one of those novelists who believe in the worth and dignity of man and the potency of love to heal and redeem.

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