



SELECTED WORKS OF GITA MEHTA

DR. D. PARAMESHWARI

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Nizam College, Hyderabad
(TS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Gita Mehta has established herself a great Indian writer by her diverse themes. Nothing is common between her works Raj Karma Cola and A River Sutra. The historical novel Raj which carries conviction and which highlights history focused through individuals has not been a favorite with the critics. Only Usha Bande has done a thematic study of raj which is commendable. A River Sutra finds that Mehta's novel reflects aspects of traditional, spiritual heritage of Indian society. Similarly Indira Nityanandan finds the six stories providing the novelist an opportunity to delve in to various facets of Indian culture and ethos.

INTRODUCTION

Karma Cola is about the mystic east with its pseudo 'gurus' and the gullible westerners' lured by the spiritual guidance of these 'gurus'. The west with its materialistic philosophy and advancement is still attracted by the philosophic outlook of India. A River Sutra is about the holiest river Narmada and the enlightenment of a bureaucrat who is spending a semi-retired life on its banks. It is here the bureaucrat comes across diverse experiences each different from the other, yet connected with the river in some way or the other.

The Historical Novel 'Raj' covers the period from 1897 to 1950 giving a picture of the British rule, the affairs of some princely states and finally Indian independence followed by the merger of princely states. The novel has six divisions: Prologue, Balmer, Sirpur, Maharani, Regent and Afterword. The four chapters Balmer, Sirpur, Maharani, and Regent trace the life and achievements of Jaya Devi, a princess born and brought up in Balmer, a small kingdom in Rajasthan.

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The main story in Balmer thus deals with Jaya's upbringing, which is different from the upbringing of a traditional princess. Her father maharaja Jai Singh brings her up as a prince much to the consternation of her mother. When Jaya was just five years old, jai Singh took her in to jungle overruling the maharani's objections. There she was made to face a chained panther, which was constantly lunging forward. After a long time, her terror subsided. Then the maharajah took her hand and put the other hand on her brother Tikkas shoulder told them "Rulers are men and men are always frightened. A man cannot govern unless he confronts his own fear". Much later Java understands the significance of the training. "The Maharaja had decreed that his daughter was not to be raised in purdah. In every other particular, the Maharani insisted that Jaya be educated in the traditional manner of the princess of Balmer". Another cause for Maharani's worry was that Jaya had inherited the Maharani's green eyes but her father's dark skin. She wondered if Jaya's dark skin would create problems at the time of marriage.

Jaya is given lessons on "Rajniti" by the raj Guru, and English is taught to her by Mrs Rao. She is also exposed to hunting, polo as well as feminine arts and traditional rituals. Every day she is reminded of the 'Sati' queens of Balmer and wonders "Why there were so many 'Satis' and so many vows". Jaya studies the Artha Sastras tenets on civil and criminal jurisprudence. She realizes that the revenue system of British India was modelled on the revenue system of Chankya.

Alarmed by the changes in Jaya's education, the maharani complained to KuKi-bai and the purdah ladies, "who will marry such an overeducated girl? She in laws will resent her. Her husband will be insulted when she flaunts her learning in front of him. She is twelve years old. At that age I was already engaged to be married. At the very time she should become a woman; her father is trying to make her in to a son"

Maharaja Jai Singh is an able ruler with the welfare of people at heart. He makes his wife give up purdah and join him in the running and maintenance of relief camps. His modernity is revealed in the way he brings up his children. His personal care in giving them lessons in courage and in getting them trained to be good administrators are brought out very well in the novel.

The Maharani who is old fashioned and who observes purdah strictly and follows all the customs and traditions of the Balmer kingdom, stands by her husband is when she is asked to come out of the purdah and assist in organizing kitchens for the people during famine. Ultimately, she is overruled and has to remove her veil.



The titles of two other works of Gita Mehta Karma Cola and A River are composed of words belonging to two languages English and Sanskrit Karma, a word from Hindu metaphysical philosophy is yoked with Cola, Constituting the modern western philosophy. In other words it is about the repercussions of East-West Encounter.

The word “Sutra” meaning a thread follows “River” representing the holy river Narmada. The work contains various stories linked to river Narmada. Infact , the river Narmada forms the background for all the stories. One story entitled “the Musicians Story” is a tragic account of an ugly girl who happens to be a great musicians daughter. The musician teaches her not only the ragas but also the sounds audible in nature. He wants her to be completely immersed in music.

Her first music lessons consisted of listening to bird and animal sounds under the guidance of her father. It is interesting to note how and when the father started giving her music lessons. One does not find the traditional form of the novel in’ A River Sutra’ but a string of narratives linked to the river Narmada and brought alive by the narrator and Tariq Mia. The style of narration is a simple one in this novel but the terminology connected with music is superb.

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