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Narratology in *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta

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Abstract

The major thrust of this research is to show how the narrative design and dimension of Mehta's *A River Sutra* reveals the subtlety and complexity of the theme of subordination. In *A River Sutra*, Mehta effectively exploits an obscure connection between two Hindu myths and cleverly merge them into one connective narrative. This not only extends the geographical and historical scope of the work, but also recaptures, within the reader's mental process, a lost directness of apprehension. Thus the two myths-- one centered on Narmada, the river goddess, and the other around Ma Manasa, the snake or naga goddess – are employed to transmit the Hindu paap and prayaschitta, or sin and retribution, concept in a meta-myth framework. Bose, since he has offended the snake goddess must do penance and repent, but since the snake goddess and the river goddess are sisters. He is allowed the flexibility to carry out his penance in the waters of the Narmada River.

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Works Cited

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Narratology in *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by DhrubaKathayathas been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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I. Exploration of Narrative Technique in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

Gita Mehta uses multiple narrative techniques 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 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. The technique of *A River Sutra* 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 Sutra Dh r who narrates the stories from his point of view. In the same way the narrator of this novel plays a role of Sutra Dh r 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”. The narrator while going towards Tariq Mia’s ashram meets the monk. In “The Monk’s Story”, the monk is a narrator who narrates is 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 o the monk. 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 easeful 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 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 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 over just one thing in my life', (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. 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" (91). Tariq Mia narrates the story from third person point of view and makes the narration omniscient.

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 PraverJhabvala, Anita Desai, ShashiDeshpande, 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.

Ryan Wilhelm sees the similarity between Gita Mehta and famous German writer Herman Hasse. Both the writer explores the in-depth philosophical issue. Wilhelm makes the following remarks:

The concept of Unity of Life appears to be a predominant thought both in Hinduism and Buddhism. While that has been the main theme in Herman Hesse's *Sidhartha*, I surprisingly found very similar, albeit fleeting thoughts, in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*. Needless to say that there is a huge

difference between understanding this concept and actually
experiencing it. (54)

Experiencing this unity of life is believed to be the central purpose of human existence in both these religions. It is expected to lead to emancipation from the wheel of life and rebirth. Hinduism suggests multiple ways to experience this unity of life – ranging from extreme forms of denial of worldly interaction and control of senses to being an absolutely integral part of the world through a normal life that most of us experience.

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* has been read in the recent past widely. It deals with the theme of immortality. The narrator retires to a guest house on the banks of river Narmada with the intention of withdrawing from world for a life of contemplation. He gets a glimpse of self-transcendence. In this context, Schmid Wolf makes a forceful remark:

Much against his wishes the world keeps thrusting itself on him in the form of various people passing through his guest house needing his help briefly or chancing upon him on his daily walks. These people include a Jain monk who renounces his position as a wealthy scion to the richest diamond merchant of India, a bewitched company executive. He wants to get rid of his enchantment of love and lust. A courtesan becomes the wife of a bandit to eventually. (43)

The stories of these people keep reminding narrator of the power of human passions and their relevance in the real scheme of things. The narrator is completely confused. He is not able to make sense of the happenings around him. Luckily, he has a good friend in Tariq Mia – a pious Islamic scholar and Imam in a mosque who is a strong believer in Sufism.

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. Each of the interactions of the narrator with the characters in the book is presented in the form of a story. Regarding to the portrayal of characters, Jackson Barry makes the following view:

Gita Mehta does not make an attempt to bring a happy ending to the travails of the narrator. Like his characters, he too continues to struggle with his journey but with a growing sense of awareness of what emancipation and the unity of life means and involves. The book has been a refreshing read. Mehta has a very effortless and engaging narrative style and never gets didactic when it comes to explaining the intricate concepts of the thoughts in Indian philosophy. (23)

Mehta manages a very interesting portrait of India and its uniqueness. In literature, a river is used as a symbol to represent the flow of life and its unity. Mehta brings the mythological context of the river Narmada quite well in the book. The first is that of the seeker – teacher pair which is almost a prerequisite in Hindu approach to enlightenment/realization. A teacher guides the seeker towards the necessary knowledge and possibilities of experience of unity of life but in the actual act of experience the seeker is all alone.

River plays a central role in mooring the seekers to a place of quite contemplation. Probably the most important commonality is that of the emphasis on Samsara being central to achieving the end goal of realization of unity of life. Gaurav Desai discloses the following remarks regarding to the embedded idea of the novel:

As a diasporic writer, Mehta 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. (63)

The novel is a magnificent mixture of history and fiction. It centers on India's holiest river, the Narmada. It is in the form of interconnected stories. She defines her India through insightful, intelligent and often witty eyes.

According to AtulAgnihotri, the narrator, who has spend his working years in civil services, takes up the position of the supervisor of a small goverment guest house. It is situated on the banks of Narmada. It is amongst hills and forests. Atul dwells upon this idea in an extensive way:

Here, he interacts with the tribal, who attribute supernatural powers to the river, which is worshipped as a goddess. He meets other people in the area, who also believe Narmada to be sacred, capable of purifying sins by just looking at it. Myths, beliefs, stories are aplenty, as is the beauty of the place. He comes in contact with different people here, and all of them have a story to tell; and the river, Narmada, plays an integral part in their stories and their lives. As a whole, they bring forth the picture of a culture that exists.(21)

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 met narration 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 donot always a character in the work. Craig Shaffer holds the following stand in regard to the choice of the author:

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. (33)

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 the protagonist cannot confess his immoral act to anybody else. 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. Collective conscience is projected in the novel, according to Martin Delaney. Delaney asserts:

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. (27)

Through diary Nitin Bose narrates his story in the first person point of view and makes the narration reliable. 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 The Courtesan represents the particular group of courtesans which is neglected by the society.

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. Alain Lain expresses the following view with respect to the solitude endured by various characters:

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. (44)

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. 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.

Asceticism is the major theme mentioned subtly in various stories which are included in this book. 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. Rahul Gulzer puts forward the following view concerning to the theme of asceticism:

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. (37)

The psychology of human mind is depicted in a lifelike way. 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.

It is expected to find common features of the so-called traditional position of women, which is the main focus of the second chapter, Expectations: Daughters, Brides and Wives. Dipesh Sengupta remarks:

As some characters conform to the traditional norms they face, the research tries to describe the reasons why they decide to do so. The research also has a closer look at what these women have in common and whether or not it is possible to find which female characters are more likely to accept the conventions of society and stick to them. (16)

The attitudes of those who follow the codes towards the women that decide to rebel against them are also examined in the third chapter, Women Following the Rules. Nonetheless, the first appeals and even petitions did not raise much attention either from Indian politicians or from the British. It took several decades to put the thought through and gain both the national and international support that was needed for such an important political step.

Although different critics and reviewers examine the novel *A River Sutra* critically from different angles and arrive at different findings, none of them examined the narrative structure of the novel. The shifting nature of the narrative design is the focal point of this research. The cautiously chosen and subtly produced design of the narrative is inextricably joined with the main thematic content of the novel. Thus the researcher makes use of the perspective of narratology to examine the complexity of narrative pattern in Mehta's *A River Sutra*.

Narratology is the main theoretical tool used by the researcher in this study. Narratology is more than a theory. According to Werner Wolf, “It does qualify as a discipline. It has a defined object domain, explicit models and theories, a distinct descriptive terminology”(87). This terminology is transparent analytical procedures and the institutional infrastructure typical of disciplines. Narratology’s overriding concern remains with narrative representation as type, although it does not preclude the study of narrative tokens.

Defining narratology in positive terms may prove difficult. In the wake of the narrative turn, the application of narratological tools to extranarratological research problems has become more widespread. However, in a theoretical perspective not every approach labeled narratological automatically constitutes a new narratology. While one subset of the new approaches comprises methodological variants others focus on thematic and ideology-critical concerns. The aim of this thesis is to explore and evaluate the narrative strategy Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*. The research therefore concentrates on the various female characters and their experience in post-colonial India. As Indian society still relies on many conventional norms and values and women have to deal with the tradition, the focus will be on the expectations the predominantly male-oriented society requires, and also on the approaches the women examined adopt to either conform to them or revolt against them, taking into account the codes of their religion, caste and social status.

This thesis is divided in three chapters. In the first chapter, the researcher introduces the topic, elaborates the hypothesis, and quotes different critics’ views regarding to the novel. In the same chapter, the researcher shows the departure also. In the second chapter the researcher makes a thorough analysis of the text by applying

the theory of narratology. The last chapter contains the conclusive ending of the research.

II: Narratology in *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta

Complex and thematically interlocked stories are incorporated in this collection *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta. *A River Sutra* consists of a series of bio-sketches narrated by a retired civil servant. This servant tries to escape the world by becoming manager of a Government Rest - House on the banks of the sacred river, Narmada. His destiny had brought him there to understand the world. The river is believed to have healing qualities. Bathing in the waters of the Jamunapurifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the Ganges in one. Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters. With four hundred billion sacred spots on her banks, the Narmada is too holy by hall.

A meta-narrative is a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience. The prefix meta- means beyond and is here used to mean about, and narrative is a story constructed in a sequential fashion. Therefore, a meta-narrative is a story about a story, encompassing and explaining other little stories within totalizing schemes. Meta-narratives are not usually told outright, but are reinforced by other more specific narratives told within the culture.

The Narmada acts as the sutra and the nameless narrator as the Sutradhar. Together they connect and capture Indian myths, rituals traditions, culture and philosophy. The unknown narrator at once acts as the story teller, translator, and the audience or listener with complete ease. He creates apt background for each narration. The following extract reveals clues about the narrative design of the novel:

He is as curious as the reader to know more about the episodes and is cautious enough as the author to speak in a calculated manner, to put forward the thoughts of characters without interpreting it, so that the audience or the reader can interpret it in their own manner. The

narrative style of the novelist can be called info-dumping- where the author puts concentrated amount of background material in form of conversation between two characters or Dialogic.

The dialogic work, as coined by Bakhtin carries a continual dialogue with other works of literature and other authors. It does not merely answer, correct, silence or extend a previous work, but informs and is continually informed by the previous work. Dialogic literature is in communication with multiple works. As Bakhtin puts it, ‘a particular language in a novel is a particular way of viewing the world, and therefore, the speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, an ideologue, and his words are always ideologemes’”(43). Generally dialogism is associated with narrotology.

The narrator’s semi-retirement is his own, adapted version of the fourth residence. He was simply not equipped to wander into the jungle and become a forest hermit, surviving on fruit and roots. However, one of the stories told is of a Shiva disciple, the Naga Baba, who did just that. The following lines cited from the text throw light on this aspect of the chaos and confusion faced by the characters:

At the academy he had learned the arts of a protector sadhu to wield his iron trident as a weapon. He had perfumed yogic contortions to gain physical prowess far exceeding any wrestler’s, hardened his hands and his feet so they could kill a man with a single blow. (230)

The Naga knew that people thought he could levitate and place irrevocable curses on any who displeased him. During the Indian Mutiny, children would be told that twenty thousand Naga ascetics, naked and ash-covered with matted locks, had come down from their caves in the Himalayas to do battle with the red-coated Englishmen

ambitious for empire. the Naga Baba visits a cemetery and the homes of untouchables, describes what is usually identified as a Tantric practice.

To demonstrate total freedom from attachment, normative rules of cleanliness are deliberately broken. Thus the profane becomes sacred, the sacred profane. At the end of the novel, Naga Baba later returned to the world as a professor of archaeology, having written an acclaimed book on the Narmada. The professor declares that mythology is a waste of time. He adds that it is the individual experience of human beings that carries worth and values. The following citation is illustrative of the case in point:

The river is believed to link mankind to the energy of Shiva. It was formed from his perspiration while meditating strenuously. The stream took on the form of a woman. She tried to seduce him. Amused, Shiva blessed her with the words. You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible; this is what the deity said. (8).

Kama, the temptress, also tried to seduce Shiva away from his meditation. She is reduced to ashes by Shiva's 'third eye'. Brief mention is made of the *KamaSutra*. Mehta associates Kama with the ancient goddess 'worshipped by the tribal inhabitants of India's forests before the Aryan settlement. The goddess has such fearful names as the Terrible One, the Implacable Mother, and the dark Lady.

Mikhail Bakhtin considered the nature of the whole of human consciousness as dialogic. He considered that dialogism is a universal phenomenon that covered all expressions of the human life. 'No idea', He said, 'is simply able to survive in isolated consciousness of a human being...if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies'. (Bakhtin, 51-71). The blunting of this tool by casual use, are consequences of a failure to recognize and engage with the concept's place in intellectual history.

Dialogism denotes not an identifiable quality of a narrative text. The reader and the speaker and the listener are participating in the dialogue. Dialogism appears to be a simple expression to the philosophical implications of narratology. Cates Baldrige analyses it further and remarks:

Whenever a character in a novel speaks, he or she reveals a perspective on reality shaped by concrete cultural factors such as class, occupation, gender, or generation, meaning that when fictional persons interact, what really come into proximity and often into conflict are the various self-interested and partial descriptions of the social system they articulate.(165)

A River Sutra can be labeled as a polyphonic novel by Bakhtian classification of novels. A polyphonic novel is the one in which 'a character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's. The narrators are represented not only (as) objects of authorial discourse but also (as) subjects of their own directly signifying discourse

The conflict between Aryan and pre-Aryan was a classic conflict between instinct and reason. The pre-Aryans had had a profound respect for nature and the inter-dependence of life. The tribal worshipped the river as a manifestation of the Goddess. Throughout the book, the reader is made aware of Hindu reverence for nature, which is an aspect of, not distinct from, the divine. The following lines cast light on this facet of the issue that is probed in this study:

The six mighty ragas, the pillars of all music, were born from the expressions on Shivas's face and through their vibrations the universe was brought into existence but they are all male. Their children are the putras sons and in this way music lives and multiplies (195)

The very shape of the veenaimortalizes the immortal beauty of Shiva's consort, Parvati. The arts are Shiva's gift to mankind. Each raga is related to a particular season, a time of day, an emotion. The first sound of creation was Om. A significant character in the novel is Tariq Mia, Imam at the local mosque.

It is Mia who tells the narrator that he is really meeting, not retreating from, the world. Mia tells the narrator that the human heart has only one secret – the capacity to love. The old Mullah would often break into Sufi songs and seemed able to read the narrator's mind. This story depicts something of what life was like in a Princely state before India's independence from Britain. The women's job was to educate the heir's to India's mightiest kingdoms. The mystery and secrecy of life as perceived by Indians are noticeable in the following citation:

New and Old India meet in the story of Nitin Bose, as it does in that of the Naga Baba. Bose is a young executive in Calcutta's oldest tea company who enjoys the high life of meaningless adulteries, golf at the Tolleygunge Club, drinks at the Saturday Club. He had no interest in all those Puranas and Vedas and Upanishads and god knows what.(111).

In his long and solitary evenings, Nitin found himself enjoying his grandfather's old texts. The endless legends contained in the Puranas. After entering into a rather mysterious liaison with a tribal woman, he has been recalled to Calcutta. He becomes convinced that only a visit to a shrine of the Goddess at Narmada will cure him. This chapter also gives us a glimpse of what life had been like for the colonial estate managers.

Cates Baldrige remarks, "this does not mean that the author remains neutral (an impossible undertaking). It means only that she endeavors to present the worldviews of even her villains as if from the inside"(154). Finally, within a

polyphonic novel it is possible for the characters' differing social vocabularies to interact dialogically. The conversation between clashing social perspectives creates an exchange in which each language reveals to the other what it did not know about itself, and in which new insights are produced that neither wholly contained before.

The languages come to reflect a new self-conscious understanding. After a character has been involved in a dialogic exchange, he sees the social field from a Copernican rather than a Ptolemaic perspective. This is not merely a matter of influence, for the dialogue extends in both the directions. The previous work of Literature is as altered by the dialogue as the present one is. The cultural aspect of various communities is independent but interdependent, homogenous within themselves but heterogeneous outwardly.

Bose was himself aware of the Englishness of his tea-estate experience. In another echo of colonial times, Bose writes an article on the customs of the tribal. Indians have never been prepared to settle for a single mythology if they could squeeze another hundred in. Mia grumbles that Hindus disguise their greed with India's religious pluralism is also included represented by Tariq Miah. The effect of spirituality in the selected behaviors of Indians is crystal clear in the following citation:

All the characters are endearing. The stories are tinged with sadness. One character, a gifted child singer, gets murdered, another gets jilted. People are always alarmed the first time they see me', she says. The reference to Shiva as a 'golden peacock enabled me to answer a question I have often been asked by students when visiting a temple with peacocks in the grounds, why are there peacocks here. (162)

The Narmada River and a sutra are the two things that bind the mentioned themes. Mehta manifested the style of the Personal Point of View when a nameless narrator describes his life and experiences in the first person. Since the character has no life story and no main event which made him choose to live a retired life on the banks of the Narmada River. The reader got a glimpse of the narrator's personality through what he did not say. To oppose this style, the people the narrator met and the stories he heard discovered the tumultuous nature of truly living. It turned out that the main character's very lack of story made him an all-around man like most people. The man seemed ordinary, a narrator without a narrative and still finding his own life.

The word sutra referred to an Indian literary form. An aphorism is a short statement that contains a general truth. In other words sutras usually contain a moral or a message intended to enlighten the reader. The novel was positively responded by critics. *A River Sutra* juxtaposes myth, reality, desire, sorrow, passionate intensity, detachment, blind faith, renunciation, self-realization disappointment, love, pain, calmness with wisdom. Mehta treats the elemental Hindu myths through the meta-narrative technique and uses Narmada as a gamut or 'sutra' to create an ideological consensus between Hinduism, Islam and Jainism.

The narratology is loaded with symbolism that arises from a mixture of affirmation of myth and life. It includes a faith in life and living life itself. Mehta has used myth as a powerful tool to connect the past to the present forcing us to transcend borders of time. The river Goddess Narmada, Siva's unmarried daughter, the beguilingly beautiful seductress represents the duality of Indian myths. In the myth, the river is represented as mythological symbol of Indian culture. As the daughter of lord Siva, it is referred to as Her Holiness. In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta, employs the ambiguity of Narmada's driving impulse to provoke to the sexuality in her myth:

Did they brood on the Narmada as the proof of Shiva's great penance or did they imagine her as a beautiful woman dancing towards the Arabian sea, arousing the lust of ascetics like themselves while Shiva laughed at the madness of their infatuation.(187)

A mere glimpse of the Narmada's waters is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births. It is said that Shiva, the creator and destroyer of worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream took on the form of a woman- most dangerous of her kind. Her inventive variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the delightful one, blessing her with the words you shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible. Then, he gave her in marriage to the ocean, Lord of rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors.

The narrative begins with narrator's musings on Narmada. He imagines the ascetics with ash smeared naked bodies. Their matted hair wound on top of their ascetic god, witnessing the river's birth. The nameless narrator is a retired bureaucrat who chooses to be a Manager at Narmada rest house and lives in a small cottage. From the gardens he could see Narmada the river has become the sole object of my reflections. And because he was fascinated by the river and wanted to learn more about it, he explains:

The bungalow's proximity to the Narmada River was its particular attraction. Worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva, the river is among our holiest pilgrimage sites. During my tours of the area I had been further intrigued to discover that the criminal offence of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself in the waters of the Narmada. (122).

It is strange and perhaps amazing to find out how Mehta personifies the river seeing it from the eyes of a man. In the silence of the ebbing night, the river's heartbeat pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at least to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank of Amarkantak.

Jean Michel Adam, the noted narratologist, says that "In the wake of the narrative turn, the application of narratological tools to extra-narratological research problems has become more and more widespread"(65). It has resulting in a multitude of compound or hyphenatednarratologies. However, in a theoretical perspective not every approach labeled narratological automatically constitutes a new narratology. While one subset of the new approaches comprises methodological variants others focus on thematic and ideology-critical concerns.

Mehta tries to develop an erotic imagery of the virgin River. Narrator calls himself vanprasthi but watching the river in isolated darkness he imagines her as a woman. Geographically the source of river Narmada is in Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh. From the same source the rivers Son and river Johilla also flow out in differen directions. Johilla is a tributary of the Narmada and rejoins it a few kilometers further downstream. In the legends of Kurma and Shiva Puranas, these three rivers are inter-dependent. In Indian mythology river Son is one of the two rivers that have been given a masculine form, the other being Brahmhaputra.

These ancient texts recount the history of the marriage arranged between the Son and the Narmada. It is a story of love and betrayal. The Narmada, like a future traditional Indian wife had never seen her betrothed. Curious, she sent her friend,Johilla, daughter of the barber, so that she submitted a report to her on what he could resemble. When Johilla saw Son, she fell under his charm. Son, seeing the pretty young woman approaching, supposed that she was his betrothed.

Consequently, he gave the order to begin the marriage ceremony. The following lines indicate how the major character happens to explore the mystery and miracle of life:

When Narmada discovered that she was deeply offended. She sprang through rocks and chasms, formant of the rapids and waterfalls which always resound of her disappointment. She finished her escape towards the west by drowning her misery in the Gulf of Cambay. The rejected Son flowed down to the top of a high hill, and ran out towards the east then towards north to join the Ganges on its way towards the Bay of Bengal. (171)

Narmada, therefore, is considered unmarried, pious. Narmada was renowned even in the ancient world. His interest in the traditions of the river bring him in contact with the outside world whose stories he narrates and realizes that even at this stage he knows little of life.

The question of the validity and reliability of narrative utterances was again raised by Booth. Muller Booth makes the following remarks:

He introduced the concept of unreliable narrator, interpreting cases of conflicting and self-contradicting narration as an aesthetic device aimed at signaling the author's moral and normative distance from his narrator. However, the way in which Booth constructed his argument made it necessary to introduce a second, more speculative concept, namely that of the implied author. (78)

The concept of unreliable narrator has become more accepted in post-classical narratology. The controversy over the implied author's plausibility is ongoing. Apart from these stories there are certain references to certain myths, customs, traditional practices, ancient literature and the tribal faith.

After getting a job in Narmada rest house, he befriends Tariq Mia, an old Muslim mullah, a Sufi, who acts as co-narrator- giving a second dimension to the story. Additionally, the following lines exemplify this point:

The ancient Greeks would probably have sympathized with the river's mythology but at least they only had to deal with one set of myths, whereas Indians have never been prepared to settle for a single mythology if they could squeeze another hundred in. (152)

The nameless narrator tells about his experiences in first dimension. There are six narratives in the novel which are linked through the river and the narrator acting as the sutra or link and the sutradhar or linkage or the connector or the storyteller. The six stories are about a rich diamond merchant who becomes a Jain monk, about murder of a young innocent, blind, talented singer Imrat, the seduction of an executive in a tea plantation estate and the curse that befalls him, the love-story of a courtesan and a bandit.

Somewhere these myths penetrate deep and are submerged in all the narratives. The myth of Shiva and Narmada infuses all the narratives in one form or the other. The plot is relatively simple. The nameless narrator introduces us to various sub-characters who carry the narrative further. It is like holding the baton in the relay race. The baton is passed by the narrator and whoever receives the baton tells a story. Different characters belonging to different religious backgrounds narrate the stories in first person carrying the baton and then passing it further. The guest house becomes the intersection of the lives of various characters that flow in and out of it like the tidal water of the river Narmada. As in *A River Sutra*, Professor Shankar points out to the Narrator:

You have chosen the wrong place to flee the world my, friend.

toomany lives converge on these banks. The characters of each story appear only once and the same subject-matter travels from one story to another. Each narrative represents the story of a particular cultural unit. Gita Mehta uses meta- narrative technique and at the same time she manages to fill the gap between each story beautifully using the river Narmada as the sutra or the link. (178)

The principal myth is that of the Lord Siva and his daughter Narmada. It may be the story of Uma-Shankar- the female infant rescued from an abusive brothel keeper. She begins the narratives with the story of renunciation of the Jain monk. The monk relates the essence of his vow to the Narrator.

Only austere asceticism and shunning of sexual desire,domination, and pleasure of women would allow the Jain monk to possess new powers. The Monk's story is in from of dialogues between the narrator and the Monk.Within the dialogues principles of Jain philosophy are disclosed to the reader. The narrator appears to be surprised to see a young man who not more than thirty years of age dressed as a Monk. The narrator refers to the Narmada pilgrimage- the Narmada parikrama- made by the Hindus to which the Monk replies that he was not a Hindu and the narrator accepts that he 'pretends ignorance to keep him talking' and passing the first hand information- first person narration- to the reader.

The monk flung his head back, blowing the thin muslin of his mask outward with the force of his uninhibited laughter makes fun of Hindus. A stark contrast is created betweenHinduism and Jainism by Monk's statement: "You Hindus. Always disguising your greed with your many headed gods and your many headed arguments"(13). Mehta fictionalizes the process of diksha, or renunciation of the Jain

Monk. As a representative of Jain religion the monk tells about the Jain principles and about Mahavira, the pioneer of Jain religion. The monk through his story explores the principles of Jain religion such as non-violence.

The narration is in flashback to an earlier point in the story. 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. He decides to renounce the world because he observes and feels the depth of poverty and hunger. The life of unremitting pleasure ceased to satisfy him. He elaborates that life was like a dreamless sleep. He is confused when he observes his father's ill-treatment to his miners.

Through the character of the monk, Gita Mehta recreates the image of Lord Mahavira . The elderly Jain monk tells him about Lord Mahavira's teachings and says:

You have travelled the world and think you have seen everything.

Perhaps you have. But you have not learnt the secrets of human heart'.

The monk follows the footsteps of Mahavira. For making the narration reliable Gita Mehta chooses the monk as a narrator of this story. Mehta uses Monk's renunciation as a curtain raiser to the next five narratives.

Jainism believes in ahimsa. (176)

The father-child relationship has another turn in this narrative. The Monk after his renunciation turns a stranger to his father. One is the son of an affluent diamond merchant who has everything in life and the other is a blind but talented orphan.

It is the story of Master Mohan, a music teacher, who had an unfulfilled desire of being a famous singer. He meets an exceptionally talented, orphan, blind child

Imrat with a voice Master Mohan 'had only heard in his dreams. His features hidden behind the muslin cloth hearing the chanting of the other monks:

'You will be free from doubt.'

'You will be free from delusion'.

'You will be free from extremes.'

'You will promote stability.'

'You will protect life. (41)

Mehta represents the river as a center of pilgrimage for all religious minded Indians- followers of Hinduism, Jainism, or Islam. The second story is told by Tariq Mia, the secondary narrator, in the mosque. It is narrated from a third person's point of view giving a third dimension to the narration. She positions Jain Monk's story and Imrat's story one after the other. But the narrator forgets to ask the Monk about it. After his departure he tries to find the answer and discusses it with Tariq Mia.

There is another reference to Kabir, one of the great poets in India. Gita Mehta refers to this Hindu-Muslim bonding tracing it back to History and the sixteenth century sufi-Bhakti philosophy. Kabir was free from religious practices against either. Though intensely religious in outlook he was not a slave of either Hinduism or Islam. He rubbed shoulders with Bhakti reformers as well as sufi saints. Imrat sings Hymns by Kabir:

Some seek God in Mecca, Some seek God in Benares.

Each finds his own path and the focus

of his worship.

Some worship him in Mecca.

Some in Benares.

But I centre my worship on the eyebrow

of my beloved. (ARS 74)

It is significant that Mehta prefaces the novel with a couplet from the poet-mystic bhakt. It reverberates through the novel in many forms, through the words of many characters. The refrain from Kabir, the Sufi mystic, punctuates the tale of the blind young singer Imrat, who 'always wanted to sing at the tomb of Amir Rumi' sings.

Master Mohan feels great love for the child and gives him music lessons devotedly. He finds a way to live by teaching and caring for the blind by.

O servant, where do you seek me?

You will not find me in temple

or mosque,

In Kaaba or in Kailash,

In yoga or renunciation.

Sings Kabir, "O seeker find God

In the breath of all breathing. (72).

Their relationship and bonding evolves from teacher-student to a parent-child relationship. Master Mohan gets totally involved in Imrat and when Imrat is suddenly murdered by the landed gentry, he holds himself responsible for murder. He considers himself a murderer, unable to find solace even on the banks of Narmada, commits suicide by throwing himself under the train. Tariq Mia explains:

'Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as

he had loved the blind

child. I don't know the answer, little brother. It is only a

story about the human

heart.' (ARS 91)

Strangely, Mehta juxtaposes the Jain Monk's story with the story of a Hindu teacher Master Mohan and a Muslim boy Imrat indicating multicultural positioning of Narmada. Indecently the unknown narrator is also Hindu and Tariq Mia is a Muslim, but their religions don't hold their friendship. The religious preaching are at par with each other and perhaps all religions have a single objective of purity of human heart.

Mehta's narrative has an undercurrent highlighting the importance of the river as the pilgrimage centre for pilgrims of varied faiths. Sufi and Bhakti poetry here remind readers about the multicultural nature of Narmada finding representations of many faiths and highlighting the all pervasive truth about equality of all religions and faiths. J.L.Mehta remarks in the sin the *History of Medieval India*:

The devotional worship of god with the ultimate object of attaining moksha or salvation is called Bhakti and the Islamic mysticism is known as Sufism. The Sufis were peaceful emissaries of Islam. A practitioner is called a Sufi and seeks remembrance of god through love of god, and above all else, through constant remembrance of the creator and asceticism. Bhakti reformers and Sufi saints took up the cause of socio-religious reforms and preached the gospels of Equality of all mankind and universal brotherhood. (183)

The unnamed narrator reads Bose's personal diary, goes again in flash back. It creates a relationship between Bose and the reader. Solitude of the tea estate was its most attractive prospect, he is involved with a tribal woman, Rima. Bose's tale is highly symbolic. It carries shades of meaning. Nitin reads profusely the books from his grandfather's trunk and became fascinated by the endless legends contained in the Puranas. He remarks:

I even discovered mythology dealing with the very Area in which my tea estate was situated, legends of a vast underground civilization stretching from these hills all the way to the Arabian Sea, peopled by a mysterious race of half-human, half-serpent. (119)

Sexual restlessness began to gnaw at the edges of my content. He is haunted by erotic imaginings. Gradually his will to self-destruct is almost predicted as his grandfather's books offered no escape from sexual temptation. Nitin Bose does not realize when he transcended, reading the labyrinthine ales of demons, sages, gods, lovers, cosmologies.

Suddenly, Nitin Bose starts singing a song and talking about Rima. He is said to have possessed by his lover. Incidentally the unnamed narrator has already created a background. He remarks about Vano villagers that 'they believe their goddess (a stone image of half woman with full breasts of a fertility symbol but the torso of a coiled snake- only a divine personification of the Narmada river) cures madness, liberating those who are possessed'(6). When Nitin Bose arrives at Narmada rest-house he sings in a strange haunting voice:

'Bring me my oil and my collyrium.

Sister, bring my mirror and the vermilion.

Make haste with my flower garland.

My lover waits impatient in the bed. (134).

Bose turns to Narmada, the river goddess, who is related to the snake goddess Mansa as sister. Manasa is believed to have been born from the erotic imaginings of Shiva and his seed fell on a lotus leaf and seeped into the underworld kingdom of Nagas.

Before Nitin Bose's arrival at the resthouse, the Narrator wonders whether Bose was aware of the powers of the goddess:

‘Did he know the goddess who had incinerated even the Great Ascetic in the fires of longing, the Goddess whose power had been acknowledged by the ancient sages with such fearful names as the Terrible One, the Implacable Mother, the Dark Lady, the Destroyer of Time, the Everlasting Dream--did he know the goddess had been worshipped by the tribal inhabitants of these jungles for thousands of years? (187)

Would a brilliant mind be enough to protect the young man from the dark forces of the jungle, from the tribal worship of that Desire which even their conquerors had acknowledged being invincible, describing it as the first-born seed of the mind?

The Naga mythology of the snake goddess finds its cure in the Vano tribes near the river goddess Narmada, linked through Lord Siva. There exists no reference to the parent child relationship except when the narrator finds responsibility of Nitin Bose a burden. He says: ‘Never having been a parent, I found this unfamiliar burden of responsibility an irritant’, (ARS 150) and is relieved when finally Nitin Bose left the bungalow. It is interesting to note that most of the references in the novel are real. Strangely enough during my research I found that there is no tribe called ‘Vano’ around Narmada. The priest from Vano tribe remarks:

If your sahib wants to recover he must worship the goddess Narmada at any shrine that overlooks river Narmada. Only the river has been given the power to cure him, from the ‘power of desire. (141).

Nitin Bose gets cured only when he surrenders and makes offerings to Narmada. He is cured after the Vanotribe ceremony of immersing the idol in Narmada. The

tribal waded in behind him, their hands raised, their faces turned to the West and chanting. The story internalizes legends of two tribes, one from the eastern part of India and the other from the west with the legends of Narmada. Although the whole area is surrounded by tribal, these tribal are called the Gond. The name Vano has been created fictitiously. The ritual that is described is also real in nature. Mehta talks about the relationship of the high class and the lower class in the executive's story where the lover from high class abandons the tribal woman.

In the next story "The courtesan's story" she again talks of love but here love is eternal. It is the story of a bandit Rahul Singh who kidnaps courtesan's young daughter because he thinks that she has been his wife in so many lives before that one. As a witness she describes, again in flashback the life of bandits in the state of solitude. Even after According to the myth the Aryan warrior had fallen deeply in love with a tribal woman of Narmada Valley. The aborigines caught him beheaded as punishment. Since then he was said to be sleeping somewhere deep in the forest:

He, the abductor, told me a great warrior slept somewhere close by with honey bees circling his head. He laughed, saying his men thought he was himself immortal because he had been stung by one of those bees. I wanted to be stung by such a honey bee so we could be together forever and sometimes we set out to search for the warrior but we never found him.(185)

Rahul Singh, the Bandit, has certain similarities with the Aryan warrior. His love is also pure and eternal. He too is shot by the police before he could live a happy life with his love. He dies leaving her alone and pregnant. The girl could not bear such shock and result is miscarriage. She plans to take vengeance on the men who killed

her husband and unborn child. Her plans are thwarted when the arms she has prepared for the vengeance are found by the Manager of Narmada guest house.

The courtesan's daughter unfolds Rahul Singh's greatness before the nameless narrator. He swore vengeance on his family's murderers and killed them all. Of course he has become hunted man. But he has never harmed anyone who did not deserve it. From the flash back she comes to the present. In the present condition she herself could not return to the society as a murderer's wife. A victim of social ethos she is left with no choice but is forced to commit suicide by jumping into the river Narmada for which her mother is happy. The Courtesan's Story is again narrated in the first person by the courtesan herself and later by her daughter. Paradoxically the river Narmada is a source of renewal of life. Mehta wants to inform us that irrespective of the caste or creed, high or low class. The river provides solace to all. Although this story has no traces of father- daughter relationship but has a parent child relationship where a longing mother tries to get back her abducted daughter safely and finally lets the daughter sleep forever.

When the narrator first meets the courtesan's daughter he is aroused by her physical beauty and suddenly he changes his identity from the story teller to a very human, retired bureaucrat, acting as the manager of Narmada rest house. Soon enough he realizes his folly and feels embarrassed and again gets back into the role of the narrator. Describing her he says:

A slender young woman stood in the hall. Although she was dressed in white sari, the home spun cotton gave her almost a royal air... Her thick hair had fallen over her shoulders. She swept it back impatiently, lifting her arms to wind into a bun at the nape of her neck. The gesture pressed her round breasts against the thin fabric of her sari.(142)

In contrast to the beauty of the courtesan's daughter is the ugliness of the daughter of the musician in the next story. The ugly daughter of the musician describes her story to the narrator in the first person. It is called The Musician's story. The story establishes the art of music as all pervasive and describes music-legends of Siva, also called Natraj and Bhairav meaning the fire of time.

Through her story she describes her genius father who through music tries to free her of own ugly image. The music teacher says explaining how melody was born:

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. Everything started to tremble with the longing to exist. The universe erupted into being as Shiva danced. The six mighty ragas, the pillars of all music, were born from the expressions on Shiva's face and through their vibrations the universe was brought into existence. (205).

Fire of time also symbolizes that the musician's daughter perfects her music notes with time. The music embedded in nature cannot be imitated or trapped and in the music of nature lies perfection/ beauty. But his daughter wanted him to give her a sacred saying, a goddess who would grant her beauty. Her father is a famous music teacher who is cheated by his disciple. The disciple promises him to marry his ugly daughter after learning the art of music but after accomplishing his purpose he marries someone else. He rejects her because she is ugly and could not see the beautiful heart and an extremely talented musician inside her. Unable to bear rejection she shuns music.

The very sound of music turned 'hateful' to her ears. Her father, unable to console her that beauty is a passing thing and it lies in the eyes of the beholder, brings her to the banks of river Narmada. The river has power to cure a person dead from inside. She says about her father:

He says that I must meditate on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance, until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed and can become again the ragini to every raga. (225).

The musician's story clearly demonstrates the father-daughter relationship. As a devoted father, the musician is almost blind from the fact of ugliness of his daughter. He helps her to elevate herself from the mundane world and takes her as his student. He wants her to be married to music. Again the narration revolves around Shiva, father of Narmada, and the musician brings his daughter for cure to the banks of river Narmada, Shiva's daughter. Incidentally the legend of Narmada is very similar to the story of musician's daughter. Both are cheated by their lovers and both remain unmarried in the end even after their marriage has been fixed. The next story is The Minstrel's story narrated by Tariq Mia.

This narrative again describes the father-daughter relationship between Naga Baba, also called Shankar, and Uma. Tariq Mia meets Naga Baba – who belongs to the martial ascetics, the ones they call the Naga sadhus, the Protectors. Crossing his legs in the lotus position and continues his chant for nine days and nine nights by that funeral pyre:

‘Shiva-o-ham

I that am Shiva

Shiva-o-ham

Shiva is I. (241).

The ascetic rescues a little girl from prostitution and calls her Uma which symbolically means peace in the night. Over the months the child heard the songs so often she often asked to learn and recite rivers praises herself. Only when she had fallen asleep did the Naga Baba begin his own meditations so that sometimes in her dreams she heard his deep voice. This narrative is a flashing forward to a moment later in the chronological sequence of events.

Sankaracharya started a vigorous campaign for the revival of Hinduism. This legacy is treated as a living and progressive faith, based on solid foundations of Vedic philosophy and ancient Indian cultural traditions. He was also the founding father of bhakti movement which found its way in the medieval period. Nevertheless, he laid stress on gyan or jnana- the true knowledge- as a means of attainment of salvation. Shankaracharya with his yogic powers is said to have filled whole Narmada River into a small jar (kamandal). He wrote Narmadashtaka to pray to the goddess Narmada to relieve common man from its flood. (Shukla):

You cross ground by leaping
Like a dancing stag.
The faithful ones name you Reva,
The leaping.
But Shiva named you
Delightful and, in his laughter,
He gave you the name of Narmada.’ (85)

Talking about the father daughter Shiva in form of Professor defends and praises and exerts pride on his own daughter the river Narmada. All her stories culminate in its characters finding solace in the arms of Narmada-bards, ascetics, gamblers, cheats, dancers, singers- find refuge in her embrace. As he minstrel sings:

'You remove the stains of evil.

You release the wheel of suffering.

You lift the burdens of the world.

O holy Narmada. (278).

In nameless narrator provides background to each story so that a suitable atmosphere is created to capture reader's mind. There is no central character in the novel. The narrator of the story is present mostly in all the stories but he himself is unknown. Mehta does not even feel the need to give him an identity. The events in the novel are in form of incidents or memories of past, but these are related with different characters each time. The novel explores the complexity of the human mind or man.

III: Mehta's Concern with Form –Content Dichotomy

The major thrust of this research is to expose how the narrative design of this novel contributes to the complexity of theme and issue intended by the author. *A River Sutras* is a lyrical series of interlocking stories that transport the reader to a contemporary India. The setting of the novel is on the banks of river Narmada amid constant traffic of pilgrims, archaeologists, policemen, priests and traders. The chief narrator is a retired bureaucrat who tries to escape the world by becoming a manager of a Government Rest House on the banks of River Narmada. Perhaps his destiny has brought him there to understand all about the world. Gita Mehta employs the simple story telling technique.

The narrators of the stories converge on the banks of the Narmada and partake of peace and mental serenity by telling their experience and by residing on the banks of this canonical river. 'Sutra' is the theme of love that runs through all the stories, threading them loosely together. Perhaps she uses Narmada as the thread or string which holds together the main story and the sub-stories. River Narmada is the 'Sutra' which threads together the diverse people who live on its shores or who come to worship at its water.

Hailing from a patriotic background Gita Mehta intends to explore and expose India with all its richness in classical music, poetry and religion especially to the western readers. To ascertain this fact she presents stories about Hindu ascetic, Jain Monk, courtesans, minstrels, diamond merchants, tea executives, Muslim teachers, tribal folk beliefs.

Focusing on the creator-destroyer deity Siva and the serpent image in the Hindu myths of creation that abound in classical Sanskrit texts, Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* addresses the inevitable crosscurrents that arise when an ancient literature meets

a modern tongue. This paper celebrates the presence of myth as an extremely powerful tool that can connect not only the past with the present but an obsolete language with a global lingua franca, allowing us an experience to read across borders of times, genres, literary traditions and spaces. India is a place where many worlds and times collide with huge velocity: there are satellites being launched and bullock carts being driven at the same moment; there's the constant tension and contradiction of immense sophistication and an almost pre-medieval way of life.

Since *A River Sutra* incorporates both oral and written traditions of mythmaking, including those based in folk cults, it evinces a flexibility of transculturation, grafting the primordial on to the contemporary, lending itself appropriately to an analysis of an alternative vision of established life.

The novel's narrator is a civil servant who gives up an important post to manage a government guest house on the banks of the holy River Narmada. In the Hindu tradition, he is now a vanaprasthi, who has retired to the forest to reflect. He rises before dawn to meditate. At twilight, he watches the river flickering with tiny flames as if catching fire from the hundreds of clay lamps being floated downstream for the evening devotion. The narrator is at the intersection of a busy human thoroughfare. The power of the river draws all kinds of travelers, who have fantastic, often savage stories to tell. At a bazaar, he meets a gifted musician who is making a pilgrimage to the river Narmada because a broken engagement has left her unable to play a note.

In another tale, the narrator learns of a music teacher who adopted a blind beggar with a singing talent. Steering cavalierly clear of emotional entanglement, on the other hand, can leave a hole in the heart. The narrator is appalled, but his assistant is sanguine about the young man's predicament. Mehta uses parables, myths, even

hymns to weave a book of unusual wisdom, one that gently questions our tendency to quarantine ourselves from the exhilaration and disappointment of attachment. Love and desire are shown to be both noble and barbaric, and not always--indeed, not often--in our control. On occasion, though, Mehta seems to worry that her readers may not get her drift. She then hammers it home with jarring zealotry.

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