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A River Sutra: A Dialogic and Meta-Narrative Work

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Abstract

A River Sutra (The holiest river Mother Narmada), a great novel of Geeta Mehta was published in 1993 which received the greatest attention of all Mehta's works. The story is told and set around Narmada in central India Though Geeta Mehta, as a postcolonial writer perhaps, known more for her essays than novels, is also a documentary filmmaker and journalist. She is one of the well-known contributors in Indian English Literature, which has a long tradition of women writers such as earlier novelists Kamla Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, etc. All these activities share a focus on India, the country of birth – its history, politics and cultures. The same concerns inform her novel: *A River Sutra*, a modern revisitation of prevalent traditions of Indian aesthetic and philosophical thought.

Keywords- Meta-narrative, Salvation, Narratology

The present paper focuses on the meta-narrative and dialogic technique used by Geeta Mehta in *A River Sutra* which is a lyrical series of interlocking stories that transport the readers to a contemporary India .the seamless flow of the narrative and dialogic technique is like the flow of river Goddess Narmada. 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, Islamism and Jainism. According to John Stephens, 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 story” within totalizing schemes. Meta-narratives are not told outright, but are reinforced by other more specific narratives told within the culture. The

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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. Since we don't know much about him, he transforms from the author to a story teller, from the reader to a listener with complete ease. He is as curious as the reader to know more about the episodes and is cautious enough as 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 holiest river Narmada's bank and its surrounding is the place where the novel is set in. Indian people have great religious faith and spiritual association with Narmada. People worship the river and get salvation in her company. For them Narmada is not a river only but a motherly figure. Therefore, frustrated and nervous people pilgrimage the bank of Narmada for getting solace of mind. On the surface, novel may appear to be a detective or a collection of short stories but after reading these stories, the reader cannot separate one story from another. The technique of novel is little similar to the epic Mahabharat in which, Vyas wrote the Mahabharat but he himself is not involved in it as a character. He is only a Sutradhar to narrate the story. Sutradhar (narrator) of the novel also keeps himself and narrates the stories sequentially.

Geeta Mehta in her novel (*A River Sutra*) uses multiple narrative techniques and fills the gap between all the 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". Each character of each story appears only once and represents a particular community. The novel starts with the introduction of nameless narrator who is a retired bureaucrat and joined the post of a manager of the Narmada Rest House. Like other Indian, he also came here to get solace of mind, away from the humdrum of city life. Getting a job in this rest house, he became friend with Tariq Mia. The nameless narrator hears the story and offers a background to each story.

I would also analyze the narrative style of the novelist that 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 in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), 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

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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. Generally dialogism is associated with narratology. 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).

In large measure, the ease with which dialogism has been appropriated as a tool for (not only) literary analysis, and 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, with the philosophical and philological contexts in which dialogism denotes not an identifiable quality of a narrative text, but a set of problems in the study of human language, communication and cognition. The narrator, 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. 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 and in which those figures whose social perspectives oppose that of the narrator are represented not only (as) objects of authorial discourse but also (as) subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (Bakhtien). 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, granting these dissenting ideological positions their full status as coequals with the one she chooses to inhibit.

Finally, within a polyphonic novel it is possible for the characters’ differing social vocabularies to interact dialogically. When this occurs, the conversation between clashing social perspectives creates an exchange in which „each language reveals to the other what it did not

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know about itself, and in which new insights are produced that neither wholly contained before. Furthermore, the languages come to reflect a new self-conscious understanding that, far from unproblematically reflecting reality, they merely give voice to one possible viewpoint among many, all of which are equally limited by cultural circumstances, and thus they lose their naïve belief in their own authoritative (i.e. unquestionable) status. After a character has been involved in a dialogic exchange, he sees the social field from a Copernican rather than a Ptolemaic perspective, and that the contingent nature of all cultural discourses hegemonic and subversive alike-begins to reveal itself. Gita Mehta uses the dialogue between the unnamed narrator and other characters to develop the narration. She refers continuously to Indian mythology, *Vedas*, *Puranas*, work by Shankracharya, Bhakti philosophy, Sufi philosophy, and many other references to Ancient Indian Literature. This is not merely a matter of influence, for the dialogue extends in both the directions, and the previous work of Literature is as altered by the dialogue as the present one is. In this sense, Bakhtin's dialogic is analogous to T.S Eliot's ideas in "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919), where he holds that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.

On the way to Tariq Mia, the nameless narrator confronts the monk who narrates his story to the nameless narrator in first person. As a representative of Jain religion, monk narrates the Jain principle and Mahavira, the pioneer of Jain religion. The monk explores the principles of Jainism such as non-violence which was the sharp weapon of Gandhian ideology. Monk, the son of a rich diamond merchant enjoys every moment of life and thinks that life is a blessing of God. After returning from the world tour of fulfilling the purpose of trading, he decides to renounces the world because he observes and feels the debt of poverty and hunger. He is confused when he observes ill treatment of his father to his miners because he is strict follower of Jainism and breaks those principles while treating his miners. Through this Monk, Mehta builds the image of Mahavira in the mind of readers. The monk is the mirrored figure of Mahavira and follows the footsteps of Mahvira. Monk is the 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 loved just one thing in my life" (p.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

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secret of human heart i.e. “the capacity to love” (p.48). 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”. (p. 91) Tariq Mia narrates the story from third person point of view and makes the narration omniscient.

The Executive’s Story is another story which is narrated through the diary of Nitin Bose, an executive. 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 he cannot confess his immoral act to anybody else so he confesses it in his diary. 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. 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.

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Through diary Nitin Bose narrates his story in the first person point of view and makes the narration reliable.

In “The Courtesan’s Story” 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 narrator. The Courtesan represents the particular group of courtesans which is neglected by the society. The courtesans are not considered as human beings but they are used for entertainment only. In this story there is another narrator i.e. the Courtesan’s daughter. She describes her life with the bandits to the narrator. She also tells the reason behind Rahul Singh’s act that Rahul Singh kidnaps her because he thinks that she has been his wife in so many lives before that one. 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. 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. 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.

In The Musician’s Story the musician’s daughter describes her story to the narrator in the first 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. The musician’s daughter is ugly that’s why the disciple rejects her. His love is a materialistic love which gives importance only to external beauty. The musician’s daughter cannot tolerate his rejection but the musician convinces her that beauty is a passing thing and it lies in the eyes of the beholder. In her narration she describes the details of every raga which can be told only by a person who has knowledge of music so the writer chooses her as a narrator of this story. The writer with the help of this narrator describes the selfish and materialistic world.

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In the next, “The Minstrel’s Story” the narrator is Tariq Mia. He meets Naga Baba a few years ago and get acquainted with him and a little girl who is saved by Naga Baba from the clutches of the prostitute. 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. In the story Naga Baba is a representative of ascetic’s community. The story also describes how people are victims of superstitions and religious faiths. The last chapter of the novel *The Song of The Narmada* is a sequel to “the Minstrel’s Story”. This chapter narrated by the nameless narrator in the third person narration which focuses on Naga Baba’s reappearance in the role of Professor Shankar. 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.

In the narrative technique the nameless narrator provides background to each story. The writer uses flashback technique in the novel. The writer’s purpose of providing the background to each story is to create suitable atmosphere which captures the reader’s psyche. The use of narrative technique in this novel is different from the regular concept of the novel. Generally the novel includes a saga of events related to the central character’s life but the novel comprises different characters and different events. The novel highlights not only one character but with the help of various characters Gita Mehta expresses the psychology of human mind. 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.

To sum up the discussion, I would say that my attempt was here to unfold Geeta Mehta’s technique of narration in *River Sutra*. She succeeded in handling Dialogic and Meta-narrative which provides us the starting point to understand Mehta’s work vis-à-vis from the view point of postcolonial situation. I further posit that she uses the technique used by the old Indian texts like *Panchtantra*, *Kathasaritsagar*, *Kadambari* and *Mahabharat*. Her style is apt here to prove the maxim: “Unity in Varity”, in the society of India.

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