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REPRESENTING THE UNDER-REPRESENTED: ETHNIC WORLD IN GITA MEHTA'S  
*A RIVER SUTRA*

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ABSTRACT

In the fast growing globalised world, people are moving towards a multicultural society adapting to the unified codes of the materialistic lives. This has been reflected in the major literary works with poignant themes and issues mostly related to the mainstream society. Yet, the lives of the marginalized undergoing inevitable cultural change in the present phase are being left unnoticed. This has led to the debate on the plights and predicaments of the indigenous people who are socially, economically shelved from the mainstream society. The Present paper tries to critically analyze the treatment of the Tribes, depiction of tribal culture with all its customs, tradition and mythical beliefs, exploitation of the tribes in the hands of upper crust people of the society with reference to Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*. It also implies on the need for representing the sidelined sections of the society to understand their culture and social positioning of the tribes in the hierarchal social setup, forcing them to be marginalized, unrecognized and under-represented and misconstrued.

Key Words: Culture, Exploitation, Marginalized, Myth, Tribes, Under-represented.

INTRODUCTION

Literature, perceives the entirety of humankind, presents variegated cultures and society. World literature in the present phase is documenting the lives of multicultural societies. Indian English Literature has a broader arena in presenting the diverse cultures of the Indian Subcontinent to the world's forum. Bringing forth the heterogeneous ways of life and their underlying connections are one of the principal focus of many vibrant literary expressions. Although literary contributions presenting the popular culture, focusing the mainstream society are plentiful, the representations of the marginalized sections, especially the lives of the indigenous people are visibly less.

The indigenous ethnicities of India have received minimal attention in the Indian literary domain. Very few writers have produced literary writings on the tribal life and culture. Gita Mehta is one such writer who has conjured up the multicultural heritage of India, including the ethnic world in her resounding novel *A River Sutra*. In the novel, Gita Mehta's writing sheds light on life tales of people from different layers of the society. One such tale presents the peripheral tribal lives that have been excluded from the creamy layers of the society, in a way interconnecting the neglected sects with the mainstream culture. Glorifying each culture and highlighting the brighter sides of the human spectrum with vast multitudes, the novelist has succeeded in her attempt to record the intricate Indian cultural array. As R. S. Pathak states,

*A River Sutra* does not have the structure of a novel in the modern sense. It is in line with the ancient Indian tradition of story-telling. The pattern enables the author to present a multiplicity of viewpoints, which goes a long way in helping her unfold the intricate realities of life. (107)

Although ethnic lives have been given descriptive documentation in a limited space since the novel *A River Sutra* converges several tales within it, Gita Mehta portrays the strong image of the Other Side (the marginalized lives) in a vivid manner. Amidst the narratives of the mainstream people, the presence of the tribal life and the mystical world of forest are seen throughout the novel. The beginning of the novel introduces the Vano village where the Tribes dwell in. The picturesque depiction of the hillside hamlet is given through the narrator. The narrator has exiled himself from the busy world to spend his retirement life in solitude in a peaceful place near the hillside jungle. Through his narration, the author makes the readers to visualize the wild forest with its natural bounties and the Tribal life. A. K. Chaturvedi lauds on Gita Mehta's recreation of collective Indian ethos in her writings as:

The novel (*A River Sutra*) has carved out a niche for her (Gita Mehta) in the history of Indian English Literature and has enabled her 'to become a writer lionized by the world who has created a new language of literature and recreated India for Indians.' as adjudged a seminal book by the Illustrated Weekly of India, the novel reflects the shift of novelist's concern to sensibility and deals with the themes like cultural values, music, art forms, ethos and tribal life (Chaturvedi 65)

Gita Mehta limns all the unique traits and characteristics of the tribes at every possible situation through the narrator. The Tribes' hospitality is shown through the narrator's experience while his morning walks; he will be greeted by the tribal women, despite being a stranger to them. The gallantry of the tribesmen is revealed through a short recollection of the

historical incidents by the narrator in his viewpoint, he states that,

Our Bungalow guards are hired from Vano village and enjoy the reputation for fierceness as descendants of tribal race that held the Aryan invasion of India at bay for centuries in these hills. (Mehta 4)

The aborigines are projected with their real traits as amicable people, giving importance to hospitality, valor, hard work, and with nature worshipping tendencies. Having mythical beliefs, rituals and sacraments, supernatural elements such as magic and witchcrafts, the tribal life is richly presented with its cultural hues.

In the executive tale, the author primarily focuses on the tribal life and culture. She has spelled out on the exploitation, deforestation and industrialization as the huge tribulations, the tribal people face. Yet, she has also expressed her eco-centric view on the natural ecology of forest where the tribes dwell in, which gives the Tribes a soothing life in tranquility despite their economic deprivation. The ethnic world is distinguished and contrasted from the prosperous urban life in which the people suffer humidity, traffic jams, power failures and the crowd as the novelist describes the Calcutta city.

The real life issues faced by the poor tribes in the hands of the members from the mainstream society representing the civilized world are also focused by the author. The tribes in the post-colonial India are exploited by the members of the privileged class, especially the tribal women, who are seen only as sexual objects. As Patrick Colm Hogan's observation rightly reveals the fact that "colonial ideology tended to "feminize" indigenous men and "hyper-feminize" indigenous women" (36). Here, tribal men as servants are feminized as they mutely accept the suppression through Nitin's description,

It was all ridiculously English I started laughing. Even when the driver braked and the servants came forward to open my door, I could not stop laughing at the thought that I had entered a British fantasy of India, untouched by the chaos of the last

forty years. To assure the servants that I was as pukka as any other sahib, I began issuing orders in an unnaturally military way. (Mehta 75)

Through Nitin's introduction about his tea garden colleagues, Gita Mehta has unveiled the exploiting nature of the Men in power, "We listened to their boasts of rouge elephants tracked, man-eating tigers shot, hot-blooded women tamed and envied the cowboy quality to their headlong pursuit of pleasure during the weeks they spent in the city." (Mehta 72) The conversation between Nitin and the tea garden colleagues before he joins as a manager in a tea estate bring out the rotten minds of the Men in power over the marginalized women. The tribal women have been enlisted along with the wild animals as just an object to be used for their wild pleasures. Further their degrading remarks on the tribal women as, "Armies of women. Real women who will do anything to please a man." (Mehta 73) proves their corrupt oppressing minds, especially on the tribal women who are doubly suppressed based on their race and gender. In the postcolonial lens, it brings out how the subaltern women in the society are perceived and presented by the people from the upper strata of the society not different from that of the colonial oppressor. Poverty prevailing in the lives of the Tribes is one of the reasons that make the people from the mainstream to opine derogatory comments over them. With their materialistic strength they are utilizing both the forest and human resources of the Tribes.

Nitin who leads a peaceful life in the tea estate for two years until his friend from the metro city stimulates him with his vicious words. Provoked Nitin changes his previous thoughts about the tribal women. The transformation in the Nitin's perception on the tribal women can be witnessed as follows: Before he comes to the tea garden, his view on the tribal women is judgmental natural to the upper strata people who looks down upon the downtrodden as "hideous creatures" (Mehta 73), "smell like hell" (73); Once, he reaches the tea garden as a manager, he finds them as gentle tribal women (Mehta 76) showing undisguised respect to him; After his friend's stimulated words he conjures them as the voluptuous images. To overcome his

isolation, he yields to alcohol and a tribal woman. The practice followed by his predecessors who has exploited the tribal women for their carnal pleasures is the reason for Rima's relationship with Nitin. Nitin forgets his moral stand when he is provoked.

Despite the reality, Nitin is enchanted by the tribal woman. Rima's beauty and her songs, the tribal tales and magical tricks she narrates every time while visiting Nitin has enthralled him. He is obsessed with the tribal woman and her culture described to him through her songs, myths and tribal beliefs. As in the Arun Joshi's portrayal of the protagonist 'Billy' in his novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, who develops a love towards tribal life and a tribal woman called Bilasia, Gita Mehta has also presented the character Nitin in a similar vein.

Nitin, the chief executive of a tea estate finds peace in the natural ambience of his workplace far from the madding crowd, overwhelmed with the simplicity of tribal life. This is depicted through his words, "...imagining that the gentle tribals I had seen bending over the tea bushes were in fact descendants of this civilization, still able to do the great Indian rope trick...." (Mehta 78) Like Billy, Nitin also becomes lovesick with the tribal girl, Rima. Unlike Arun Joshi, who has given an idealized picture of the tribal woman only as an elemental feminine force, Gita Mehta has projected Rima in two ways. Firstly, as the elemental feminine force and secondly, as a victimized subaltern suppressed in terms of race and gender. The mystic charm of the indigenous women, as an elemental force, which has the power to catch hold one's mind is presented through Nitin's diary lines:

Then she seduced me with tribal songs in a language I could not understand so that I heard only the sweetness of the melodies. She told me tales of great serpent kingdom lying inches beneath the soil. She spoke to me of charms that gave men the strength of elephants in rut and of magic performed during the eclipse of the moon when a man's soul could be captured inside the two halves of a coconut. (82)

Viewing the tribal women as the female elemental force tends to the conception of polarities

that implies the reversed power conflict for the supremacy, such as female over male, pre-Aryan mystic charm over the Aryan reason, the eastern philosophical notions over western civilizing tendencies. The characterization of Rima as the seducer here underlines her supremacy of as a tribal woman over Nitin despite his powerful position. This projects the reversal of power possession taken by Rima, symbolizing the supreme elemental force elevating a poor tribal woman to an unstoppable divine force, as remarked by Geetha Doctor in her review stating, "yet it is significant that her female figures are most often courtesans or temptresses. She paints them in the most defined colours so perhaps we are to regard them as the human counterparts of the divine *apsaras*" (27).

Yet, when viewed in postcolonial lens, the character of Rima is portrayed in a hyper-feministic manner as a seducer, willingly submissive to exploitation by the internally colonized mindset of the people from the upper strata of the society. This reminds of the colonial past when women in the colonies are humiliated by the foreign colonizers. The tribal women are hyper-feminised as passive creatures, subservient as they volunteer themselves as the objects to be used by the lords. This is revealed through the character Rima when she asks Nitin, "Why did you not send for me earlier?" (Mehta 81). Hence, the tribal women are given a humiliating picture as Patrick Colm Hogan rightly points, "Indigenous women were "hyper-feminized," Which in this case means assimilated as a group to prostitutes, Or rather to a fantasy of the prostitute, an image of an insatiable scheming, threatening temptress." (19) Here the term 'temptress' is not seen to describe the elemental feminine force that surpasses human power but, to unfold the pathetic predicament of the subaltern women, submissive haplessly and willingly mute towards exploitation.

Another important aspect in the alluring character Rima is her music and knowledge of tribal folktales. Those are one of the predominant factors in the Tribes' culture that captivates the members even from the upper crust of the civilized world. Oral tradition of imparting knowledge and transferring tales of the past, expressing flawless love, embracing the bounties and praising the

omniscient power of Nature is done through the songs sung by the tribes. Music is an emotional and intellectual output of the tribes. Nitin, as the author portrays, he is mesmerized and delighted with the songs of the tribes.

The Tribes life is constructed around nature, love, music, dance and mythical beliefs. Love is the primal force that makes them vibrant personalities. Nitin's relationship with Rima begins not because of love, but with his inner longings to fulfill his suppressed desire and a way to escape isolation proves his originality as an outsider in the tribal world. This becomes clear when the author exposes Nitin's retrieval to his civilized life framed around materialistic passions. With that, his attraction towards a tribal life dwindles and he considers it primitive.

Nitin's decision to leave Rima, a tribal coolie's wife, which he has never realized during his sensual encounter, unravels the indifferent attitude the people in power show towards the subaltern. When he gets a promotion and summons to come back to the city, as he has conquered his emotional and physical emptiness for his refreshment, he leaves Rima. His underestimation of the strength of tribal woman, that she could be satisfied with the given money, turns wrong when Rima's emotional bindings surpass his materialistic supremacy. His failure in suppressing Rima's connection with his psyche lets guilt haunt his mind. Then he starts to believe his soul is possessed by Rima, as in the tale she has narrated. To find a remedy to redeem his soul in torment, Nitin enters another ethnic world. Hence, Nitin can be equated with the priest's character in Hawthorne's *A Scarlet Letter* in terms of his adultery and his self guilt which pricks him hard. But the difference is, Rima is not questioned for her adultery and Nitin finds a way out for his salvation in the ethnic culture.

Gita Metha depicts the rituals which the Tribes perform to solve Nitin's problem, shows their amicable nature, nature worshipping tendencies and strong belief in myth and the power of nature which could cure any problems of man. The author also presents the rituals and ceremonies the tribes perform in a process of redemption of Nitin Bose

from the magic spell of Rima. The tribes have made an idol garlanded and taken it as a procession to dissolve it in the river Narmada having a supreme power in dissolving the magic spells in the name of the tribal god with a woman's head and coiling serpents' body. They worship river Narmada as God who can cure the venomous illness of desire as they state it in their prayers and songs as the author explains the complete meaning of the ritual through Mr. Chagla' words, "'Save us from the Serpent's Venom'. Well sir the meaning of the prayer is as follows. The Serpent in question is desire. Its venom is the harm a man does when he is ignoring the power of desire." (Metha 93)

The tribal God symbolizes the power of nature to overcome the desires of men. A woman's face of the god represents the Mother- Nature and the two coiling serpent's body represents the desire. Hence, the ritual of immersing the idol into the river while the Tribal prayers surrounds the air around the river bed, "Salutaion in the morning and at night to thee, O, Narmada. Defend me from the serpent's poison." (Metha 94) as they believed when the mud idol disintegrates into the river the evil spell is also vanishing into the river. This clearly gives the real picture of the tribal people, their beliefs in myth, nature worshipping and helping qualities and emphasizes the fact that their rituals and ceremonies are entwined with nature life. Their practices have a therapeutic relief from the clutches of desire, guilt and the miseries of the civilised world. It has cured Nitin of his madness, giving a psychological redemption from his guilt.

With this, Gita Mehta has given the thumbnail image of the tribal life and culture that has been left unrecognized. Misconception about the tribal culture in the spectacle of the civilised world that has secluded the tribal culture and their buried richness is unraveled through the author's exemplary narration.

Hence, the novel *A River Sutra* partly portrays the life and culture of the Tribes and the bright side of the tribal world and the tribes to some extent, as A.K. Chaturvedi states:

Being the descendants of old civilization they are by no means undisciplined,

uncivilized and barbarous...Their way of life is characterized by simplicity and naturalness, songs and dances, laughter and humour...In a nut shell their life is governed by spontaneity, love, desire, selfless service, struggles and their belief in primordial power. (Chaturvedi 72)

The novelist delineates the tribes as the indigenous ethnic groups with unique cultural autonomy and not just the ethnic groups who are presumed to possess certain specifications as the people with primitive traits, distinctive culture, and coyness to contact with the mainstream stream community at large, geographically isolated and economically deprived. This kind of strand taken up by the mainstream world proves the legacy of the colonial thought process inculcated in the mindset of the colonised Indians without retracing and restructuring their own national past to fix discriminatory social hurdles by understanding and incorporating the cultural multitudes of free India with due respect. The writer also clearly brings out the fact that festivals and ceremonies; rituals and folktales; music and love are the guiding and controlling principles of the tribal life. It proves the unique cultural hegemony of the tribes that is scarcely addressed by other writers focusing on the mainstream society. These are the intrinsic factors that constitute the tribal customs, traditions and culture, the author presents along with the harsh realities, the Tribes face socially and economically.

Although certain characteristics of the tribes are misconstrued and used to merely add charm and an exotic touch in the novel, the cultural identity of the tribes are portrayed in a way bringing in the peripheral life to the centre, the author has represented the marginal life to occupy a central space along with the other dominant cultural patterns widely followed. As Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin quotes W. J. T. Mitchell's remarks,

It should be clear that representation, even purely "aesthetic" representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced of from political and ideological questions....If literature is a "representation of life,"



then representation is exactly the place where "life" in all its social and subjective complexity, gets into the literary work. (15)

Thus, Gita Mehta has succeeded to provide a space for the marginalized, to be recognized and establish their own identity as the indigenous ethnicities and stating the existence of the ethnic world, unnoticed beyond the mainstream society. Through her literary representation, Gita Mehta has tried to blur the national centre and margin divisions and has tried to project the multicultural ambience of India.

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