

Lord Shiva's Timelessness against Temporality: A Study of A River Sutra

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ABSTRACT--*Mythological stories are the documents of a culture as they touch almost everything we feel and experience. Myths came even before art, language, literature, religion, science and philosophy and have survived the test of time today. Therefore, they throw light on people's collective unconscious from the pre-historic to the contemporary era; hence, they are a powerful tool for understanding the way of living and psychology of a particular group. Gita Mehta, in her novel, A River Sutra, has narrated the happenings viewing them from the point of view of the myths related to Shiva and the holy river Narmada. The characters of the novel are common human beings like tribals, researchers, musicians, ascetics, pilgrims etc. for whom the Narmada and its folk tales have been the focus of the lives of such people since time immemorial. As the river is the mythological daughter of Shiva, the novel revolves around the latter's myths and his association with the earthly life. The present paper is an attempt to explore Gita Mehta's use of the elements of Shiva's timelessness in A River Sutra. Simultaneously, in the same pursuit, it aims to study the association of Shiva's mythology in the context of the contemporary Indian society and human beings at large.*

Key words/phrases--Shiva, Narmada, mythology, culture, collective unconscious, earthly

I. INTRODUCTION

Mythological stories are the essence of a culture as they touch almost everything we feel and experience. Levi-Strauss defines myth "... a kind of collective dream expressing unconscious wishes" (quoted in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty 14). Mythological characters of a particular cultural group are like the members of the super-family in which every man and woman of that culture is born. W. K. Wimsatt states, "Giambattista Vico, the Neapolitan scholar had elaborated the theory that myth was ... the only language the man was capable of in his primitive stage of development ... a genuine language with its own principle of structure and its own logic" (699-700). Myths reveal important aspects of a culture as well as people's instinctive sacred belief in them, however unempirical. The beauty of a myth is in the underlying faith not in the rationale behind it. "...the common reader does not look for intricacies of the plot or the credibility of the characters or the style. What he enjoys is the familiar elements like myths or fantasy" (Bande 143-44). They came up much before art, language, literature, religion, science and philosophy and have survived the test of time today. Therefore, myths throw light on people's shared

unconscious from the pre-historic to the contemporary era; hence, they are a powerful tool for understanding the traditions and psychology of a particular group.

From Indian point of view, wisdom, adventure and romance contained in myths are an inseparable part of the life and belief of every Indian. They are "the most fulfilling form of storytelling; they serve to document events; explain the unexplainable; to operate as manuals for morality" (Singh). Sudhir Kakar, a well-known

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psychotherapist of India opines, “Filtered though the decorous symbolism of art and folk-tale, these (Indian) myths present modern psychic conflicts and their fantasized resolutions in a socially congenial form” (422). While dreams are meant to be forgotten myths are intended to be reminisced because Indian mythology not only portrays intricate psychological conflicts but also presents satisfying solutions to certain complex issues. Faith in mythology using its stories as guideline for living is one of the chief characteristics of Indian culture. Veronica Ions comments: “India’s recorded civilization is one of the longest in the course of world history and its mythology spans the whole of that time and more” (11). Various mythological stories, handed down since ages through cautiously compiled scriptures, are meant to convey great philosophical truths, subtle facts, rules and maxims to guide our daily life, and their interpretation depends upon the sublimity of the reader.

II. MYTH AND CULTURE

Gita Mehta weaves *A River Sutra*, around mythical and ritualistic patterns because it provides an “emotional certitude” to her (Tripathi 177). The book enables the novelist to express the psychology of human mind which is constantly under the control of culture, religion, faith and desire and completely submits to it. The narrative itself implies that culture is a powerful connecting force and as E. T. Hall also affirms it “controls our lives in many unsuspected ways” (52). The problem is, Hall adds, “culture hides much more than it reveals, and...it hides most effectively from its own participants” (53). Using the myths, Mehta has tried to focus on the unknown aspects of Indian culture by concentrating on the individual as well as the common cultural background of the people. In this process, one observes that the treatment of mythology in the narrative of the novel has been blended thoroughly with the cultural aspects related to the *Narmada* and this adds a lot of weight to the novel’s aesthetic quality. Culture is “a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual” (Williams 16) and Lord *Shiva*, being an integral part of the Hindu cultural ethos, is an approach towards life for his followers.

Hindu mythology is the most democratic expression of mythic imagery. Rich in symbols, each image is a piece of an ancient metaphysical puzzle but we should not forget, “Within infinite myths lies the Eternal Truth” (Pattanaik “Seven Secrets from Hindu Calendar Arts” X). These truths are the nucleus of every *Purana* and they aim at imparting sublime, philosophical and perpetual truths. Throwing light on the purpose of myths, *Swami Vivekananda* states that the main object behind creating these myths was “...the education of mankind, and the sages who constructed them ... laid down the rules of morals for the conduct of mankind” (46). They are open to multiple interpretations. Furthermore, myths and legends maintain a parallel between the contemporary and the past life and it is this timelessness that enables us to gain the correct perspective on our own times. The myths of *Shiva* and others, not only provide “the raw material for most of India’s early art and literature,” but also give “courage and consolation in face of adversity to countless millions” (Radhakrishnan 81).

III. NARMADA: SHIVA’S DAUGHTER

Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* deals with mythological legends related to lord *Shiva* and the *Narmada*, depicted as an eternal inspiring force. The book is an assortment of stories told by an unidentified narrator. They all are centered on the theme of the river *Narmada* who is not only a backdrop but a living identity. The characters in the stories are common human beings like tribals, researchers, musicians, ascetics, pilgrims etc. for whom the

Narmada and its folk tales have been the focus of the lives of such people since time immemorial. Uma Chakravarti remarks: “Men and women in India...carry with them a sense of the past which they have internalized through the transmission of popular beliefs, mythology, tales of heroism and folklore....forming a sort of medley of ideas” (27). *A River Sutra*, is such a medley of ideas that form our base for understanding the mythological beliefs of different communities apparently having *Narmada* as a common link among them.

A River Sutra begins with the description of the *Narmada* and concludes with “The Song of the Narmada.” According to a myth, it is believed that *Narmada* was born of *Shiva*’s penance, “*Shiva*, the Creator and the Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The streams took on the form of a woman – the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her....” (*A River Sutra* 8). Lord *Shiva* blessed her, saying that she would be forever holy as well as inexhaustible. Her sprightly movements and sparkling vivacity delighted *Shiva* so much that he called her ‘*Narmada*’ which means ‘the one who gives pleasure.’ He later tied her marital strings to the ocean, “Lord of Rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors” (9). To join her bridegroom, the river flows in all those variations that delight the Ascetic *Shiva*. Parameswaran has reported:

Puranic sources variously represent *Narmada* to be the daughter of Rishi Mekala, daughter of the moon, “mind born daughter” of the Somapas, sister of Nagas, and a daughter of Surya or Tapa the Sun God, who named her *Narmada*. The myth of *Narmada*’s birth described in *A River Sutra* has been taken from *Sthala Purana*, (152).

The river “churns and bubbles around sudden rapids, eroding the grey-green stones lying on its riverbed into the oval lingams that are the symbol of *Shiva*” (174). Legends also convey that the river is considered holy due to its birth. It is often called *Shankari*, that is, the daughter of *Shankar*, Lord *Shiva* and it links mankind with the energy of *Shiva*. All the stones rolling on its bed are believed to acquire the shape of His symbols. There is a popular saying in the Hindi belt of India, ‘*Narmada Ke Kanker utte Sankar*’ which indicates that the stones of the *Narmada* get an embodied form of *Shiva*.’ The shrines located on the banks of the *Narmada* are considered pious due to their association with *Shiva*’s powerful expressions. *Amarkantak*, *Mahadeo* and *Rudra* are situated en-route of the pilgrimage and are ecological basis as depicted in *A River Sutra*.

Due to her association with Lord *Shiva*, the *Narmada* is presented as one of the holiest of the five sacred rivers – the *Ganga*, the *Yamuna*, the *Godavari* and the *Kaveri* – of India. Gita Mehta uses the description of *Padma Purana* when she narrates, “Bathing in the waters of the *Jamuna* purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the *Saraswati* in three, in the waters of *Ganges* in one but *Narmada* purifies with a single sight of her waters” (*A River Sutra* 163). Or in other words, a mere quick look of the *Narmada*’s water is presumed to purify the devotees of their sins. According to *Puranic* Scriptures, there are supposed to be “four hundred billion” (151) blessed locations on her bank. Revered as the daughter of Lord *Shiva*, the river is glorified as the most sacred pilgrimage sight. Numerous ascetics meditate on her bank “seeking through their meditations to liberate themselves from the cycle of rebirth and death” (42). “As the daughter of Lord *Shiva*, it is referred to as ‘Her Holiness’ (as a mother who nourishes surrounding human settlements) and as ‘a whore’ (one that takes away your sins),” observes Bhasha Shukla Sharma (4).

IV. TIMELESSNESS OF LORD SHIVA

Lord *Shiva* is a timeless figure who pervades the pages of *A River Sutra*. The word, ‘Shiva’ means “...that which is transcendent. Shiva means God who cannot be contained by time or space, God who needs no form” (Pattnaik *7 Secrets of Shiva* 3). Gita Mehta constantly keeps *Shiva* and *Narmada* in the consciousness of the reader. He has been described as both the Creator as well as the Destroyer of the world. “In Hinduism, the universe is thought to regenerate in cycles (every 2,160,000,000 years). Shiva destroys the universe at the end of each cycle which then allows for a new Creation” (Cartwright). Thus, *Shiva* is inert as well as dynamic, the originator as well as the annihilator, the oldest as well as the timeless youth. He has both gentle and violent manifestations. *Shiva* is the ideal renounce regardless of being a perfect lover. He removes the evil and guards all that is good. He is the everlasting basis of fertility in the living things and grants prosperity on devotees although he is an ascetic. Gita Mehta commented in an interview with C. J. S. Wallia, “The River in the novel is holy to Lord Shiva, who could be described as a great humanist God of the arts, beyond gender.” (“Gita Mehta, an Interview”).

4.1 *Shiva in Music and Art*

The music or the *Ragas* are closely related to *Shiva*'s personality. Music incarnations of *Shiva*, also known as *Natraj* and *Bhairav* representing ‘The Fire of Time,’ are discussed in detail in “The Musician’s Story.” The Musician believes that music is universal. All the great musicians recite ‘OM’/ ‘A-U-M’ before starting music practice because the “first sound of creation was Om” (*A River Sutra* 209). The author has rightly asserted that ‘Om’ or ‘A-U-M’ combines divine energies of the Trinity: creation (*Brahma Shakti*), preservation (*Vishnu Shakti*) and liberation and destruction (*Shiva Shakti*). Traditionally ‘OM/ AUM’ is considered synonymous to God. “...it is not a word, it is God Himself” (Swami Vivekanad 81).

It is believed that the universe as well as all the arts including music was created through *Shiva*'s divine dance. Hindu mythology portrays *Shiva* as a divine dancer. He loves to dance in joy as well as in sorrow and hence, he is the subject of some of the most magnificent bronze artifacts in the world. “Lord Shiva’s dance dispels the clouds of ignorance and instills a faith, hope and wisdom. It banishes the sufferings of his followers and makes them find the light inside their beings” (Pravesh Sharma). Through His dance, He creates both the visible and the invisible worlds and destroys the illusory bonds that chain every human soul. Ions, discussing the symbolism of *Shiva*'s dance states, “Dancing symbolizes both the glory of Shiva and the eternal movement of the universe, which it serves to perpetuate. But by the *Tandava* dance he accomplishes the annihilation of the world at the end of an age and its integration into the world spirit, so it represents the destruction of the illusory world of maya” (44). All the arts including music as well as entire creation owe their existence to *Shiva*. Elaborating upon the symbolism in *Shiva*'s dance, Mehta writes:

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. Shiva shook his drum. Everything started to tremble with the longing to exist. The Universe erupted into being as Shiva danced. The six mighty ragas, the pillars of music, were born from the expressions on Shiva’s face, and through their vibrations the universe was brought into existence. (*A River Sutra* 205)

In this way, the entire creation of music is *Shiva's* gift to mankind and a true musician is said to enter into a pact with *Shiva* himself. Melody of the six *ragas* maintains synchronization with the living things. "When they fuse together, they become the beat of *Shiva's* drum that brings the universe to destruction" (205). They are all males and music can never be motionless, therefore, "these six *ragas* were given six wives, six *raginis* to teach them love. Their children are the *putras*, and in this way music lives and multiplies" (206). The musician tells his daughter that a goddess supervises over each of these *ragas*.

Gita Mehta also narrates the mythological story behind the origin of the *Veena* (a classical musical instrument of Indian origin) – how the immortal love between Lord *Shiva* and Goddess *Parvati* gave birth to this melodious instrument. Goddess *Parvati* performed all great penances to achieve Lord *Shiva* until he returned her love and their timeless association gave birth to music. Mehta relates a myth in which she narrates that one morning, when *Shiva* woke up having made love to *Parvati* all night, he found the Goddess still asleep. He observed "Her breasts were like perfect globes and her slender arm rested across them, her fragile bangles sliding up and down with each breath. *Shiva* was moved to such tenderness by the sight that he created an instrument to immortalize His wife's immortal beauty – the first instrument of music, the *veena*" (*A River Sutra* 196). The musician tells his daughter that the *veena* is just not two gourds joined by a section of wood and a few wires. However, when their union results in a composition, it ought to express the melody of the soul without which a *rag* is only a dead thing. That is why it is believed as per the *Vedas* that by "playing the *veena* with the correct rhythm, keeping its notes and its character intact, a man can...attain salvation" (207). He compares music to mathematics which can help us in understanding the universe. Bringing out the holiness of Indian classical music, he also attempted to help her find beauty around her because it was not present in her mirror. He knew very well that she was rejected by the world, but he was aware that music would help her find divinity around her as well as draw solace from it. Thus, using the music legends of *Shiva*, the musician tried to make her look into *Shiva's* timelessness through the divinity of the Indian classical music – the truth that prevails even today.

The world history and the contemporary era are replete with the negativities of bloodbath, terror and aggression. However, the entity of music has not only survived through all such ordeals, but it has also kept its pace with the modern society with its novel formats and experimentations. The Indian music industry is doing wonders today. This survival owes it to its immortal but aesthetic quality of providing solace and pleasure to a restless mind.

4.2 Asceticism

Lord *Shiva* is described as an ascetic in the novel in various references. *A River Sutra* is again a witness to the *Shiva-Narmada* myth recreated in "The Minstrel's Story," a tale of an ascetic Naga Baba who belonged to the clan of "the martial ascetics, the ones they call the Naga sadhus, the Protectors" (*A River Sutra* 231). He rubs ash over his hair and body in the ascetic's bath to increase the power of his meditations and worships Lord *Shiva* as 'the Annihilator of the Universe' and as 'the Lord of Death' in all ferocious forms because one could not be a Naga Baba without undergoing the severest test of penance and austerity. The ascetic rescues a little girl from prostitution on the night of *Shiva* (the festival of *Shivaratri*) and gave her the name "Uma" which symbolises "peace in the night" (241) and literally means in Sanskrit, "oh don't do," through a purifying ritual. He told the little girl, "The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become the daughter of the Narmada" (254). He

also trains her in reading, writing and singing the songs of the *Narmada*. However, he deserts the girl in search of some higher enlightenment and the same Naga Ascetic later appears as Prof V.V. Shankar and Uma has grown up now and has become a famous River Minstrel. The analogy is obvious that if the *Narmada* is born of *Shiva's* penance, Uma is definitely born of the penance of the Naga Baba alias Prof Shankar. When with folded hands, she sings to the water of the Narmada, "You are twice born/ Once from penance, Once from love" (275) she refers of the *Narmada* but it is true of herself too. Uma also has two births like the *Narmada*. Uma Parmesawaran opines, "...Naga Baba has always been a teacher figure (for Uma) and any student is intellectually birthed and shaped by a teacher..." (154). Later at the end of the novel when she appears as a famous River Minstrel and completes her chanting of the hymns of the *Narmada*, Professor Shankar questions her, "Where do you go from here?" She replies, "I am making my way to the coast." Shankar laughs and says, "To find a husband, like the Narmada found her Lord of Rivers?" (*A River Sutra* 280). The novelist suggests that she goes towards the sea coast just as the *Narmada* flows into the Arabian Sea. Professor Shankar's name is one of *Shiva's* names and that of *Shankaracharya* whose hymns to the *Narmada* are repeated in the novel. So the focus of the story is *Shiva* and the Naga Baba and Professor Shankar are unmistakably allusions to the great Lord.

The *Narmada*, a representation of *Shiva's* eternity, is also a symbol of asceticism and pursuit of higher knowledge. The holy river, even today, is a witness to thousands of ascetics and even non-ascetics performing penance on her sides and knowledge seekers analyzing facts for some higher understanding. One can observe devotees doing 2600 km arduous spiritual exercise of long *parikramas* (devotional physical pilgrimage on foot of a pious area, like a holy river) all the way from the river's point of origin at *Amarkantak* to its culmination into the Arabian Sea and back, just as the river minstrel from "The Minstrel's Story" makes her way to the ocean to find her "Lord of Rivers" (*A River Sutra* 280). Out of five holy rivers of India, "it is the only one which has the tradition of being circumambulated from source to sea and back, on a pilgrimage or yatra" ("Narmada Parikrama ..."). Here is a fact worth mentioning: a retired Indian army captain, K K Venkatraman, turned ascetic and he performed the *parikrama* in 1988 and shared his spiritual experiences in his English translation *Walking with the Immortals* (2017). The book records many spiritual factors of this ritual practiced since time immemorial, the key one is the "unfolding of the divine grace that comes in abundance for the welfare of a person who sacrifices all the worldly comforts, takes up the dharma of a sanyasi (renunciate) and goes about walking around the banks of the river with total faith and surrender to Mother Narmada (Rajan). The *Narmada* being *Shiva's* manifestation, His timeless lineage of austerity is experienced through such pilgrimages.

V. CONCLUSION

Being all-pervading, Lord *Shiva* dwells in everyone as pure consciousness. His myths throw light on the collective cultural ethos and psychological traits of the race from the pre-historic to the contemporary era. On one side, He is the symbol of divinity while on the other, He is as temporal as any other man with all human tendencies. He lives in the heights of Mt. *Kailash* with his lovely wife, *Parvati*, two sons, *Ganesha* and *Kartikeya* and his bull *Nandi*, epitomizing the ideals of man-woman relationship and of a mundane family existence. *Shiva's* prevailing contrasts guides us to maintain a balance between the worldly and the spiritual. His

myths perform the mighty task of uniting the various parts of the country as he is worshipped with equal devotion throughout India. “Indeed, the uses of these myths perform a significant role in locating old and new meanings of human existence and the universe” (Sukrita Paul Kumar). He is a family man as well as a renouncer, and a severe ascetic. He is a dancer and a source of all music in the universe. “The Rudra form of Lord Shiva denotes ‘the wild one’ or the fierce god. Yet, Shiva is also known as Sambhu, or the one who causes happiness” (Pravesh Sharma). Thus, He is an embodiment of an irascible person with a compassionate heart – a combination that can be viewed in many humans. His myths inspire us to think, feel and imagine and help us define humanity each time we read them as He is the most human of all Gods and thus, is an epitome of the strange contrast of His timelessness and temporality. “There is no god and demon outside us, no hero or villain in the past. It's all here and now, in our heart and mind, and in the hearts and minds of people around us” (“Devlok with Devdutt Pattnaik”).

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