



## TRANSFORMED IDENTITIES OF THE INDIAN PRINCES A STUDY OF GITA MEHTA'S *RAJ*

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### ABSTRACT

'Change is the law of life; consistency is the virtue of fools' says, Confucius. Along with time one has to change and try to reconcile with the changed circumstances for a peaceful survival on the earth. Cultural identities sometimes come from histories and in course of time, they undergo constant transformation. Colonisation has been resulted in transforming cultural identities of both the coloniser and the colonised. Indian society has witnessed such cultural assimilation, acculturation, deculturation and loss of identity with British colonisation. The Indian history is decorated with tales of princes and the princess and their flamboyant lifestyles. However, their life style, powers had come to an end when India got independence. In addition, they lost their identities as *maharajas and maharanis, nawabs, begums, nizams* after the princely states merged into united India. After realising their powers stripped away, some of them have managed to become powerful businessmen and politicians, others are struggling to stay afloat, having sold off piles of their gems, jewels, entire fleets, etc., living a life as private citizens. The present article brings out the cultural conflicts between the princes and the British and the subsequent loss of autocracy and identities of the royal Indian princes in the independent India. Gita Mehta's '*Raj*' delineates the story of a Rajput princess Jaya who represents the class of princes turn into politicians of democratic India. Her character resembles the present influential politicians like Maharani Gayatri Devi, former M.P., Smt. Vasundhara Raje the present Chief Minister of Rajasthan State, Chhavi Rajawat India's first and youngest village Sarpanch and so on.

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History unveils the profound social, religious, economic, political and cultural transition that many nations have undergone since long. They have discarded some traditional practices while adopting others, catering to new circumstances as conglomeration of different cultures, emerging as new cultures. The advent of colonization caused the process of accepting and adopting alien cultures, which has acquired global identity. India which had been the 'jewel' in the imperial crown of the British

was the first of Britain's colonies to gain independence. The British penetrated into it as traders and in time had become the rulers of India. Resultantly, contact with the white man brought drastic changes in Indian society, which is still alive today. They left strong imprints of their philosophy, culture and language, which have been integrated into the Indian lifestyle.

The encounter between the British and the Indian princes got immense significance in the

Indian history. The native princes, who had ruled over a number of states within British India, were the true embodiment of India's rich culture, tradition, valour, pride and governance. Coming to their plight, they had a tragic disillusionment during and after the British rule having undergone different experiences, like being robbed economically, political uprootment and deculturation. When the British decided to quit India, the native Raja's suddenly realised their anomalous position. Their treaties with the British monarch, which had sustained their illusion of safety, now stood abrogated. They were not only deserted by the White but also alienated from their own people.

After independence all princely states were compelled to merge either in Pakistan or in India. Merely 565 princely states were merged into the united India by accepting the privy purses given by the Indian government, which were also terminated during Mrs. Gandhi's government in 1971.

The British had stuffed them (the princes) and burnished their fine feathers, but as princes they were dead... and if not actually dead, then anyway buried alive in a cage the British had never attempted really to open.(1)

Gita Mehta is one of the prominent Indian English women novelists, a reporter, a documentary filmmaker and also the daughter of a famous Indian freedom fighter Biju Patnaik.

Her first novel *Raj* is a thorough and colourful historical story that delineates the life journey of a young woman born into Indian nobility under the British Raj. It also reveals the facts about early Indian struggle for independence, and its affects on a slim segment of aristocratic society. Mehta has picturised the colonial experience of Indians with reference to the glamour and elegant lives of the Indian princes.

*Raj* being a historical novel is the result of her long and intense research and study that reveals her interest in Indian themes and keen observation about the idiosyncrasies of both men and women of Indian aristocratic society. She has blended historical material with imagination without distorting the historical facts. She has provided authenticity to her novel by citing quotations from proceedings of the

Indian National Congress and speeches of National leaders. This novel mirrors the pitiful lives of the Indian princes who desperately try to keep their identities in the present Indian society.

*Raj* mainly focuses on the relation between the Indian princes and the British during the colonial era. In an interview to Vibhuti Patel she speaks of the background of the novel as a historical observation about the relationship between the Indian princes and the British rulers:

The pleasure of writing this book was that I read so much history. I found this period of Indian history riveting because the quantum leaps then were so huge. The princes were the first to fight the British in the '20s that capacity was lost between 1920 and 1939 they had the treasure of Indian in their hands. They blew because they could not agree to the norms required by the British. I hope history in the book is carried recently-there shouldn't be a dichotomy between the narrative and the history. I wanted the book to be an easy read. But wherever historical figure speak I segued into their actual words. (2)

The novel renders a turbulent period in Indian history that spans the period from Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee to the violent and bloody civil wars for independence. Gita Mehta demonstrates her keen insight of the historical, political, cultural complexities of India, the British and the royal India under the British Raj. The novel portrays the important events with which the new century set in, the famine of 1898, the British domination and their interference in the affairs of the princely state, emergence of Gandhian thought, freedom struggle, the two World Wars, awakening national and democratic ideals among people, independence and merging of princely states. The novel besides presenting socio-political and cultural events has also depicted the romance of a woman's existence in India.

The plot of the novel reveals to us the development of the character Jaya Devi who has been thrown into the fray by a relentless fate that takes away her father, brother, husband and son. Jaya Devi, the heroine of the novel, is an intelligent,

beautiful and compassionate daughter of Jai Singh, the Maharaja of Balmer state. Jaya plays the roles of both a mute observer and an active participant. As an observer, she has seen the lives of her father, brother and husband who had fallen prey to the circumstances and were crushed in the double game of the British. As an active member, she withstands against the indissoluble realities and adversaries. She does not lose her courage after her husband's death, and acts as Regent to her son. She accepts the changes that came with the changing times.

The novel has been structurally divided into four books in which the phases of Jaya's life is revealed with historic flavour. The four chapters are "Balmer", "Sirpur", "Maharani", "Regent", all these give us the information about her varied experiences in her life. The novel comprises of an epilogue and aftermath along with these four chapters. The first book reveals Jaya's childhood, death of her brother and her father that led to her marriage with Dowagar Maharani's grandson Pratap Singh. The second book picturises her brother-in-law Maharaja Victor's suicide and her accession of throne as a Maharani. The third book portrays her personal and public life with her husband, birth of her son Arjun and death of her husband. The last book deals with her holding charge as a Regent to her son, the Second World War, her son's death and the Indian independence merging of princely states. The novel ends with her resolution to participate in the general elections. The narrative concludes with the total destruction of the Indian princes' identity with the passing of the bill against privy purses.

The present novel *Raj* gives us an ample account of the encounter between the princes and the British simultaneously, enumerating the grandiose picture of the princely existence. Erin Soderberg observes:

Through her story, Mehta not only weaves together elegant language and colourful picture of Indian culture, but also points a picture of Indian colonial life from an Indian perspective. (3)

The British had different treaties with different states. These treaties welcomed changes and also caused economic exploitation in the royal states. Balmer also had a treaty with the British that

opened frequent visits of the Europeans to Balmer and brought about changes and developments as it is observed in the novel:

The horse has been replaced by the car, the elephant by the train, the bird by the flying machine. Magic becomes reality every day, and the magicians are not gods but men. (4)

These treaties demanded the princes' frequent visits to Europe while offering money, gold and gifts to the English. In the novel Raja Jai Singh attends Victoria's Diamond Jubilee ceremony with gifts and money. We also witness George V coronation in Delhi and all these ceremonies and functions were planned in order to extract money from the princes. The political intention behind all these gifts and money was the British intention of exploiting the Indian princes and the princes' intention of impressing the British to protect their thrones.

The Indian royalty was robbed more by the British and their treasury went in the form of gifts and taxes to them. The economic exploitation of the British is revealed in the words of a noble from the Kingdom in Jai Singh's durbar:

Britain cripples us with her greed. Half of India's money goes to fatten England. The other half is spent on an army in which no Indian can be an officer.... The Angrez are weaving a spider's web of power from which we will never disentangle ourselves. (5)

The British never paid heed to the words of the princes during the famine and drought periods in their states. Jai Singh who goes to England for getting relief funds for his state, returns empty-handed. Instead of helping the princes the British imposed more tax on the lands. Raja Jai Singh laments that "when British Indian starves, royal India dies". (6)

The dawn of western education, turned many Indian princes to Anglophiles and they went to great extents to despise their own culture and tradition. The British strategy to make all the Indian princes to pro-British was the main intention behind the western education. Thus Zareer Masani in his work *Indian Tales of The Raj* commented that:

Colonial education, as preached by Macaulay and practised by the Christian missions, may have neglected the rural masses and denied India's indigenous cultural heritage; but it also created its own nemesis in the shape of a new class of a westernised Indians who quickly outgrew the clerical role for which they were reared. (7)

In the novel Tikka, son of Jai Singh has been sent to London and had also arranged for an English tutor Captain Osborne to teach Tikka the English language and their customs and manners. Tikka evolves as a westernised Indian prince who experiences a kind of aversion towards India. Therefore we often witness strong verbal fights between Jaya and Tikka and Jaya says, "You hate India and it's all the English man's fault". (8)

Prince Pratap and Maharaja Victor the grandsons of Dowager Maharani of Sirpur are true anglophiles. Prince Pratap, Jaya's husband prefers to spend his time in London, and develops a sort of contempt for India and Indians. The Sirpurs are the devoted subjects to the British and are considered as 'British lapdogs'.

The anglicised Indian princes were given more privileges by the British who enjoyed a special status and received superior treatment among the other states. They thought that the English language and education not only gave them special status but also infinite power to them. Jai Singh's intention to arrange Jaya's match with a Sirpur prince is to win British approval since the Sirpurs are the devoted subjects to the British.

Maharaja Victor, brother of Pratap, is more commonly known as the godson to the Queen Empress of India. His passion for Hollywood movies earned him a designation as 'Hollywood maharaja'. Prince Pratap on the other hand transforms himself totally as an Englishman in his lifestyle and prefers to spend most of his time in London. His English education turns him against his own traditions and ethical values and he does not appreciate his wife's nativeness, and he arranges Mrs. Modi to teach her the western mode of life and the French language. He wants his wife to become a fashionable Indian princess and he does not mind his wife mingling

with white men. When the Prince of Wales visits Sirpur Pratap permits Jaya to play Polo with the prince which he thinks that it could improve his own reputation among the other princes. Jaya gets shocked with her husband's western ideology yet is suggested by Lady Modi to attract her husband:

If you want to attract your husband, princess, you must make the British envy Pratap, not patronize him. You must make yourself into a woman who is desirable to white man. (9)

The article Frame and Fortune by Russel Harris gives the details about the Maharani Siniti Devi of Cooch Behar. She brought her experiences in a book called *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess in London* (1921) in which she anguishes how the English language has played a hazardous role in neglecting native languages:

The Maharaja did what he and the government thought best at the time by sending our boys to England for a thorough English education, but afterwards the boys felt their lack of knowledge of the Indian languages very much. They did not know Sanskrit and Urdu and found it difficult to speak freely and fluently in the Cooch Behar language. (10)

As a political strategy the British used to invite the rebellious Indian princes to London, and used their woman as a pretext to dethrone these Indian kings. Their affairs with the white woman brought scandalous remarks and some of the Indian princes tried to marry white women at the risk of their thrones. Both Pratap and Victor run after European girls, Victor even prepares to marry an American film actress Cora Hart at the risk of the Sirpur throne. Finally, Victor commits suicide when she rejects his marriage proposal. Prince Pratap also courts Esme Moore, a globe dancer and completely neglects his wife Jaya. But Jaya helps him out from the clutch of his affair with Esme Moore by offering her money.

During the two World Wars many of the Indian princes went in support of the British and many of them had even sacrificed their lives. In the novel Jaya's brother Tikka, and her son Arjun had participated in the World War I and World War II.

Tikka joins the regiment despite his father's disapproval. Jai Singh is anguished when Tikka prepares to leave for war:

Today the Empire takes the dearest part of myself. This is the armet of sovereignty-symbol of my eyes and my protection. (11)

The novel besides supplying the elegant picture of the Indian princes also portrays the glimpses of Indian National Movement. Raj describes the relations between the British and the Indian princes, between the nationalists and the princes, between the British and the nationalists. The characters Mrs. Roy and Arun Roy, the nationalist leaders have considerable amount of influence on Jaya. Mrs. Roy is engaged as Jaya's English tutor and through her Jaya has learned about the Indian national movement and has met major national leaders. Jaya's national feeling is increased by Mrs. Roys's inspired words such as:

Shall I tell you why I wear this? Because it is woven in my own country, not shipped as raw cotton to the millowners of Manchester and Lancaster. Each time I buy a garment like this I put food into the mouth of Indians. (12)

At the same time we see cunning and selfish national leaders through Arun Roy's character. He is moved by the noble ideas of nationalist, exploits Jaya physically and takes advantage of her unsatisfactory marital life and molests her. He instigates all the Balmer people to go against their own rulers.

The cultural exchange and mutual respect between the colonised and the coloniser is seen though the character Mr. James Osborne who is initially fascinated by Jaya at first, but he does not take advantage of his position as Resident in Balmar. He without compromising his British self, helps her as a true friend.

All the treaties of the princes with the British were broken when the British left India. The British had never justified their treaties with the princes and had left them to their desperate fate. The princes accepted the new circumstances that came along with the end of colonisation. They realised that they could not get back to their feudal past except by accepting the changes. The Balmer

state merges into the Indian union after Jaya signs on the Instruments of the Accession. As Jai Singh says in his durbar:

We can never return to what we once were. If we are not prepared to change, we will perish. (13)

The novel ends with Sardar Patel, The Deputy Prime Minister of India, who was behind the task of merging the princely state in to the Indian union who feels that:

The real task has just begun...we have to weave new fabrics into old materials; we have to make sure that simultaneously the old and the new are integrated into a pleasing whole-a design that would fit well into the pattern of India. (14)

These words are apt to the conclusion of the novel. It reflects the present plight of the colonised who were driven way from their own past and at the same time they could not tune with the colonisers. At present the colonised have taken a middle path by integrating both the coloniser and the colonised ideology in their lives. The novel ends with Jaya's participation in election by accepting the changes in the new India.

The British colonisation had annihilated the princes in all ways; in fact the princes did not get anything in return but left as penniless Rajas in their own land. Thus Jai Singh satirically comments on the plight of the princes under the British, with reference to the four arms of kingship:

*Saam*, I tended my people, putting their survival above their vanities of an empire, and I was called seditious. *Daan*, I provided for the state, and my only; son was taken hostage by the Angrez. Dand, how can I ve just when I cannot give sanctuary to those who fight injustice in the British Raj or try a man who has the ear of the Angrez?...*Bhed*? intrigue, flattery, imitation-the weakest arm of monarchy. This is what it means to be an Indian king in the British Empire. (15)

Unlike Jaya there are some of the other princes who are unable to accept the new identities brought an end to their lives, for example Raja Heroji in *The Princes* (Malgonkar) who gets himself killed by a

tiger and Victor in *Private Life of an Indian Prince* (Mulk Raj Anand) who becomes insane. This reveals their inability to accept the changing circumstances. But Abhay in *The Princes* represent the class of Indian princes who are living as common people and Jaya represent the present politician class in India.

Accepting anything new is a natural phenomena but choosing the best always matters. We cannot restrict ourselves not accepting the 'other' in the present globalization period but solution for encounters always lies in integration. In the present situation where People neither completely comply to the norms of the alien culture nor with their indigenous culture, but create a culture of their own. In the words of Ashcroft :

...it is not possible to return to or to rediscover an absolute pre-colonial cultural purity, not is it possible to create national or regional formations entirely independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise. (16)

Today any country has a mixtured and shared cultural society. People are adopting and exchanging different cultures, ideologies and values according to their comforts. Therefore, there is no fixed identity or culture. And thus creating hybridity in all perspectives. Homi Bhabha suggests that for Fannon:

The bearer of a hybrid identity...and they construct their culture from the national text translated into modern western forms of information technology, language, dress... transforming the meaning of colonial inheritance into the labratory signs of free people of the future. (17)

The idea of modernity through the colonial encounters could be seen as both a disturbing phenomenon for traditional cultures as well as facilitation for a fruitful exchange of ideas for a healthy hybridity of shared perspectives. Thus instead of intra-national and international Darwinism let us symbolically call it as 'amphibianism'.

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