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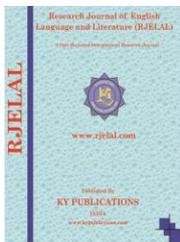
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INTERPRETING 'INDIA' THROUGH GITA MEHTA'S *RIVER SUTRA* AND ANITA DESAI'S *JOURNEY TO ITHACA*

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Abstract

River Sutra and *Journey to Ithaca* are the two prominent novels in Indian writing in English. Both the novels are written by women novelists. Both the novels discuss the theme of Indian mythology, spirituality and cultural aspects of India and is at the centre of the narrative. In *River Sutra* Gita Mehta presents the Indian religious philosophy and cultural aspects of India. Indian culture is all encompassing and is of accommodating nature. Many religions flourished in India. Indian culture is enriched with the varied religious philosophies. This paper attempts to highlight the ways in which the theme of Indian mythology, spirituality, renunciation and cultural legacy is presented by both the novelists.

Keywords- Indian mythology, spirituality, Indian culture, renunciation, river myth, folklore, Narmada

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Gita Mehta's *River Sutra* and Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* are among the two important novels in Indian writing in English. Both Anita Desai and Gita Mehta have significant novels to their credit. Both of them raised issues related women in India and their development. Gita Mehta's novel *River Sutra* primarily focuses on cultural legacy of India. The prime focus of her writing is on history, culture, folklore and religion. Her prose writing encompasses social, cultural issues in India. In *River Sutra*, Desai has presented a panoramic view of India, it's rich cultural heritage, the holy river Narmada and the beautiful tree plantation at Assam. The various stories takes us to various locales giving a beautiful and serene picture of India. The setting of the novel is the Vindhya ranges and the beautiful Narmada river surrounding. There is beautiful description of different trees in the jungle like Silk Cotton, Mango, Banyan, Peepal and the mud path in

the jungle which is only used by monkeys, black Buck and wild Boar.

The protagonist in *River Sutra* and *Journey to Ithaca* have two different viewpoints towards renunciation and the way of life. In *River Sutra*, the protagonist is a nameless retired civil servant, a bureaucrat who is tired of the 'hustle and bustle' of city life so seeks for a tranquil place. Though he talks about the last phase 'Vanprastha' he later desires to return to the city life. He is indecisive towards his stand at the later phase of life. In '*Journey to Ithaca*' Matteo is contrary to the protagonist bureaucrat in *River Sutra* as Matteo has decided and is determined towards his decision in his life, his path towards his aim was full of difficulties but he doesn't give up. He has chosen the path of spirituality and comes to India to search the truth of life. Though his wife Sophie tries to convince him to return to their own country Germany as she chooses practicality over spirituality but he does not changes his course of life

and ultimately goes to the Himalayan mountains to seek the truth. Mehta and Desai has shown India in their novels representing rich spiritual and cultural tradition. Mehta has shown the cultural and spiritual aspect of India. Desai takes the readers through India – various ashrams, religious places and temples. It is like a panoramic view of Indian spirituality. The novel also has elaborate thought on rich cultural and spiritual heritage of India.

River Narmada is at the centre of the narrative in *River Sutra*. Narmada River is considered as the holiest river in India, and it has got mythological significance. The nature around river Narmada has got ample significance. Narmada River takes a long route from Amarkantak to the sea covering around eight hundred miles long distance. Narmada River is at the center of the narrative Desai projects the significance of the river through various characters in the novel. The surrounding of the river is crowded and is surrounded by many devotees, pilgrims, priests, Naga Sadhus and even the researchers. River Narmada and its bank has attracted by many and is a favoured site for pilgrims, priests, and archeologists as it has rich cultural past and mythological significance. Rivers have significant place in the life of all human beings. Rivers in India have mythological significance and hence they are worshipped in India and are considered as goddess. Many rivers have references in Indian mythological scriptures. In India, rivers have healing powers and give solace to the ailing people who comes to the banks of holy rivers. Mehta describes the glory of the Narmada River with all its splendor. Monks, ascetics, courtesan, bandits, minstrels, scientists, Naga Baba are the characters come to the banks of Narmada to find remedy to their problems. According to the Indian mythology, Narmada River is born out of Shiva's penance. Narmada is considered as the daughter of Shiva. Narmada river nurturers the human beings irrespective of their caste, creed, richness or poverty. The sacred congregation 'Kumba Mela' is a tradition and religious activity followed in India. Thousands of pilgrims, sadhus, Nagas attend the Mela and is very auspicious for the pilgrims. Various beliefs and folklore associated with the river Narmada are brought out through the characters in the novel as death at the holy site of

Narmada frees a man from his sins. Master Mohan dies by committing suicide in the holy Narmada River as he has belief in the holy tradition of the river.

Music has great significance in Indian mythology. Dance and music has got religious significance in India. They both are considered to be a medium to reach god. String, wind instruments as well as drums and cymbals have references in the ancient cultural texts. Music is considered to be divine. Mehta also discusses the four ashrams of life followed in Indian culture. Brahmacharya, Grihasth, Vanprashtha and Sanyasa are the four ashrams in Hindu religion. These four ashrams help an individual to lead a meaningful life. The novel *River Sutra* reflects the religious harmony of India. Various religions are fused together and the citizens live amicably. Mehta describes various religious systems, beliefs, practices followed in India. The multiple invasions in India British, Dutch, Portuguese, Mughals have added to the cultural dimension of India.

The bureaucrat and Tariq Mia's discussion in the novel *River Sutra* presents significant religious thoughts and a philosophy of leading a meaningful life. The discussion between them is not restricted to any particular religion but it is amalgamation of different religions and philosophies. This also show the all-encompassing and accommodating nature of Indian culture where all religions flourished and nurtured freely. There are references to Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, *Mahabharata*, *Shakuntala* and *The Cloud Messenger* by Kalidasa – all these works reminds about the cultural legacy of India. The characters in the novel are representatives of different religions and are from different circumstances which brings out the significance of the river Narmada and the significance of Indian culture. The character like Naga Baba alias Prof. Shankar experiences both the lives, as a archeologists and as a ascetic Naga Baba. The novel *River Sutra* presents both the mythological and also the scientific point of views. Prof. Shankar shows the scientific aspect and rich historical past of Narmada River.

In 'Journey to Ithaca', Laila, the Mother, Matteo and Sophie undertake spiritual quest. Matteo's wife Sophie accompanies him on his spiritual quest. For Desai, life is an unending quest and stresses on the enrichment of the inner experience of life rather than the outward, external rituals of religion. The characters in the novel roam from place to place in finding the right place to attend spiritual fulfilment. Matteo is a seeker of truth and is on a quest for nourishment of soul. The couple went to Mumbai (Bombay), where they met Mr. Pierre and Mr. Pandey who took them to a small room of a spiritual guru. Matteo and Sophie were told about a yogi by both of them. The novel gives elaborate description of the condition of the ashram in India. There were needy, poor, hungry people at the ashrams, the dirty, dubious ashrams were creating a oblique image of India. Sophie does not believe in the rituals at the ashrams and criticized it. She is astonished to see patients attending the pooja at the asram whereas they should be taken to the hospital.

In 'Journey to Ithaca', Sophie's character presents the scientific and practice attitude towards life. She advocates practical view but at the end of the novel she follows her husband. The author does not tell us the course of action of her life. Sophie, after arriving in India, insists on going to Goa as she wanted to visit it and Matteo too agreed and promises her about visiting Goa. Matteo does not like their visit to Goa. Sophie on the contrary likes the visit and the company of Francis, Marc, Peggy and Gusteva. Hippie camps, wine, drugs and enjoyment without any were the things in Goa which Matteo does not like as there was no spiritual gain. Matteo and Sophie were told many things about India by Francis, Marc, Peggy and Gusteva like a sadhu living with the lioness, the death of a woman who came to India to achieve divine power. There is also the reference to the Kumbh Mela. The quest for Matteo began with the reading of *The Journey to the East*. The reading of the book took Matteo to various places in India, goes through various experiences and at the end he chooses his path towards salvation. For Matteo, the path is clear and well decided, he doesn't gives up, where as in *River Sutra*, the bureaucrat narrator is skeptical and is indecisive

towards his decision of renunciation. In both the novels *River Sutra* and *Journey to Ithaca* there is a journey into the realm of spirituality and discussion about leading meaningful life. Gita Mehta takes us from Indian mythology, Indian cultural legacy, folklore, primitive tribal life of Assam, the sacred Narmada River and the city life of Kolkata. She gives a panoramic view of India in *River Sutra*. India, which she portrays appears to be imaginary to some extent as compared to the present but certainly the beautiful description of the jungle, the life of the tribal people, the guest house - all takes the readers on the journey of India.

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