A River Sutra Study Guide

A River Sutra by Gita Mehta

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Contents

Introduction

In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta took a new direction in her writing. In her previous works, *Karma Cola* (1979) and *Raj* (1989), Mehta had focused on the interactions between India and the Western world. In *A River Sutra*, Mehta changes focus and explores the diversity of cultures within India. To accomplish this, Mehta presents seemingly unconnected stories in her novel, stories about Hindu and Jain ascetics, courtesans and minstrels, diamond merchants and tea executives, Muslim clerics and music teachers, tribal folk beliefs and the anthropologists who study them. What binds these stories together are two things: the Narmada River and a "sutra." "Sutra," as Mehta explains in the glossary to her novel, means "literally, a thread or string." In the case of her novel, the "sutra" is the theme of love that runs through all the stories, threading them loosely together. The Narmada River stands for another type of "sutra." This river, known as the holiest in India, threads together the diverse people who live on its shores or who come to worship at its waters. The term "sutra" also refers to an Indian literary form, so in the novel, each story is in itself a "sutra" that presents a message. Every time the nameless narrator tries to tease out the meaning of one "sutra," he encounters another pilgrim or lost soul with another story to tell.

Critics have responded positively to *A River Sutra*. They remark on both the simplicity of the storytelling style□a style as old as India□and the complexity of the themes the novel explores. As the reviewer from the *Washington Post Book World* noted, the stories leave the reader with "the sense that things are richer and more meaningful than they seem, that life is both clear and mysterious, that the beauty and the horror of this world is both irreducible and inexplicable." Critics further praise how Mehta introduces Western readers to a world they have not fathomed. *A River Sutra*, however, suggests that the "sutra," or the theme of love, running through the stories can connect all people together.

Author Biography

Gita Mehta was born in New Delhi, India in 1943 to parents who were very involved in the movement for Indian independence. In 1943, India was still a British colony. Three weeks after Mehta was born her father was jailed for supporting the nationalist cause. At the age of three, Mehta was left to be raised in a convent in Kashmir so that her mother could better aid her jailed husband. After India gained its independence, Mehta's father went into politics.

Unlike her traditionally educated mother, Mehta earned a university degree at Cambridge in England. There she met her husband, Sonny, who is currently the editor-in-chief at the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf in New York City. As a journalist, Mehta covered such events as the Bangladesh war of 1971. Mehta has written and filmed several television documentaries. Her first novel, *Karma Cola*, published in 1979, was an answer, in part, to Westerners' insistence that as a woman in a sari Mehta was an expert on India. The book humorously examines India's enchantment with American materialism and America's attraction to Indian mysticism. The quest for either, said Mehta in an interview for *Harper's Bazaar*, is a "kind of lobotomy." Her next book, *Raj*, a historical novel, was published in 1989. In this novel, Mehta documents the divisions between Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh Indians and their struggle against British rule. The novel spans almost 100 years of Indian history, from 1897□the height of British imperial power□to 1970, the year that India, by breaking with the tradition of rulership, became more truly democratic. In 1993, Mehta published *A River Sutra*. In this novel, Mehta pays scant attention to how India has interacted with Western traditions. Rather, she focuses on how the stories and traditions of diverse Indians□Muslims, Jains, Hindus, and tribal peoples□ have been interwoven. The India she writes in this novel seems foreign and strange to Western readers. Sensing this, Mehta included a glossary of terms to aid the uninitiated. In 1997, Mehta published *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India*, a work of nonfiction. In this collection of essays, Mehta explores the collisions between technological modernism and ancient traditions in present- day India. Mehta currently divides her time among New York, London, and India.

Plot Summary

The Narrator's Story

The loose collection of stories that comprises Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* are connected by three things: the Narmada River, the theme of love, and the narrator's inability to understand the various tales of the human heart he hears. Mehta gives very little information about this narrator. The reader never knows his name, much less the secrets of his heart. It is through this nameless man that the reader learns the stories of uncommon pain and joy that the narrator has collected during his tenure as the manager of a government rest house on the banks of the Narmada River.

The Monk's Story

Ashok is the first of many people to tell the narrator his story of love. The monk is probably only thirty years old, and yet he has already tired of a world that offered him anything he wanted: extreme wealth, a loving family, and the opportunity to better other people's lives through charity. The monk has willingly decided to become a monk in a religion where, as other monks tell him, he will suffer almost constant pain. Ashok believes these sacrifices are worthwhile because in his renunciation, as the same monks tell him, he "will be free from doubt."

The narrator cannot understand Ashok's adherence to a religious order where the highest level of enlightenment will probably come, as Ashok's father says, from "starving himself to death." The narrator shudders to think that one day he will see Ashok's body, just as he has seen so many other priests' bodies, as a corpse floating down the Narmada River. After listening to the monk's story, the story's meaning is still a mystery to the narrator. The old Muslim mullah Tariq Mia must finally explain that the Jain monk's story was about "The human heart. . .Its secrets." His frozen heart thawed by "compassion. . .for the human helplessness that linked us all," the monk finally feels connected to the world. His renunciation of the world, paradoxically, is his celebration of that connection.

The Teacher's Story

As Tariq Mia seeks to enlighten the narrator about the true meaning of the monk's story, he offers him another story, one of a teacher's love for his student. This story, like the monk's, is meant to show the secrets of the human heart. A music teacher, Master Mohan fell in love with the sound of a blind pupil's perfect voice. Imrat's music represented a haven to Master Mohan whose own life had been filled with disappointment. Braving the wrath of his family, who despise him, he adopts the boy and nurtures his gift. He selflessly helps to further the boy's singing career, seeking no financial gain for himself. Master Mohan's greedy wife is outraged by her husband's actions. Out of revenge and greed she arranges for the boy to sing for a wealthy patron.

Wary of the man's motives and seeking to protect the boy, Master Mohan had refused the rich man's request for a private concert. Tragically, Master Mohan's instincts were correct. As Imrat sings his devotional Muslim songs in front of the wealthy man, the man slits the boy's throat. Hearing Master Mohan's tale, Tariq Mia can only assume that the "great sahib" killed the boy so that Imrat could share his voice with no one else. Devastated, Master Mohan makes his pilgrimage to the Muslim saint Amir Rumi's tomb, where Imrat had dreamed of singing. Instead of going back to his wife and children, Master Mohan throws himself in front of a train. If the rich man killed the boy so that no one would hear his voice again, Master Mohan kills himself because he cannot imagine life without the boy. A world without the boy's purity of soul and voice is not worth living in.

The Executive's Story

Soon after hearing this story, the narrator meets Nitin Bose, a young tea executive. Apparently insane, Nitin hands the narrator his diary and implores him to read it. Once a careless executive living the high life in Calcutta, Nitin had accepted the stewardship of a tea plantation nestled in the Himalayan foothills. Isolated, he began reading and rereading the legends of the Puranas, collections of legends dating from between the first century B.C. to the sixth century A.D. He was delighted to learn of the "mythological tales dealing with the very area in which my tea estate was situated, legends of a vast underground civilization stretching from these hills all the way to the Arabian Sea, peopled by a mysterious race half human, half serpent." As he confided to his diary, however, he didn't for a moment believe the legends.

After two years, however, the legends Nitin had read began to merge with his real experience. Night after night he imagined that one of the half-serpent women seduced him. For a long time, Nitin was unable to make sense of the mysterious Rima who visited his bed each night: "I did not know whether I had fashioned her from the night and my own hunger." When he finally learned that she was not mythical, but merely a coolie's wife, Nitin explains how "Waves of disgust engulfed me and I wanted to vomit with shame." Rejecting Rima, Nitin determined to go back to Calcutta. But playing on his beliefs in the legends, Rima plotted a just revenge. Luring Nitin into the moonlight, Rima followed the folk beliefs and caught Nitin's soul between two halves of a coconut shell. Believing in the magic, Nitin lost his mind. According to a tribal priest, "If your sahib wants to recover his mind he must worship the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River."

At the government rest house, Nitin finds villagers who worship the same ancient goddess as the people of the Himalayan foothills. Following their rituals, Nitin is finally cured. After he has left the rest house, the narrator learns that the village children are singing his story. Nitin has become another of the many tales about the Narmada River.

The Courtesan's Story

Next, the narrator meets an old courtesan, trained in the arts of love, who has had to survive by turning into a common prostitute. She describes the height of her skills and art in great detail, and longs for the days when such delicacy was appreciated. This woman taught her daughter the art of the courtesans and tried to protect her from the sexual advances of men. Despite her care, the daughter is kidnapped by a notorious criminal, Rahul Singh. Searching for her daughter, the courtesan has come to the Narmada River. When she finally finds her daughter, however, it is too late. The daughter fell in love with her captor, believing in his belief that the two had spent all their past lifetimes together. When Rahul Singh is killed by the police, the courtesan's daughter despairs and loses the baby she is carrying. Her plots to avenge her husband's death are thwarted. Convinced that Rahul Singh did not want his bride to adopt his life of crime, the courtesan's daughter does not know how she will live. After comforting her mother one last time, the girl jumps off a cliff into the waiting Narmada River below. Believing her child to be cleansed of her sins, the old courtesan begins the long walk home.

The Musician's Story

When the narrator first sees the musician, he believes she must be a beautiful woman. Her sari reveals a graceful form. However, when she turns to face the narrator, he is struck by the ugliness of her features. Her ugliness had played a large role in her life. Her father, a famous musician, took her under his wing, in part to protect her from her mother's sighs at the girl's homeliness. Under her father's tutelage, the daughter learned how to become a great musician in her own right. But she followed the traditional beliefs that her music, and all women's music, should complement a man's stronger notes. After it becomes apparent that no one will want to marry this girl, her father strikes a deal with an aspiring musician. He will teach the young man all he knows if the young man will agree to marry his daughter. The two pupils begin to play music together. The harmonies they create are so beautiful that the girl is convinced in the power of their love. She perfectly complements this man's music. As her mother begins the wedding preparations, however, the family learns that the young man has abandoned his teacher and his bride. He intends to marry another. Heartbroken, the musician vows to never play music again. Her father has taken her to the Narmada River so that she can "understand that I am the bride of music, not a musician." But she thinks there is no hope: "it is an impossible penance that he demands of me, to express desire in my music when I am dead inside."

The Minstrel's Story

Tariq Mia tells the narrator of a Hindu ascetic, Naga Baba, who taught him the song of the river. This man, who Mia guesses was highly educated before he renounced the world, wandered along the banks of the Narmada with a small girl, Uma, in tow. Mia has not seen the Naga Baba in years, but his story had touched him.

In his travels, the Naga Baba, who dressed in rags, washed in the ashes of the cremated, and begged for food, had found a little girl in a brothel. Threatening to curse the house of ill repute, the Naga Baba had convinced its owner to relinquish the girl. Uma, as he renamed her, had been sold to the brothel by her father. Repeatedly raped by customers, Uma was frightened of all men. To nourish her spirit, the Naga Baba dedicated her to the Narmada River, in a sense baptizing her in its waters. Saying that the river was her new mother, the Naga Baba began to teach Uma the songs of the river. For years they traveled together, but one day the ascetic abandoned his charge in search of further "enlightenment." Alone, Uma became a river minstrel who traveled between religious festivals, keeping the legend of the river alive in song.

The Song of the Narmada

In the novel's last chapter, Uma comes to the narrator's rest house. She says she has been sent to sing to him the song of the river. The narrator is shocked to learn that the respected professor, Dr. Shankar, who has been staying with him, was the one who summoned Uma. He is even more shocked to learn that the well-dressed and thoroughly modern Dr. Shankar is none other than the Naga Baba himself. The road to enlightenment, as Dr. Shankar explains, led him back to the world of men. As he tells the narrator, "I have no great truths to share. . .I told you, I am only a man." Unsatisfied with this revelation, the narrator demands a further explanation. But Dr. Shankar persists, "Don't you know the soul must travel through eighty-four thousand births in order to become a man?. . .Only then can it reenter the world." As the novel closes, the narrator wonders what he would do if he ever left the rest house. The reader is left to wonder if the narrator will follow the Naga Baba's path and reenter the world, or, like so many of the people whose stories he heard, jump into the river that he has begun to worship.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The chapter starts by introducing the narrator and explaining that he is a retiree, and a widower. When he discovered a job at a guesthouse (a form of lodgings intended for travelers and pilgrims), he took the position because he wanted to escape from the world. His colleagues thought that such a position was beneath him since he had been a senior bureaucrat before he retired.

The author describes the beauty of the setting of this guesthouse; it is located near the Narmada River, which is a holy pilgrimage site, so there is a regular stream of pilgrims passing through. The main character appreciates this location because he is on a spiritual quest of his own.

The reader is introduced to the daily life of the narrator: his day starts early with him appreciating nature, and the river, and the spirituality of the god Shiva. Once the staff arrives at work, he walks into the jungle where he describes the Vano peoples who held the Aryan invaders of India at bay for centuries. He also mentions the Muslims who live in the next range of hills.

He describes the pilgrims, and how they are very much like him – older Hindus seeking enlightenment. He is impressed at their endurance but understands that this endurance is part of the pilgrimage because it reflected what Shiva, the one who created the Narmada River from his sweat.

The narrator goes to visit a Muslim friend – Tariq Mia – but does not want to disturb the Muslim religious ceremony by arriving before it is over so he sits in front of nearby caves and peers into them; he does not enter because he is scared of snakes that might be in them. He usually does not meet anyone here but has met Jain Mendecants in the past. The remainder of the chapter discusses a meeting he did have with Jain monk. In this meeting, he finds out about some of the religious requirements of these monks: including the most important and most difficult one – non-violence, which requires that they not hurt any living thing.

The chapter ends with the main character admitting to the Jain monk that he has renounced the world. He then asks the monk to explain his religious renunciation ceremony and, when the monk is hesitant to do so, he suggests that it is his duty to enlighten those who are curious. The monk agrees to the request, and sits beside the main character to begin his story.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter introduces both the main character and the Indian culture. It is significant that there are many religious groups mentioned in this chapter, as India is a religiously

diverse nation. The author spends some time trying to make the reader understand that the main character is on a spiritual quest, and this is the driving force behind everything he does during his day. There is a clear sense of religious tolerance expressed.

The Narmada River is introduced in this chapter and is significant as the importance of this river is explored through all the following chapters. The book is written in the form of loosely connected stories told by various characters, and this river ties these individual stories together.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter subtitled "The Monk's Story" is precisely that: the story that the main character requested at the end of chapter one - of how the monk became a monk. The monk starts his story by stating that he had loved only one thing in his life. He says that he was very rich before he gave up all his possessions and he describes the ceremony that his father paid for in order to help him become a monk.

This ceremony began in a stadium filled with people who were amazed that he was giving up his wealth. The ceremony that a Jain monk follows before giving up his worldly goods is based on what Mahavira - the man whose footsteps these monks follow – started. It is a ceremony that celebrates the monk entering poverty, and includes donations to charity. The monk's father, upset that his son was giving up his wealth, wanted to be sure his ceremony was as large and extravagant as possible.

As the ceremonial parade continues through the streets, the monk's father explains that those who have not lived in India only see the poverty and squalor of the streets and the bazaar, but that the streets were more like a living thing: changing to accommodate what occurred in them.

During this ceremony, the monk's father throws jewels into the streets, as a celebration of his son's choice to become a monk. This causes a mob to gather, desperate to collect these valuables. The monk's father was afraid of this violence, and had taught his son from a young age to also be afraid of violence.

The monk realizes that, while his father had always been generous - giving to charities and sharing his wealth as he could - he was distant from the people he helped; his father did not understand the nature of poverty but thought of it as a distant abstraction.

The monk tells of how his father reacted when he told him he was going to renounce his worldly belongings. His father thought that it was the Western way of life– he had lived the life of luxury when he was in Europe—that ruined his son's peace of mind, making him want to seek it again through giving up his possessions.

When his son had returned to India, his father sent a Jain monk to talk about their traditions. The son became intrigued by these lessons and by the knowledge the monk held. His father tried to discourage him from spending time with the monk because he could never know the level of suffering the monk had to go through. The son was attracted to the monk's knowledge because he realized that his wealth had separated him from suffering, which in turn separated him from knowledge and peace.

At the end of the ceremonial procession, the son completes the ceremony that permits him to join the monks. First, he is told of all the things that will happen to him as a monk – poverty, ridicule, hunger - but then he is told of what he will gain – freedom. The

chapter ends with the monk ending his conversation with the narrator because he must continue on his journey.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter describes the experience of a particular religious group – the Jain monks. It is significant because it is the first chapter of many that follow; each of these chapters introduces a new person, tells their story and explains their religious journey.

This chapter does not discuss the Narmada River which is apparent in most of the other chapters, but it still maintains the theme of religious journeying and the search for enlightenment that the main character is experiencing.

An important aspect in this chapter, which may not become clear until later in the book, is the significance of suffering. In this chapter, the main character merely listens to a story about suffering but, as the book progresses, the reader learns from other stories that the main character's journey to enlightenment will probably not be successful unless he understands suffering.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The chapter starts on a new day with the narrator considering, and feeling disturbed by, what the monk had told him in the previous chapter. He even avoids the caves because he is not yet ready to have such a discussion with other travelers. He does go on his usual morning walk, however, to visit his Muslim friend, Tariq Mia.

When the narrator expresses to Tariq Mia that he was disturbed by his discussion with the monk, Tariq Mia asks him what it was about the conversation that had disturbed him. The narrator explains that he is upset because the monk never told him what the one thing he loved was. Tariq Mia disagrees and says that the monk indeed had told him what the one thing was: the human heart's capacity to love.

The narrator does not understand this so Tariq Mia plays a record of a young boy singing. When the narrator still does not understand, Tariq Mia tells him of a man who came to his home two years earlier during the festival that celebrates the anniversary of Amir Rumi's death. This man had given the record to Tariq Mia and asked him to bring the music to the tomb of Amir Rumi because the boy had always wanted to sing there but was dead and could not. Tariq Mia had then asked the man to tell his story.

Chapter 3 Analysis

It is significant that the narrator was disturbed by the conversation with the monk because - as Tariq Mia asks him - how can he give up the world when he knows so little about it. How can one give up love if he does not know what it is? This is a significant theme throughout the book: seeking enlightenment may require that one gives up the ways of the world, but if one has never experienced life, how can he learn anything from giving it up?

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter tells the story of the man, Master Mohan, who came to Tariq Mia's door. Master Mohan was an unhappily married music teacher. One day he found out that the Quawwali singers were coming to Calcutta. The man who told him about the singers told him to ask Mohammed-sahib to go with him because Master Mohan had said that his wife would not go with him; he ends up deciding he would go to the performance, without his wife. Master Mohan's wife had come from a wealthier family and did not respect Master Mohan. She believed that other people did not respect him either because they called him Master Mohan (a child's title) and not Gupta-sahib (a title of respect).

The reason for this lack of respect is that he did not come from a family with connections or money. When Master Mohan was a child, he was a capable singer but, because his father did not have money, he was unable to obtain a recording contract for his singing before his voice broke. Without this recording contract, Master Mohan became just a music teacher, like his father.

His father, trying to make a good life for his son, arranged a marriage for him to the daughter of a wealthy family. After Master Mohan's father-in-law died, her brothers took all the wealth and she was left dependent on Master Mohan's earnings, which made her so bitter and angry with him. She also expressed this disappointment to their children, blaming Master Mohan for their relative poverty. Music was Master Mohan's only escape, which is why he was so pleased to find out about the Quawwali singers' arrival.

He was moved by the music when he attended the performance with Mohammed-sahib. At the end of the performance, a woman took a blind child onto the stage with the singers and had him sing with them. The child had a beautiful voice that moved Master Mohan to ask the woman their story. She was the child's sister, and she was hoping to have the singers take him in because they had no other family and she had to work; he could not come with her.

The next few nights, Master Mohan returns to the singers but the boy, Imrat, does not sing again. On the fourth night, the woman approaches him and asks him to take the boy because she cannot and the singers will not. He agrees to take him and teach him music. His wife and children are cruel to the child and to him because he brought the child into their home, but they persevere.

The boy tells him that his father said he was to sing at Amir Rumi's tomb and Master Mohan promises him that he will. Master Mohan becomes convinced that God is giving him a second chance through the boy's voice.

Since the two of them cannot sing at home without being hassled by his wife and children, they begin to sing in the park, and people passing by hear them and give them money. Eventually a man offers Imrat a recording contract. At the same time, though, two suspicious characters begin insisting that Imrat go sing for a great sahib. Master Mohan tries to dissuade them because he feels there is something not right about their request, but they come every day to pressure him.

Eventually, one of the passersby brings a music executive to listen to Imrat sing in the park. He offers the boy a recording contract and soon Imrat's recordings are being played everywhere; Imrat is planning to use the money to pay his sister to return to him. Master Mohan's wife becomes enraged because she is not receiving any money from Imrat's success, so she meets with the two suspicious men and takes 5000 rupees to have Imrat sing for their great sahib. Imrat does go to sing for the great sahib and the chapter ends with both Imrat and Master Mohan screaming.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter introduces the significance of class and wealth in India. Because Master Mohan did not come from money, he was not successful in his singing career and ultimately became just a workingman; this social status as a workingman made him a lower class - and thus less-respected.

This chapter further expands the significance of class, wealth and its relationship to enlightenment that began with the story of the Jain monk in chapter two. While the Jain monk had given up his wealth to embrace suffering, Master Mohan's lack of wealth is what created his suffering. The significance of this within this story is to make the narrator aware that the path to enlightenment has nothing to do with wealth, or the lack thereof.

The second important aspect of this chapter is the introduction of singing as part of the path of religious journeying and enlightenment. This concept of song as representative of spirituality continues throughout the story.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The chapter starts with an explanation of why Imrat and Master Mohan were screaming at the end of the previous chapter: the great sahib had cut the boy's throat. The main character was shocked at this and asked Tariq Mia why he would have killed the boy. Tariq Mia responds that he did it so nobody else could enjoy something so wonderful. The powerful sahib was never charged with the murder because he was wealthy, but the two suspicious men were.

Tariq Mia continues the story of Master Mohan and says that Master Mohan had stayed with him for a while before returning to his wife in Calcutta. Master Mohan never did make it back to his wife, however, because he threw himself in front a train on the trip home; according to Tariq Mia, he could not bear to live in a world that had nothing for him to love.

The story continues with the narrator returning to his home from Tariq Mia's home. He sees the Vano village women working and finds their liveliness refreshing after Tariq Mia's story so he stops for a few minutes and is cheered up by their lightheartedness.

When he returns to the rest house, Mr. Chagla is waiting for him with a letter from a former colleague saying his colleague's nephew, Nitin Bose, is coming to stay at the rest house to learn about tribal customs. The narrator is a bit alarmed at this because he feels that Nitin could not know about the powers of the goddess that the tribal peoples worship.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Imrat wanted to sing his song at the tomb of Amir Rumi but was unable to so Master Mohan journeyed to the tomb to play the boy's recording; this completed both his and the boy's spiritual journeys; so, his suicide is almost expected.

The fact that the main character is cheered up by the tribal women's life is significant. Since these tribal women worship the power of the Narmada River, and their daily rituals heal the narrator's state of mind, it suggests the Narmada River–either directly or through worship—has the power to heal. This theme of the Narmada River as a healing force is explored in detail in future chapters.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The story in this chapter begins a month after the last chapter ends. The narrator has been told that Nitin is expected to arrive the next day and is preparing for this arrival when a police constable comes to the guesthouse. The constable asks the narrator accompany him to the police station where a man is being held because he had attempted to kill himself in the river. The police constable says that the man would only give a woman's name – Rima Bose - but that the address of the guesthouse was in his pocket. Because Bose is the last name of the nephew he was expecting, the narrator wonders if it is, indeed, Nitin and why his colleague did not warn him that his nephew was mad.

The narrator goes to the police station and talks to the prisoner who does turn out to be Nitin. Nitin says that he is looking for the tribal shrine to the goddess in the jungle because he has heard that it cures those who are possessed. He tells the narrator to read his diary, which will make the whole issue clear.

The narrator did not want to take Nitin back to the guest house until he found out if he was sane, but Mr. Chagla and the doctor who had been called to look at Nitin, insisted, otherwise Nitin would be charged with a crime and held in jail.

The narrator asks the doctor if one can be possessed and the doctor says that if one believes he is possessed, he will be possessed. The narrator asks if it is okay to allow Nitin to go to the Vano village where he believes he can be cured of his possession and the doctor says that if he believes it will cure him, it will cure him.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter is a more explicit statement of the power of the Narmada River to heal: Nitin Bose has come to the river precisely because he needs healing. This healing may be through the power of faith in the goddess that the Vano's worship, but even the medical doctor believes that some illnesses can be cured through the power of belief. In this book, the power of faith and the importance of spiritual awareness are common themes.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

This chapter is the story of Nitin, as read in his diary. Nitin starts his diary by explaining that he came from a wealthy family and got his position through connections. He talks about how Calcutta was being crushed in poverty caused by the partition of India fifty years ago, the war in Bangladesh twenty years ago and natural disasters, which drove people to the cities. He and his colleagues were separated from this by their wealth and lives of luxury.

He, his colleagues, and other wealthy boys from the tea estates, spent their time drinking, having affairs with women whose names they never learned, and betting on anything that they could bet on.

Eventually he was offered a choice of going to an executive training course or managing a tea estate; he chose to go to the tea estate because of the experiences he had had with the tea estate boys and the partying life they led. His friends thought he was crazy to make this choice because the tea estate was so rural and he was accustomed to the social life of the big city.

Upon arrival at the tea estate, he started laughing because it was so English; he felt that the estate was surreal - a British fantasy of what India was. When the servants began to wonder at his laughing, he became more serious and started directing them to unload his belongings so they would have a proper respect for him as the manager of the estate. He had brought a trunk of books with him and, even though he was not interested in them, he recognized that bringing these books showed the staff that he was a scholar; he intentionally develops a new persona for the workers at the tea estate.

As he develops this new persona, however, he changes so the persona actually becomes him. As time passes, he finds that he is no longer interested in drinking and women, but he is interested in the books he brought with him.

His tea estate did so well for two years in a row that the Chairman sent a member of the board, Nitin's friend Ashok, to ask Nitin to return to Calcutta for a promotion to director of a company. Ashok does not believe that Nitin has given up alcohol and women and thinks there must be something wrong with Nitin since he does not want to return to Calcutta.

Ashok returns to Calcutta without Nitin but his comments regarding Nitin's lack of sexual activity for two years had disturbed Nitin's tranquility and made it difficult for him to return to his peaceful life. He discovered that he was lonely and the books no longer helped him escape, so he began to drink.

One night a woman unexpectedly comes to his bed; he does not turn her away. It was so surreal that if he had not seen her bite marks on his skin in the morning, he would not have believed she existed. She returns every night but only after he is asleep and he wonders why he cannot stay awake to wait for her; eventually he decides that he cannot stay awake because he has been enchanted. She tells him her name is Rima but he does not look for her during the day because he is afraid to break the enchantment. They continue as lovers for over a year and this relationship brings Nitin's sense of peace back to him.

This peace is broken by the Chairman's command that he return to Calcutta. He tells Rima of this order to return and she is broken-hearted. She tells him that she will return to her husband, a coolie. Nitin is deeply upset over the revelation that she is married to a coolie; it is not the marriage that distresses him, but the fact that her husband was a coolie, the poorest of the poor. This breaks the spell he had been under and Rima becomes ugly to him. He goes to Calcutta as ordered and quickly falls back into his old life of drinking, partying with his colleagues, and sleeping with many women.

He accepts the directorship offered by the Chairman but has to returns to the tea estate to organize things for his successor. He does not want to see Rima, but he also does not want her to live in poverty so he sends money to her through the head bearer.

Rima does not come to him but she sings to him from the garden; he ignores it for several nights before he feels too guilty to continue ignoring her and goes into the garden to find her. She runs into the jungle and he follows her until she stops and performs some strange action with two halves of a coconut. He falls and is not able to get up. She runs off, saying that he will never leave her now.

The head bearer finishes writing the story in Nitin's diary by explaining that Nitin should not have run into the jungle during an eclipse because it makes men crazy. They take Nitin to a priest who says that Nitin has been possessed. Nitin does not believe the priest and sends for a doctor. Nitin begins to act crazy - singing and thinking his name is Rima – but the doctor cannot find a reason why. The priest returns and says that until Nitin prays to a goddess at a shrine that overlooks the Narmada River, he will not recover.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The process of controlling his emotions in front of the servants at the estate in order to retain the correct relationship – the right status – shows how important class and status are to him. This shows the same focus on the significance of class and social status as was clear in chapters two and four. In this chapter, Nitin's concern with class and social standing is what causes him to deny his love for Rima and, ultimately, is what drives him insane.

The belief that the Narmada River is a healing force is clear in this chapter: Nitin insists that he cannot be cured of his possession until he worships at a shrine overlooking the river.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

This chapter returns to the narrator who has finished reading Nitin's diary. The narrator is asleep when Nitin goes to the shrine to worship and when he finds out that Nitin has gone, he is concerned for his safety. Mr. Chagla explains that the Vano guards ensured him that he would be safe, and, in any case, they could not send anyone to accompany Nitin because outsiders are not permitted. Nitin was permitted only because the Vano believe he has already been touched by the goddess and so was no longer an outsider.

Mr. Chagla tells the narrator - who does not understand how a woman drove Nitin insane - that it is not a woman that has caused Nitin's problem, but that it was his denial of desire. Mr. Chagla then explains to the narrator that Nitin will make a clay image of the goddess and immerse it in the river in order to purge the possession. The two of them watch the ceremony of submersion from a hiding spot.

Nitin remains for three weeks, heading to the river daily, and the narrator finds this stressful as he worries about Nitin's safety. This worry disrupts his usual routine of enjoying the days.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Until this point in the story, the theme of the Narmada river's healing power was just part of individuals' beliefs but in this chapter, the river actually does heal Nitin. It is interesting that, as the river's healing powers are exposed, the narrator becomes more agitated: at the beginning of the book, the reader knows nothing about the healing ability of the river but the reader does know that the narrator is at peace with himself. As the story progresses, however, the reader becomes aware of how the river heals and, at the same time, the reader realizes that the narrator is losing his sense of peace. This process will continue through the rest of the book.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

This chapter starts with the narrator having tea with Dr. Mitra and telling him Nitin's story. He asks the doctor if possession actually occurs, and the doctor responds that it may not be possession as much as a person who is being pulled in two directions at once.

Dr. Mitra tells the narrator that Narmada means "whore" in Sanskrit and the narrator is offended at that because, to many people, the Narmada River is a cleansing river that is sought for its goodness. Dr. Mitra says that the narrator is catching the "Indian disease of making everything holy." Dr. Mitra then explains how the pre-Aryans and the Aryans battled at this site and the Aryans had been granted immortality. One of these Immortals then went to sleep on the bank of the Narmada and rests there still. He says that bandits still visit the site regularly because they believe that if they get stung by the bees that live on the Immortal, they will be immune to police bullets.

The narrator then describes the monsoon season and how they do not have guests because of the poor weather. Mr. Chagla, however, arrives with an elderly woman seeking a place to stay. The narrator does not want to allow her to stay but, as there is no other place for her to go in such bad weather, she remains at the guesthouse. She has come to rescue her daughter and, at the narrator's request, she tells her story.

Chapter 9 Analysis

In this chapter, the narrator tries to seek a medical opinion on what was wrong with Nitin and how the river could have made him well again. He does not really expect an answer, but it does show that he is questioning faith – one of the major themes in this book. The story about the Immortal resting at the edge of the river brings in another story tied to this river; it will also be a story of spiritual journeys and healing.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

This chapter focuses on the elderly woman's story, started at the end of the last chapter. The old woman is from Shah bag and her story starts fifty years in the past. She explains that she was a courtesan and courtesans used to be wealthier than some of the wealthiest wives were. She says that the essence of all the arts a courtesan knows is to teach manners to noblemen – particularly the skills of paying compliments. She indicates that courtesans were not allowed to directly instruct the noblemen; they could merely guide them to learn the proper manners.

She then explained that Shahbag changed over the years. It changed into a factory town and became coarse. The classic buildings were torn down for modern ones, the forests were cut for shanty homes and the city is owned by men who believed that everyone had a price. These changes all worked to make the role of the courtesan less important. The woman, raising her daughter to be a courtesan, tried to protect her from this coarseness.

One day a member of Parliament asked to have her daughter perform at an election meeting and she was not able to decline. After the performance, the courtesan and her daughter were returning home when gunfire broke out in the streets and her daughter was kidnapped by the bandit, Rahul Singh.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter introduces some of the changes that occurred in India as it moved into an industrial era. Many of the traditional ways of life - and occupations such as the courtesan's – were changed and many of the trappings of class were eliminated in the search for financial gain.

While this chapter does not mention the Narmada river, and there is no mention of a spiritual or religious journey, the story of the courtesan sets up the next chapter, which will explore both of these themes. This is hinted at by the fact that an infamous bandit kidnapped the courtesan's daughter - the relationship of the bandits to the Immortal who rests at the edge of the Narmada river was discussed in chapter nine.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The narrator agrees not to tell the police that the courtesan has come to rescue her daughter. The woman admits that she is upset because her daughter will never be able to marry well; when she was a courtesan, her mother protected her reputation but having been held captive for two years, nobody would marry her daughter.

The monsoon weather breaks, Mr. Chagla is able to get the power back on, and the narrator is finally able to return to his daily meditations. He is enjoying his peaceful morning when he sees the old woman slipping out to meet her daughter. He completes his meditations and decides to visit Tariq Mia to tell him the woman's story.

On his way to see Tariq Mia, he comes across a group of village women who have found a stash of guns and ammunition in a cave. The narrator sends for the police and returns to the guesthouse with the weapons. The daughter who had been kidnapped walks in on him as he is putting the guns away. She says she met her mother on the road and that her mother was resting in her room. The narrator try to insist that she and her mother escape before the bandits come looking for them because he is concerned for the safety of the staff.

She tells the narrator that the bandits will not come for her and begins to tell the story of why she was kidnapped so he will understand why they are not in danger. She says that after she was kidnapped, they took her to the resting spot of the Immortal but nobody hurt her. When Rahul Singh finally came to her, he told her that she had been his wife in past lives and he had kidnapped her because he loved her. He did not mean her to be scared or uncomfortable but as he was a man on the run, he had to hide in the jungle. She did not believe him and thought he was crazy.

She was put in a village with other women and when she said she wanted to escape from the murdering Rahul, the other women explained that Rahul was not a murderer, that he was a military man who fought in Pakistan but when he returned, his family was killed and his lands had been stolen from him. He killed those who had murdered his family, then went on the run as a bandit.

She taunted him with her beauty but would not let him touch her until one day he reached for her and she finally believed that he was right about them being together in past lives. When she got pregnant, he went back to Shahbag for a final raid so they could run to someplace nobody knew him. He was injured there but made it back to her in the jungle before he died. She lost the baby in her grief. The guns that the narrator had found were her guns; she was planning to take revenge on the men who killed her husband.

The woman's mother enters the room at that point and the two of them leave. He watches them walk to the cliffs near the river and embrace, then, as he watches, the daughter suddenly disappears and the old woman heads toward town. Mr. Chagla runs into the narrator's office to say that he met the old woman on the road and that her daughter is dead, drowned in the river.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The fact that the courtesan is worried about her daughter's reputation and marriage-ability is significant in that it represents, again, the power of class and status in Indian culture. The mother loves her daughter, but her thoughts turn to her reputation nearly as quickly as they turn to her safety. While the fact that she drowned in the river might not seem to be a healing act, in effect, it is. The daughter lost her husband and her child and, due to the stigma of having been with the bandits, would not be able to find a new husband; she really did not have anything left to live for. She had the opportunity to say goodbye to her mother before she let the river take her life.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The narrator leaves his bungalow at the guesthouse and goes to the temple town of Mahadeo. He wanders through the bazaar, realizing that it is a lifestyle that he is not part of but he is fascinated by the energy and diversity in the markets.

He recounts a story about one particular woman he met in this town when she dropped a glass painting. He went to help her pick up the glass and he was shocked at her ugliness when he saw her face. She says that he was not the first person to be alarmed at her looks and she tells him that she is there on a pilgrimage – a musician's pilgrimage, not a religious one. She says that her teacher - her father - was a genius and he shared his knowledge only twice: once with her and one other time. The narrator asks when the second time was and she says that she will have to tell him the story of her father before it would make sense.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the musician's story that follows in the next chapter but it also furthers the theme of the spiritual aspects of the Narmada river. While the woman claims it is a musical pilgrimage she is on, music is tied to spiritual enlightenment, - and ultimately, to the river - throughout this book; this was explored through the story of Imrat in chapter four and is explored further in following chapters.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

This chapter is the story of the musician, as told by his daughter. She starts by telling about how she adored him – and was in awe of him - when she was a child. When she was six, her father began to teach her music. He taught her music by relating all the notes to sounds of animals. He taught her that Shiva created all art, including music. Her father taught her to respect music in order to give it life. His teachings were hard, and she, at points, wanted to stop learning but he would not let her. He wanted her to be perfect.

Her mother thought that she was not a musical genius like her father and tried to find her a husband, but she was a very ugly girl so nobody made any offers of marriage. Her father wanted to stop teaching her but her sadness made him relent; he said that he would only teach her if she married the gods of music. She agreed.

One day a young man arrived at her father's door, wanting to be taught as well. Her father said that he did not teach anybody except his daughter and the man said that he wanted just to be near him. The young man said that he would suffer anything in order to be near the musician, and the musician explained to him that music is not suffering. The man insisted that he would do anything so the father told him he would have to marry his daughter. The young man agreed but when he saw her, he is shocked at her ugliness.

They were betrothed anyway, but they never spoke. Their music lessons continued, as strict and difficult as always, until the two of them began to work together to make the lessons easier for both of them. The girl's mother wanted the wedding to occur soon so the father said that after they performed together on the night of Shiva, he would set a date.

They did perform, and at the end of the performance, her father said that the young man was free from his promise to marry his daughter but could if he still wanted to. The daughter and mother set the wedding process into motion and excitedly waited for the groom to return from setting his affairs in order.

The groom did not return but sent a messenger to tell them that he was marrying someone else. This is why the daughter is at the river – her father told her to come here and purify her self in the river to get rid of desire. He believes that she is supposed to be married to music, not to a musician.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The father believed that there were two emotions in music: the erotic for women and the heroic for men and his daughter points out the irony of her singing music that is

supposed to be erotic when she is so ugly that she could never find a husband. Her father sent her to the Narmada river to be healed of desire. This further elaborates on the theme of the narrator's quest to find enlightenment and peace. He is at the same river seeking to be free from his worldly desires in the same way as the daughter is seeking to be free from her worldly desires.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

This chapter begins with the narrator visiting Tariq Mia and telling him the story of the musician. Tariq Mia asks him if he believes that the river could remove a lover's grief and he says he did not. Tariq Mia says that he thinks the narrator does not know enough about life, and that he is trying to learn about life through hearsay, not through experience.

Tariq Mia then tells a story. He tells of a time just after he became a priest and he heard singing along the riverbank where he was reading. He followed the sound of the singing to a waterfall and was curious so he entered the waterfall to see who was singing. He interrupted a man teaching a child to sing. This frightened the child so the teacher sent her out to collect cow dung; when the child returned she was still frightened of Tariq Mia. The narrator asks why the child was so scared of him so Tariq Mia begins to tell the story of the man in the waterfall, the Naga Baba.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The main point of this chapter is Tariq Mia's insight that the narrator is seeking to learn about life by hearing other people tell their stories when, perhaps, he should be learning about life on his own. This is particularly important since the narrator is seeking to escape from the world but, in reality, he may not even know what it is that he is escaping.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

This chapter is Tariq Mia's story about the Naga Baba. The chapter starts with the Naga Baba breaking camp and looking for cremation grounds to celebrate the night of Shiva. The Naga Baba had gotten used to the discomfort of living in the jungle and walking long distances after many years of doing this but he remembered that when he first began his religious journey, he was weak and tired all the time. However, he could not be a Naga unless he endured these trials.

As he walks to the cremation grounds, passersby avoid him because they believe he has supernatural powers. Once he arrives, he bathes in the stream then begins his chanting in front of the fire; he will continue this chanting for the nine days until the night of Shiva without stopping for food or drink. During the daytime, people would come to look at him, but once night fell, nobody would because they feared him.

Once the night of Shiva came, Naga Baba broke his chanting, and he was finally permitted to break his fast by begging at the houses of those who were of the unclean, untouchable or profane castes. He would have to visit three different homes that were of these castes; it was a great honor for those homes to supply him with food or drink.

The third home he went to was a brothel. When he arrived, the woman of the house bent to kiss his feet and, behind her, he saw a man trying to kiss a small girl. The woman offered him food but he said he had already eaten. She said he could not leave without blessing her house by accepting something so he said he would take the girl. The woman said he could take her and she would pick the girl up in the morning. The Naga Baba said that when you give a gift you were not supposed to expect its return. The woman relented and allowed him to take the girl even though she had paid good money for her and was not pleased to have to give her away. It was more important to her that the Naga Baba blessed her, however, so she surrendered the girl.

He knew he could not remain near the town in case the brothel owner wanted the girl back so the two of them walked toward the Narmada River. The girl begins to trust the Naga Baba and tells him that her mother died in childbirth and, when her father sold her to the brothel owner, he had said that she would be going to live with her new mother.

When they cross the Narmada River, the Naga Baba gives the girl a new name, Uma, and builds a house for them. He tells her that, since she started her new life on the night of Shiva, she was to be given to her new mother. The girl thinks this means she is to be sold again and tries to run away but the Naga Baba holds her and dips her in the Narmada River and tells her that she is now a daughter of the Narmada.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The healing power of the Narmada river is clear in this chapter. It cleanses the girl of her past and sets her on a new life, as a daughter of the river. This chapter also ties the god Shiva to the river—similar to how earlier chapters tied the Immortals or the Vano goddess to the river. This connection between the various religious, or spiritual beings, and the river clarifies the significance of the river in any spiritual journey.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

This final chapter is subtitled the "The Song of the Narmada." The Naga Baba had moved on to continue his enlightenment, but Uma remained at the river. Tariq Mia expresses his surprise that the Naga Baba would leave Uma because he thought that Uma was born of the Naga Baba's penance the same way that the Narmada River was born of Shiva's penance.

The narrator offers to go find the Naga Baba and Uma for Tariq Mia since he has lots of spare time at the guesthouse, but Tariq Mia says that there is no point in looking for them because they had learned what they would learn from them already.

There is a sudden ruckus back at the guesthouse so the narrator rushes back to find out what is going on. He sees the Vano women unloading crates and Dr. Mitra introduces him to Professor Shankar who has come to conduct an archaeological dig nearby. The narrator wonders who Shankar is and Dr. Mitra says that he is a friend, and that he had written a book called *The Narmada Survey*.

The guest house cook prepares a meal for them all and, when they are sitting to eat, an assistant says that Shankar worships the Narmada; Shankar corrects the assistant and says that he does not worship it, but that he loves it. Dr. Mitra asks why he does not worship it since it is the holiest river in India. Shankar explains that he is not interested in its holiness, only its immortality.

This stirs the interest of the narrator who asks what he means by the river's immortality. Shankar explains that the river, while it erodes the river bed, cutting deeper into the rock, has never changed its course; people seeing this river today would see the same thing as they would have seen hundreds of years before, making it immortal.

The archaeologists move into the guesthouse and the narrator's tranquility is disrupted. He does not go visit Tariq Mia in case the guests need his assistance. The narrator sits with Shankar and asks him why he does not think the river is sacred. Shankar replies that the river is not sacred, but rather, the lives of the people who lived along its banks should be considered sacred. Shankar then asks the narrator why he had come to the guesthouse. When the narrator says he came there to retire from the world, Shankar says it is a bad place to retire from the world because so many people converge along the river.

Eventually the archaeologists move father up the river but before they leave, the narrator asks Shankar to send a river minstrel to him if he comes across one. Once they are gone, the narrator expects to be glad that the disruption to his tranquility is gone, but he finds that he misses them. He is alarmed to realize that he has enjoyed the rhythm of

life that the archaeologists brought with them – the very rhythms of his old life that he had left behind.

One day a river minstrel arrives and sings a song of the river to him. When the song ends, the narrator sees Shankar approach. The singer kisses Shankar's feet and greets him as the Naga Baba. Shankar greets the singer as Uma.

The narrator cannot believe that he is the Naga Baba because the Naga Baba is supposed to be seeking enlightenment. Shankar says that the Naga Baba has reentered the world. The narrator is shocked and asks why the Naga Baba would have put himself through all his trials if he were only going to reenter the world. Shankar replies that he is only a man.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The story of the river is concluded by the explanation that it is immortal. While the individuals who worship the river might believe the river heals them, it is actually their faith in the river - or in the god that they associate with the river - that does this healing. As Shankar explains: it is not the river that is sacred, but the people along its banks.

The Naga Baba's reentry to the world is significant because it mirrors the narrator's world. The story begins with the narrator at peace, wanting to be retired from the world, but, by the time the story draws to a close, the narrator has lost his sense of peace and is ready to return to the world – the same way the Naga Baba did.

This last chapter also ties the theme of music as a spiritual path to the river itself. With Imrat, the musician's daughter, and, finally, Uma, it is clear that music and the river are intertwined. The fact that the book ends with a song to the Narmada river emphasizes this.

Characters

Asha

One of Professor Shankar's young female assistants.

Ashok

Ashok, a Jain monk, has renounced his billionaire lifestyle to become an ascetic. As Mehta explains in the glossary to *The River Sutra*, Jain is an "Indian religion of extreme antiquity." The Jains, who follow the teachings of Mahavira, a religious reformer who lived in 500 B.C, broke with the Hindus over the rigid caste system that divided people into distinct classes. The monks of the Jain religion seek to lose all sense of themselves by following strict ascetic principles. In self-mortification, which includes begging for food and cutting off all ties with friends and family, they seek enlightenment. Living by the doctrine of "ahimsa," or nonviolence, these monks vow not to hurt a single living creature. To this end, they wear muslin masks over their mouths, lest they accidentally kill an insect that would fly into their mouths.

The monk is probably only thirty years old, and yet he has already tired of a world that offered him anything he wanted: extreme wealth, a loving family, and the opportunity to better other people's lives through charity. The monk has willingly decided to become a monk in a religion where, as other monks tell him, he "will experience cold. Hunger. Heat. Thirst. Sickness." Ashok believes these sacrifices are worthwhile because in his renunciation, as the same monks tell him, he "will be free from doubt. . .delusion. . .extremes." The monk takes the drastic step of becoming an ascetic because once his frozen heart is thawed by "compassion. . .for the human helplessness that linked us all," he feels connected to the world for the first time. His renunciation of the world, paradoxically, is his celebration of that connection.

Naga Baba

The narrator is floored to learn that the learned expert on the Narmada River, Professor Shankar, is the same person as the ascetic hermit Naga Baba. As an ascetic, Naga Baba had renounced the world. He wandered the countryside, bathed in the ashes of the cremated, and begged for sustenance. Professor Shankar, a stylish expert on the Narmada River, seems thoroughly modern. His skepticism about the mythology surrounding the river contrasts to the Naga Baba's holy purpose. But as Professor Shankar explains, he has reentered the world, learning that the greatest enlightenment comes from being a man and part of the rush of life. His search for enlightenment that led him to become an ascetic has led him back to the world he once renounced. It seems that the girl Uma, whom the Naga Baba had rescued from a brothel, probably taught him this lesson. Tariq Mia muses that the ascetic could find no higher enlightenment than his relationship with the abused girl. In many ways, the mullah's

assessment is correct. In loving and caring for her, the Naga Baba abandoned his solitary wanderings. Teaching her the songs and traditions of the river led him back to his old profession of archaeologist. Through love, the Naga Baba regained the world and became once again the famous Professor Shankar.

Nitin Bose

This tea merchant is sent by his uncle to recuperate at the narrator's Government rest house. Apparently insane, Nitin Bose first claims to authorities that he is a woman. Once a young executive in Calcutta, Nitin Bose has seemingly lost his mind while governing a tea plantation in the isolated Himalayan foothills. Having immersed himself in the folk tales of the region, Nitin Bose can no longer distinguish reality from the mythological stories. After years of celibacy he imagines that a serpentlike woman comes to his bed each night. He is not sure if she is real or a fantasy. After realizing that he has been sleeping with Rima, a peasant woman, Nitin is repulsed by the love affair. Disgusted by her low caste, Nitin declares that the spell she had cast over him is broken. Enough of the fantasy remains, however, for Nitin to believe that Rima has captured his soul. Clinging to this belief he has come to the rest house, hoping that the tribal people will use their ancient religion to free him. His sin was not that he rejected Rima, but that he rejected the power of desire. By sacrificing to the goddess of desire, Bose can become sane and whole once more.

Mr. Chagla

Mr. Chagla, the narrator's clerk, must ride 19 kilometers from his town of Rudra to the Government rest house each day. Mr. Chagla's bustling activity contrasts to the narrator's detached observation. Frequently Mr. Chagla enlightens the narrator about tribal customs and the villagers' way of life. Despite his inferior work and social position, Mr. Chagla seems much more aware of the meaning of life than his boss. As he explains to the narrator, "But, sir, without desire there is no life. Everything will stand still. Become emptiness. In fact sir, be dead." This a lesson the narrator has yet to learn.

The Courtesan

This elderly woman describes how she was traditionally trained in the art of love. Taught "to teach nobleman good manners," the courtesan's job differed from that of the common prostitute. As this woman explains, learning to be a courtesan enabled her to become "more accomplished than any woman in India." With a changing culture, however, the art of love lost value. Courtesans instead became prostitutes: "Trained as scholars, artists, musicians, dancers, we are only women to [vulgar men], our true function to heave on a mattress and be recompensed by some tawdry necklace flashing its vulgarity on a crushed pillow." Still loving her art, this courtesan trained her daughter in the art of love but protected her from men. When her daughter is kidnapped, it is as though this woman has lost her art for the second time.

The Courtesan's Daughter

This beautiful young woman who was kidnapped by a criminal fell in love with her captor. Trained in the art of love like her mother, this girl's delicacy and refinement clash with the infamous bandit who has taken her. The bandit, Rahul Singh, however, believes that they were fated to be together and have spent many past lifetimes tragically in love with each other. She falls passionately in love with him, but shortly afterward he is killed by police and she loses the child she is carrying. The narrator is very attracted to this woman, but he is repelled by her courtesan nature. She seems manipulative, as though she can act out love without feeling it. The narrator's not sure whether or not he should feel sorry for her or believe her tale of love. But when he learns that she had plotted to kill her husband's killers, and when he sees that "all the artifice had dropped from her demeanor. Now her eyes had the desperation of a trapped animal," he believes her veracity. When she jumps into the Narmada River to end her own life, he can hope, with her mother, that "she would be purified of all her sins."

The Great Sahib

This unnamed rich music lover offers Master Mohan 5000 rupees to hear Imrat sing. Master Mohan does not trust the great sahib's servant who comes to solicit the boy's services, so he refuses. Master Mohan's wife, however, greedy for money, arranges for the boy to sing. Seemingly enraptured by the boy's voice, the great sahib asks, "Such a voice is not human. What will happen to music if this is the standard by which god judges us?" Then he, inexplicably, slits Imrat's throat. As a rich man, he faces no repercussions.

Imrat

The blind boy sings devotional Muslim songs with the voice of an angel. While his life has been marred by tragedy□his father died in a flood and his sister has had to leave him behind□the boy seems to find ecstasy in singing. He dreams of singing a song his father taught him at the tomb of the Muslim Saint, Amir Rumi, and of making enough money to be reunited with his sister. Murdered by a rich maniac, who, as Tariq Mia surmises killed his "object of worship so no one but himself can enjoy it," Imrat seems a symbol of both innocence and love. His innocent desires collide with a corrupt world, and the most perfect voice his loving music master ever heard is snuffed out.

Imrat's Sister

Unable to take care of her blind brother, Imrat's sister leaves Calcutta to become a maid servant. She entreats Master Mohan to watch after Imrat and hopes to soon make enough money to retrieve her brother.

Master Mohan's Wife

The shrewish wife of Master Mohan blames her husband for their poverty. Born to wealth, she lets her husband know that she is ashamed of him. Her greed and spite lead her to send Imrat to the unnamed "great Sahib" who murders the boy. Rather than return home from Tariq Mia's mosque to his wife and the children who also hate him, Master Mohan commits suicide.

Tariq Mia

An old Muslim mullah, or teacher, who meets regularly with the narrator to play chess and philosophize. Tariq Mia lives in a Muslim village within walking distance of the narrator's Government rest house. He teaches his friend about the music of Amir Rumi, the Muslim Saint whose tomb adjoins Tariq Mia's mosque. In their long chess games, Tariq will frequently break into song and try to explain to the narrator the meaning of life. Time and again, he returns to the theme of love. In his stories, he shows how the "capacity to love" is the most important of life's gifts. At the end of the novel, the narrator shuns the friendship of Tariq Mia, believing the man and his village to be "frozen in time, untouched by the events of the larger world." However, Tariq Mia's own capacity to love, as evidenced in his teaching and his devotion to spiritual musical, suggests that he is more truly part of the world than the narrator. As he says to the narrator, "How can you say you have given up the world when you know so little of it?"

Misfortune

See Uma

Dr. Mitra

Dr. Mitra, the cynical local doctor, left a prestigious career to work in relative obscurity. He delights in the stories about the Narmada River. According to the narrator, Dr. Mitra "maintains that he encounters more interesting patients here than he could hope to find in Delhi or Bombay, and whenever he describes a pilgrim brought to him with only one-third of a body or some particularly horrifying form of elephantiasis, his eyes shine with excitement as if he is describing a work of art."

Mohammed-sahib

He accompanies Master Mohan to the music festival where he meets Imrat. He encourages Master Mohan to brave his wife's wrath and bring home the boy prodigy. The paanwallah cynically thinks little of Mohammed-sahib's advice: "It is easy for him to give advice when it costs him nothing." The paanwallah's cynicism seems apt when

later Mohammed- sahib, fearing his own wife's temper, refuses to let Imrat stay at his house.

Master Mohan

A music teacher from Calcutta who sought out the tomb of the Muslim Saint Amir Rumi, which adjoins Tariq Mia's mosque. As he is obviously emotionally tormented, Tariq has him relate his problems. Years later, Tariq Mia tells Master Mohan's story, another tale of love, pain, and loss, to the narrator. This henpecked music teacher who had failed to reach fame in his own life, finds joy, love and fulfillment when he adopts a blind boy with a magnificent voice. Master Mohan feels connected to the world once more through the child's music. The boy's brutal murder leaves him in despair. He has come to the mosque to offer the boy's recorded voice to the Muslim Saint, since Imrat was not able to fulfill his dream of singing at Amir Rumi's tomb. Afterward, he throws himself in front of a train, killing himself. When the narrator wants to know why, Tariq Mia answers, "Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind child. I don't know the answer, little brother. It is only a story about the human heart."

The Monk

See Ashok

The Monk's Father

The unnamed wealthy diamond merchant tries to persuade his son to stay in his world and not become a Jain monk. His son, though, is partly drawn to Jain's asceticism because of what he views as his father's hypocrisy. His father says that he follows the doctrine of ahimsa, and has become a merchant so as not to harm, like a farmer must, any living thing. However, the monk sees the squalor in which the diamond workers live and holds his father responsible. Even as he rejects his father, though, the monk comes to fully understand the meaning of ahimsa. His father's anguish over the loss of his son is what he says "melted the numbness that froze my heart." That his father does not understand Ashok's decision is evident in the lavish celebrations he throws to mark his son's renunciation of the world. Throwing diamond chips and pearls into the crowd who has come to witness his son's initiation into the Jain sect, the monk's father feels that he is doing good. He fails to foresee the result of his action: riots as the peasant clamor to get more.

Moonlight

See Uma

The Musician

This female musician has a beautiful figure but an abnormally ugly face. Attracted by the music her father makes, this woman is delighted to become his pupil at the age of six. She describes how she learned to view the world through music, understanding the Hindu gods and nature as makers of music. Years later she understands that "Through music, [my father] tried to free me from my own image so I could love music wherever it was to be found, even if it was not present in my own mirror." When it seems apparent that no one will want to marry the ugly girl, her father explains that he "will be giving [her] as wife to. . .the gods of music." But the musician does fall in love with her father's pupil as the music they make together transcends the physical and unites them in a spiritual world of sound. Her music complements the male pupil's. The two become engaged□it is her father's condition for taking the man as a student□and they seem on the verge of true happiness. The pupil abandons the musician, however. Distraught, the musician turns away from her music. She feels betrayed by the harmony that failed to sustain her love.

The Musician's Father

A hard task-master, the musician's father will not let his daughter begin to make music until she can see and hear the music of the natural and spiritual world. A patient teacher, he instills in his daughter his own passion for music. When his daughter's heart is broken by her fiance, the father tries to make her fall in love with music once more. He takes her to the Narmada River to heal her soul, but his loving efforts seem futile. His daughter was betrayed by more than just love, but by the music her father had taught her to trust and worship.

The Musician's Fiance

This music student becomes betrothed to the musician so that he can study with her father. He seemingly falls in love with the musician, despite her homeliness, because her music so perfectly compliments his own. He betrays the power of their music and love by abandoning the musician for another bride.

The Musician's Mother

This traditional mother is distressed by her daughter's ugliness. She fears she will not be able to find a husband for her daughter.

The Narrator

The nameless narrator had been a high-ranking bureaucrat before the death of his wife. Adrift without a wife or family, he decides to exit the world. Not believing that he has the

strength to become a true Hindu hermit and renounce the world and all comforts, he instead takes over the management of a Government rest house on the banks of the Narmada River. In his relative isolation, the narrator becomes an observer, collecting stories of human love and suffering, but not really feeling these emotions for himself. With every story he hears, of religious love, familial love, sexual love, and eternal love, he realizes his own incapacity to connect with the world through love. Watching the Narmada River, the holiest River in India said to be the daughter of the Hindu god Shiva, the narrator watches life go by but seems powerless to become part of it.

The Paanwallah

This street vendor (he sells the Indian digestive paan) encourages Master Mohan to find a little happiness, suggesting that the music teacher attend a music festival. Later he takes credit for Master Mohan's patronage of the blind singer Imrat. He keeps the money Imrat makes so that Master Mohan's wife cannot take it.

Rima

Rima is the serpent-like woman who comes to Nitin Bose's bed at night. Well-versed in the legends of the Himalayan foothills, this peasant woman, the wife of a coolie, enchants Nitin with her stories as well as her lovemaking skills. After he rejects her, Rima lures Nitin into the moonlight and tells him that she has captured his soul in a coconut shell. Her lower caste and tribal heritage make her both attractive and repulsive to Nitin.

Mr. Sen

An overseer on the tea plantation, Mr. Sen translates the peasants' songs for Nitin Bose.

Dr. V. V. Shankar

See Naga Baba

Ashok

A member of the board for a tea company, Ashok tries to persuade Nitin Bose to leave his tea plantation and return to Calcutta. When Nitin refuses, Ashok tells him, "You are definitely going mad." Though Ashok comes across as a boor, his words are prophetic.

Shashi

Shashi, an old school friend of Mr. Chagla's, is a police officer from the town of Rudra.

Sheela

One of Professor Shankar's young female assistants.

Rahul Singh

An infamous bandit, Rahul Singh hides out with his band in an uninhabited forest on the banks of the Narmada River. He kidnaps the Courtesan's daughter because he believes she was his wife in a previous lifetime. The power of his love seduces her. He is killed by the police.

Uma

Uma is sold by her father, who calls her "Misfortune," to a brothel when she is just a child. Repeatedly raped by male customers, Uma is frightened of men and dreads the world. Instantly sensing her pain, the Naga Baba makes the brothel's owner give him the girl by threatening to curse the establishment if the woman does not comply. Taking Uma to the Narmada River, the Naga Baba declares that the river is now her mother. As a handmaiden to the river, Uma will learn its legends and songs. Through the Naga Baba's care and love, Uma is healed, and free of the hideous fate that awaited her as a child prostitute. She becomes a river minstrel, keeping the stories of the river that saved her alive.

Themes

Love

The most obvious theme in *A River Sutra* is that of love. The Narmada River itself is described as a lover, flowing to meet her bridegroom, the Lord of the Oceans. In each story that the nameless narrator hears he learns more about what his friend Tariq Mia calls the secrets of the human heart. The varieties of love that touch the heart are as endless as the stories of the Narmada River. The narrator learns of a monk's love for all living creatures. Trying to live by the doctrine of "ahimsa" or nonviolence, this Jain monk tries to empathize with the suffering of everything from the smallest insect to his own wealthy father. In attempting to utterly deny his own feelings and to take on the pain of the world, the Jain monk finds that his frozen heart has melted. Master Mohan falls in love with a blind boy singer through the purity of the boy's voice. In caring for this boy, Master Mohan is selfless. Acting as a true father, Master Mohan forgets his own needs, putting the boy's happiness above all things. When the boy is murdered, it seems logical for Master Mohan to take his own life. So too does the courtesan's daughter commit suicide after her lover dies. Some love, the narrative suggests, is so all encompassing that life without that love becomes impossible to bear. Other manifestations of love, however, offer sustenance for continuing to live and persevere. The love that the ascetic Naga Baba feels for his ward Uma helps him to decide to rejoin the world and abandon his ascetic ways. Once Nitin Bose has recovered from the insanity brought on by his strange desire for a mystery woman and his renunciation of that desire, he is free also to rejoin the modern world. The narrator himself seems to have never searched for his own capacity to love. A bystander, he seems only able to listen to the stories and watch the Narmada River flow past.

Renunciation

As the narrative begins, the reader learns that the narrator has decided to renounce the modern world. Deciding not to pursue promotion within the bureaucracy for which he works, the narrator chooses instead to become the caretaker of a government rest house. Renunciation is a major tenet of the religions of India, and thus a major theme of the novel. The narrator admits that his renunciation of the world is minor compared to the true "vanaprasthi," those who have "retired to the forest to reflect." As he explains, "I knew I was simply not equipped to wander into the jungle and become a forest hermit, surviving on fruit and roots." But this is exactly what many of the people he meets have decided to do. The Jain monk was a fabulously wealthy man, the son of a diamond merchant, and yet he renounced this lifestyle to search for enlightenment. The Naga Baba was a renowned archaeologist who chose to dress in rags and wash in the ashes of the cremated. Both of these men in choosing the humiliations and hardships the world has to offer are a bit incomprehensible to the narrator. Mehta does not judge these ascetics harshly, but the narrative suggests that true enlightenment comes from love. And to truly love, one must connect with the world. The Naga Baba's eventual

path, rejoining the world as Professor Shankar, seems perhaps a better destiny than the one most likely to befall the Jain monk. The narrator imagines that one day he will see the monk's emaciated corpse floating down the Narmada River. To reach his enlightenment, the monk will neglect his body's needs and potentially will starve to death.

Isolation

Closely related to the theme of renunciation is isolation. However, the truly isolated in the novel have not chosen their fate as the Jain monk and the Naga Baba did. The musician, for instance, is isolated by her ugliness. Her face repels possible suitors, and the man she loves abandons her. Forced to be alone, her fate is especially difficult. As a female musician she learned to be "the bride of music," her delicate chords are meant to complement the more masculine sounds of a male musician. Having found the perfect harmony with her fiance, she cannot imagine being able to play with anyone else. Her plaintiff sounds remind her of what she has lost, so she gives up her music. Similarly, the courtesan is isolated when her art no longer has meaning in the modern world. Trained in the "art of love," the courtesan dreams of a world long since past where she was able to perform before appreciative audiences. Changing times have changed her into a prostitute, forced to have sex with vulgar men. She lives without hope that the former world will ever return. Isolated from love and happiness by circumstance, these women do not have the power to renounce the world. It has renounced them.

Style

Point of View

A nameless narrator describes his life and experiences in the first person. However, unlike most first-person narrators, this man reveals very little about himself. Rather, the reader gets to know this character through what he does not say. He seems to have no life story, no main event that made him choose to live a retired life on the banks of the Narmada River. In contrast, the people the narrator meets and the stories he hears reveal the tumultuous nature of truly living. Without exception, the narrator meets or hears tales of extraordinary people, people who have made enormous sacrifices for love or who have been treated cruelly by life. The narrator's very lack of story, however, makes him an everyman. The readers eavesdropping in on the stories told by the exceptional relate more to the man who seems so ordinary. A narrator without a narrative, this man seems like most people□he is still searching for his own life story. Through him the stories of the courtesan, the tea executive, the musician, the monk, the Naga Baba, and Master Mohan are filtered. As the narrator retells these characters' stories, the readers, along with the narra tor, struggle to understand these characters' choices. Questioning their motives and their sanity, the readers also wonder whether they are like the narrator, only observers afraid to embrace the love and disappointment that the world offers.

Sutra

The word "sutra," as Mehta explains in the glossary to her novel, means literally a "thread." But a "sutra" is also a type of story, one that contains a message or moral. The novel *A River Sutra* is arranged as a set of seven "sutras." The narrator and the reader hear seven separate stories that all contain a similar thread or theme. Each story contains another message about the secrets of the human heart and the capacity to love. This theme unites together the disparate stories. The river itself is another "sutra," and Mehta shows how the myths of the river connect together the diverse people who converge on its shores. The narrator's voice and the flow of the river he watches over tie up the stories into one continuous stream. Eventually, it seems that these new "sutras" will join the billions of stories connected to the Narmada River, becoming, like the legends of old, part of Indian culture.

Symbolism

Despite the deceptively simple language that Mehta uses and the folktale-like way she tells the stories, Mehta employs a sophisticated symbolism throughout *A River Sutra*. Like the Narmada River with which she begins the novel, most things stand for something else. Thus the holiest river in India is named with the Sanskrit word for "whore." Similarly, the river represents the cure for madness to the tribals who live

beside it, and is the dancing daughter of Shiva, the God of Destruction, to the Hindus who worship at the river's side. But less consequential things in the novel also have a double meaning. The valley that separates the narrator from the Muslim mullah, Tariq Mia, is metaphorical as well as physical. A gulf exists between them, separated as they are by religious difference and variant world views. In an almost funny twist at the end of the novel, the narrator who has sought aimlessly for enlightenment begins to find it. As the ex-ascetic wanderer Professor Shankar drives away, the narrator describes how "The jeep doors slammed shut and headlights pierced the jungle, throwing strange shadows across the bamboo groves. Sudden arcs of light raked the darkness as the jeep roared down the twisting path that led to Rudra. I stared at the flashes of illumination." It is only at this moment that the narrator looks inward, trying to find the secrets in his own heart, as he's left "wondering for the first time what I would do if I ever left the bungalow." Instead of finding illumination in the teachings of a religious man, the narrator finds it in the headlights of a jeep. The light that pierces the jungle finally pierces his own heart.

Historical Context

When India is in the American news, it is often to document another conflict between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority. As a reporter, Mehta covered the Bangladesh War of 1971, a war that highlighted the conflicts between the ethnic and religious groups of the Indian sub-continent. Her life was also shaped by the conflicts between Indian nationalists and British imperialists. Her father was arrested for treason to the British Empire shortly after her birth. The ability to grow up in a free India was not an option for her parents. India's cultural ties to Britain, however, remained strong, as evidenced by Mehta's decision to attend university in Britain. Today, she lives on three continents□ Europe, North America, and Asia□as she divides her time among London, New York, and India. Mehta drew on the perspective of all three cultures in her earlier works, exploring the clashes and connections between these different worlds. In *A River Sutra*, however, Mehta turns her authorial gaze inward to examine not the diversity of the modern world, but the diversity of India.

To understand the India Mehta describes in *A River Sutra*, one must understand the history of the country. Tracing the divisions of the Indian people back 4,000 years, Mehta describes how Aryan nomads invaded the Indian sub-continent, decimating the tribal people they found. The stories of these people survived, however. The tea executive Nitin Bose is reading the ancient legends of these pre- Aryan people as he peruses the volumes of the Puranas, the collection of folk tales that date as far back as the first century B.C. The Narmada River, sacred to the Hindus and worshipped as the daughter of their god, Shiva, was holy also to these tribal people. Worshipping their goddess under a Banyan tree by the banks of the river, "the tribals believe they once ruled a great snake kingdom until they were defeated by the gods of the Aryans." Believing that they were "Saved from annihilation only by a divine personification of the Narmada River," these remainders of an ancient people believe that the river can cure snakebite and madness. Despite that the Aryan invasion occurred thousands of years ago, the novel suggests that the divisions it created were never healed. The tribal people by the river's edge are described again and again by the narrator as "illiterate." The tribal people Nitin Bose encounters in the Himalayan foothills are described as racial others of low caste. In her novel, Mehta seeks to rectify these differences by showing the common culture that these diverse people share, how the legends of each have become interwoven as they have lived for centuries by the river's edge. Similarly, the novel highlights the similarities between the Muslim and Hindu faithful who worship by the river. The Hindu narrator seeks to learn from those of a different background, whether from the Muslim mullah or the Jain monk. The mullah, Tariq Mia, also refers to their shared heritage, asking the narrator to meditate on "Kabir, the man whose poems made a bridge between your people and mine." This religious reformer, as Mehta explains in her glossary to the book "was vastly popular with the masses and persecuted by the ruling classes," as well as by the leaders of the Hindu and Muslim faiths. Evoking his name, Tariq Mia suggests that the common ground between the religions□the search for love and enlightenment□can create a bridge. Writing at a time when India is still divided by religion and by a rigid caste structure that deems some

people "untouchable," Mehta offers the interwoven stories of the Narmada River, as another possible bridge.

Literary Heritage

A River Sutra is a very textual novel. In almost every section, traditional Indian literary texts and art forms are referred to. This is important because in many ways *A River Sutra* is modeled on these other works. The very word "sutra" in the novel's title refers to an Indian literary form, that Mehta describes as "usually aphoristic in nature." An aphorism is a short statement that contains a general truth. In other words, "sutras" usually contain a moral or a message intended to enlighten the reader.

Many Western readers of *A River Sutra* may recognize the term "sutra" from the famous Indian book of exotic love, *Kama Sutra*. This encyclopedic work, written in the fifth century A.D. by the Indian Vatsayana, is referred to in Mehta's novel. The theme of *Kama Sutra* as well as its form are signifi- cant to *A River Sutra*. Mehta's novel explores many different types of love, including sexual love. The theme of love is common in many Indian works. Mehta also mentions the Bengali poet Chandidas (c. 1350-1430), whose songs, as Mehta explains, "dealt with every form of human love." Similarly, one part of the *Mahabharata*, an ancient Hindu epic poem central to the Hindu religion, describes how, as Milton J. Foley explains, "there is the bliss of seeing God and loving God in all things." This work, as well as the poems of Mirabi (c. 1450- 1520), a female Hindu poet who wrote worshipful songs to the god Krishna, are referred to in *A River Sutra* and help to suggest the timelessness of Mehta's theme.

Another Indian text central to *A River Sutra* is the *Purana*. This collection of folktales tells the story of India's mythological past. One character in *A River Sutra* becomes so entranced by these legends that he has a hard time distinguishing fact from fiction. But in many ways *A River Sutra* shows how such stories are collected. This novel, after all, is a collection of stories that add to the mythology of the Narmada River. The "sutras" of the river all contain a similar moral: nothing is more powerful than love.

Critical Overview

Critics have responded positively to *A River Sutra*. A reviewer in *Publisher's Weekly* described how "this novel of India beautifully embodies the art and craft of storytelling as Mehta portrays diverse lives touched by the river Narmada, a holy pilgrimage site 'worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva.'" The same reviewer praises Mehta for "not avoid[ing] the controversies of life in her homeland, including the caste system and political/religious rivalries," noting that "she willingly exposes its complexities." Rahul Jacob of the *Los Angeles Times* applauded how "every yarn begins the lazy circle again, another variation on the novel's central themes. Each story ends with a beguiling turn into the next one. The simplicity of Mehta's writing nicely complements the novel's profound concerns."

Reviewers of *A River Sutra* especially appreciate the form of the novel and how it ties into ancient storytelling traditions. The reviewer at the *Denver Post*, for one, likened Mehta to "Scheherazade," and the book to *Arabian Nights*. The tempo of the book, however, seems in sharp contrast to Mehta's other works. Her first book, *Karma Cola* (1979), humorously examined the misconceptions Americans hold about Indian culture, and the naivety with which Indians exalt American capitalism. Mehta's historical novel, *Raj* (1989), also looked at India in relation to Western culture. In it, Mehta explored the effect that British imperialism had on Indian nationalism. Her latest work, *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India*, a collection of essays, returns to the themes of her earlier works. In this 1997 work of nonfiction, Mehta once again examines the collision of cultures in India. She concentrates especially on the clash between the burgeoning technological industries in India and the ancient religious traditions. *A River Sutra*, by contrast, is a much more internal novel, as Mehta explores both the rich traditions of India and the mysteries of the human heart. The novel was such a departure that Mehta did not think it was appropriate for her original publisher, Simon and Schuster. As Mehta said in an interview with Wendy Smith, of *Publishers Weekly*, "I wrote *A River Sutra* privately; I didn't tell anyone I was doing it, and I genuinely didn't think it would get published outside of India. It astonishes me that that's the one people have responded to most."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Lutz is an instructor at New York University and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she explores how A River Sutra *translates both the culture of India and the experiences of love for the uninitiated.*

The India of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* is foreign, exotic, and unexpected. She describes an India that is ethnically, geographically, and religiously diverse. What binds the people of this country together, Mehta suggests, is both the Narmada River and the importance of love. However, what the Narmada and love mean to the various characters of the book is as various as the characters themselves. Mehta's job is to translate their experiences, to reveal the "sutra," or thread, that runs through their stories. The translation helps to bind together a people whose differences, historically, have split them apart. But Mehta is also translating for a Western audience. If the banks of the Narmada River shelter 400 billion sacred places that span the centuries and millennia of an ever-changing India, the Western reader indeed needs a guide to begin to navigate the river and its meaning.

The characters of *A River Sutra* can literally not understand each other. Throughout the novel, characters must find translators to make sense of the world around them. Nitin Bose, the young tea executive, ends up living among Himalayan peasants whose features, culture, and language are all foreign to him. The songs the peasant women sing in the fields are sung in a language unknown to Nitin Bose. He must turn to the overseer Mr. Sen for a translation. Similarly, when the Muslim mullah, Tariq Mia, first meets the Hindu ascetic Naga Baba, he can listen to the river song Baba sings, but the words hold no meaning for Mia. The Naga Baba must translate the Sanskrit lyrics. Even words that are known need to be translated in *A River Sutra*. The narrator is shocked to learn that in Sanskrit the word "narmada" means "whore." He argues, "That's impossible. The Narmada is the holiest river in India." It is possible because in India, and on the Narmada River itself, as the cynical Dr. Mitra suggests, there are layers of meaning. One could as soon uncover the significance of the Narmada River to India's history and mythology as know the 400 billion stories the river has spawned. Within even simple words, like the religious incantation "Om," there are layers of meaning. The ugly musician teaches the narrator that the word "Om" is in fact multisyllabic, and that each syllable of the chant has meaning: "Om is the three worlds. / Om is the three fires. / Om is the three gods. / Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva." Reciting the word, she explains, takes one from the world of "waking consciousness" to "dreaming consciousness" to "dreamless sleep." To hear the subtle differences between the sounds of the chant, the narrator must be guided. The world (and the word) is too complex to understand alone.

If Indians speak more than fifteen languages, they also practice a variety of religions. In *A River Sutra*, the reader learns of Jains, Hindus, Muslims, and ancient tribal religions. Throughout the novel, the narrator seeks guides who can explain these diverse religions to him. However, he can never really get to the heart of religions he does not understand. He listens to his guides, but he continually judges their motivations and beliefs. His resistance suggests the extent to which another's experience can only be

understood on a surface level. For instance, the narrator patiently listens to the Jain monk's story, but never comprehends his meaning. The monk describes in detail□a reader completely unfamiliar with the Jain religion can grasp the religion's principles□his decision to renounce the world. Particularly, the monk is eloquent on the principle of "ahimsa," or nonviolence. Forced to wear a mask so as not to unknowingly hurt an insect that could fly into his mouth, laboriously brushing a rock with a soft brush before he sits down to, again, not unknowingly harm an insect, and fearing to pluck a banana because "who knows what small creatures live in the leaves or trunk of a banana free," the monk seems obsessive. But once the principle of ahimsa is understood on a larger scale, his attention to minutiae makes sense. In desiring not to hurt a single living creature, the Jain monks try to open themselves up to the world through empathy. Empathizing with the pain an insect would feel upon being crushed, they also empathize, as this monk describes, with the emotional loss a father feels when his son renounces the world and turns ascetic. This ability to get inside the skin of all living things leads, the Jain monks believe, to perfect enlightenment. Yet even as he listens to the monk's story of religious love and renunciation, the narrator cannot get inside the monk's spiritual skin. Rather, he imagines the starvation the young man will undergo and his likely fate: "At this time I have sometimes seen the dull glow of something being swept downstream and known that it was the corpse of an ascetic thrown into the river with a live coal burning in its mouth. I cannot stop myself from wondering if some day while I am sitting here in the dark I will see the monk's body floating beneath the terrace." The narrator truly is in the dark. Focusing on the possibility of seeing the young monk's wasted and emaciated corpse floating down the Narmada River, he misses the larger meaning behind the monk's story. To understand that, he must seek out another guide, this time Tariq Mia. Listening to the story second hand, Tariq Mia figures out that the monk was explaining how he found "the capacity to love." For the narrator, who has never found this capacity for himself, no amount of guides will be able to unravel the secrets of the human heart.

Interestingly, when the narrator walks to Tariq Mia's mosque, he describes "the valley that separates us." This valley is physical, as well as metaphorical. Throughout the novel, the reader learns how the people of India are divided by geography. The tea executive who moves from Calcutta to the Himalayan foothills sees the difference as one between the "inescapable humanity" of the hot and crowded city and the unpopulated solitude of the cool mountain range. Pilgrims who walk the length of the Narmada River and back again traverse a varied landscape. The landscape, however, is only as varied as the beliefs of those who inhabit India. Time and again, the narrator is presented with different ways of looking at the world. He recoils from the "savagery" of Muslim spiritual lyrics as well as from the "artifice" and "the manipulations of the courtesan." The two courtesans he meet are skilled in the "art of love." Understanding love as an art, however, indicates that it is a skill to be learned, that these women can play men as musicians play sitars. The narrator's life may have been untouched by love, but he rejects this manifestation of it. In his search for meaning he cannot understand those who completely renounce the world to become "forest hermit[s], surviving on fruit and roots," but he also fights against the cynicism of Dr. Mitra who "shakes his head in disbelief at the extremes to which religious folly could take men." Dr. Mitra may "delight in unraveling the treads of mythology, archaeology, anthropology in which the river is

entangled," but the narrator hopes to find enlightenment in the stories. He is not interested in simply deconstructing them. Despite the power of the river stories, the narrator is dismissive of the animist beliefs of the pre-Aryan people who populate the Narmada's shores. He hopes that his aide, Mr. Chagla, has not "been infected by this foolishness" of "illiterate villagers" who worship a snake as a goddess. Many valleys indeed separate the narrator from those around him.

Gita Mehta understands that the picture of India she paints will be unfamiliar to her readers. She provides a glossary of terms most likely unknown to the Western reader. The glossary, while extensive, is not comprehensive. Mehta does not attempt to serve as a guide to all of India in its diversity. The religious differences of Sikhs or Christians (some of whom are descendants of 16th Century Portuguese colonists) are not touched upon, nor is the impact of Great Britain's imperialism and how the English carved out a nation in a land where before there were separate kingdoms and tribes. The India she describes is too vast and diverse for a single guide. For ultimately, the India of *A River Sutra*, the India that can be experienced through the stories of the Narmada River, is a metaphor for the human heart. The heart, like the Narmada River, contains at least 400 billion stories. A native guide can help to tease out the meaning behind a few of the stories, but the secrets of the heart resist complete comprehension.

Source: Kimberly Lutz, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In this brief review Parables without Purpose*, James Christopher reviews the National Theatre Studio/Indosa's staging of Gita Mehta's* A River Sutra *and finds that this production fails to express the wealth of religious diversity, which the novel so wonderfully captured.*

You can't miss the sense of event that hovers like joss-stick incense over the National Theatre Studio/ Indosa staging of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra.* The venue is largely to blame. Finding this strange 18thcentury warehouse on an island in the East End proves as much a pilgrimage as the Narmada River is to the characters of Mehta's novel.

Rosa Maggiora's 90ft set taps superbly into the atmospherics. A river of lights sparkles against the brickwork. A rocky bank, framed on either side by a guesthouse and a temple, dominates the space. The audience are scattered on cushions; a lucky few hog benches at the back; the unlucky many, out on wings, have terrible sightlines.

What unfolds is a series of stories that hinge around Sam Dastor's retired civil servant who owns the guesthouse. Having renounced the city in search of peace he puzzles over the mystic grip of the river, a symbol of lust and absolution. Never has renunciation seemed such a middle-class sport. Dastor's benign Hindu makes chaste small-talk with Scott Ransome's unconvincing postman. One expects cucumber sandwiches to start appearing. Instead, a Jain monk (Andrew Mallett) happens by, and we see his life story enacted as a dreamy sketch.

The monk, it transpires, has abandoned his diamond fortune to "live in the world". Suitably horrified, Dastor's civil servant consults the local wise man (Talat Hussain), who tells him the story of an impoverished musician, his nagging wife, and the discovery of a blind beggar boy with the voice of an angel. So it goes: small parables sprouting organically from the compost of Tanika Gupta's wholesome adaptation.

The Roald Dahl twists, which inspire spiritual angst in the civil servant, did little for me. It's all very pastoral, slow-moving and unbelievable. The actors rarely succeed in inhabiting their parts and the mixed casting sometimes makes Indhu Rubasingham's production look like the last days of the Raj rather than the intended celebration of religious diversity.

Source: James Christopher, "Parables without Purpose," in *The London Times,* September 18, 1997, p. 38.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essays on Gita Mehta's A River Sutra*, the reader is presented with two views on Mehta's novel. C.N. Ramachandran examines how Mehta's novel deviates from the context of traditional Indian literature narrative style and function. A.G. Khan also examines the text with regard to Mehta's narrative style and functioning as they work to frame the two categories of characters Khan sees, 'steadfast' and 'fugitive'.*

Critical Essay #5

A River Sutra is Gita Mehta's third novel, the other two being *Karma Cola* and *Raj.* While the first two novels are in the well-known comic-ironic mode, this novel can be said to be, roughly, in the allegorical mode. Further, one wonders whether *A River Sutra* can be called a novel at all. Having the Western *Don Quixote* and the Indian *Dasakumara Charitha* as its models *The River Sutra* exploits the formal possibilities of the genre to the fullest. It is a framed narrative. It is the story of an I.A.S. Officer, who, after retirement, chooses to be the manager of a Guest House, on the banks of the Narmada river in the Vindhya range. Since at this spot, there are pilgrimage centres of Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Muslims, the manager constantly comes across many pilgrims; and, occasionally, the pilgrims tell him their strange/tragic tales. The novel, after the preamble, begins with "The Monk's Story", and ends with "The Song of the Narmada". In all there are seven inset-stories.

Although ancient Indian aestheticians were content to distinguish between *Katha* and *Akhyayika* on the basis of who the narrator is, and didn't explore the narrative further, if we bring togeth er such long narratives as *Kathasaritsagara*, *Panchatantra*, *Kadambari* and *Dasakumara Charita*, we can construct an Indian narrative tradition and identify its constituents. To start with, all Indian narratives□be they epics like *Mahabaratha,* fiction such as *Kadambari*, or folk-narratives like *Vethal Panchavimshati*□are framed narratives. In fact, the strategy of 'framing' seems to be essentially oriental, which reached Europe during the Middle Ages through Arabic. Many of Boccaccio's and Chaucer's tales have been traced back to India. Often there is a 'double or triple framing'. Secondly, the narrative mode in the Indian (or Oriental) tradition is non-realistic and fantastic. Thirdly, the framed stories are often variations of certain broad human experiences, no attempt being made to particularise either the characters or incidents in time and space. In fact, almost all narratives can be said to be variations played on a few archetypal patterns of human behaviour.

In a framed narrative, the frame could be passive or dynamic. A passive frame is one which functions only as a mechanical link among the diverse stories (as in *Decameron*). On the other hand, in a dynamic frame, there is constant mediation between the frame and the inset stories; each qualifying and commenting on the other (as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*). Again, a dynamic frame may function as a counterpoint to the inset stories, providing the work multiplicity of point of view or polyphony to use Bakhtin's term (as in Boll's *The Lost Honour of Katherina Bloom*.) Or, the frame may provide a specific spatio-temporal context, as A. K. Ramanujan argues, to the inset story/stories (as in *The Hand Maid's Tale*.)

Generally, frames in Indian narratives are passive; they just serve to bring together assorted stories. Only in the case of *Panchatantra* , the frame has some dynamism in it: the five princes who are told the various stories learn something from each story and at the end their maturation is complete. From this point of view the frame in *A River Sutra* is both functional and dynamic.

The narrator in the frame, the retired bureaucrat, isn't a know-all wise man. Often, he doesn't either understand a tale told him or only partially understands it. After listening to the first tale ('The Monk's Story') he is 'disturbed'; and discusses the meaning of the story with his older friend Tariq Mia. Even Tariq Mia's explanation (that "the human heart has only one secret, the capacity to love") is beyond his comprehension. Similarly, after listening to the second story, the frame-narrator is perplexed and angry. He tells the readers: "I was upset by the old Mulla's accusation that I did not understand the World." Sometimes, even Mr. Chagla, his assistant, appears to be more knowledgeable. When Mr. Chagla states, as if he is stating the obvious, that "without desire there is no life", the frame-narrator is baffled. "I stared at him in astonishment", he adds.

The point to be noticed here is that the framenarrator also grows as the novel progresses. In fact, from one point of view, he could be considered the centre around whom and whose process of perception and understanding of men and society, the entire novel revolves. When the novel begins, he is a 'Vana prasthi', and he is determined to be totally detached from the world, from the elevated position of self-assumed wisdom. But at the end, his older friend, Tariq Mia tells him: "Destiny is playing tricks on you. Don't you realize you were brought here to gain the world, not forsake it?" The retired bureaucrat is annoyed and claims that he knows the world well enough. Later, however, he realizes that still he is groping in the dark: "I stared at the flashes of illumination, wondering for the first time what I would do if I ever left the Bungalow".

More importantly, what is to be stressed in the structuring of the novel is its multiple focalisation. Tariq Mia, the friend-philosopher of the main narrator, is also limited in his grasp of men and matters. In fact, there is no single character in the novel whose knowledge of the world is not imperfect. Each tale, narrated from a limited point of view, is later discussed, analysed and commented upon, again in their limited comprehension, by the two frame characters, who share a sort of teacher-pupil relationship. In other words, the novelist here, consciously, seems to adapt the framework of the *Upanishads*□the pupil sitting close to the teacher and entering into a dialogue with him. In the very beginning of the novel, the writer underscores this point, making her principal narrator say: "Do you know what the word Upanishad means? It means to sit beside and listen. Here I am, sitting, eager to listen."

Now, coming to the framed tales, each of the seven tales is designed as a variation on the single theme of 'attachment.' While the frame-narrator is one who has renounced the world, the first insetstory is of the heir to an international diamond merchant, who also resolves (following the model of Mahavira) to renounce the world, yearning to be free from the world. But, after becoming a Jain Monk, having renounced every possession, he realises he has newer bonds with the world. After narrating his tale, he states, he has to hurry and join his brother monks. "I am too poor to renounce the world twice", he admits. And this admission bewilders the principal narrator. The succeeding tales also, similarly, play off the themes of 'attachment-detachment.' Whereas passionate attachment leads to tragic consequences in the 'Teacher's Story' and 'The Executive's Story', 'The Musician's Story' and 'The Minstrel's Story' uphold detachment. But again, the last story□ 'The Song of the Narmada' □registers the futility of detachment. The Naga Baba returns to the world as an archaeologist and undertakes

Narmada excavations. In other words, each tale either contradicts or qualifies the implications of the earlier tale/s (as in *Canterbury Tales*); and all the inset-tales are qualified by the frame. Consequently, what we get at the end of the novel is a multiple vision of the 'many-coloured dome'□Life.

The vision of life implied by the totality of the text is a paradoxical position of both 'attachmentdetachment.' The frame and a few inset-stories mount a serious critique of attachment to the world in the form of wealth, power and sensual indulgence. While the principle narrator is sick of a highly placed bureaucrat's life and voluntarily becomes a 'Vanaprastha', the narrator of the 'Executive's Story' is even more critical. He observes in his diary that he and his 'estate boys', in their drinking, gambling and wenching, indulged in "Careless self-destruction." Similarly the singer in "The Musician's Story", transforms her unrequited love to the love of divine music.

However, the novel rejects the concept of total detachment as well. At one point, Mr. Chagla gravely states to the frame-narrator: "But, Sir, without desire there is no life. Everything will stand still. Become emptiness. In fact, Sir, be dead." Prof. Shankar alias Naga Baba declares towards the end, dismissing the divinity of the river Narmada: "If anything is sacred about the river, it is the individual experiences of the human beings who have lived here."

Such profound affirmation of life and human experiencee is reinforced by repeated motifs of love and rebirth. The allusions to the penance of Uma to achieve Shiva's love, to the five arrows of Kama (Panchasayaka) which none can withstand, to the death of Kama (Kamadahana) which makes Kumara's birth possible, to the origins of Veena created by Shiva to immortalize Uma's immortal beauty, to the seven notes of music which are all drawn from Nature□all these allusions indirectly uphold the divinity of love, and conjugal bliss. The lyrics of the great Sufi poet Rumi, quoted here and there appropriately, again strengthen this motif□of love, both human and divine. In fact, the entire novel, *The River Sutra*, is a fascinating mosaic of rich and repetitive images, motifs, and allusions.

What places the novel at the centre of Indian narrative tradition is that each inset story seems to have been selected and elaborated with an awareness of the Indian Rass theory. For instance, the Monk's story, based on renunciation, has 'Shanta' as its Sthayi, and Karuna as Sanchari rasas. The Teacher's story, centred on greed and jealousy, evokes Bhibhatsa and concommitant Karuna. While the Courtesan's story evokes Sringara and Vira, the Executive's story Adbhuta and Hasya. While Vipralambha Sringara and Karuna are communicated through the Teacher's story, Adbhuta and Karuna dominate the Minstrel's story. It is appropriate from this point of view that the novel's title is partially Indian: the River 'Sutra'.

The all-pervasive central symbol in the novel is the river Narmada. The novel captures her varied moods from varying angles. The river, born in the Vindhyas and flowing westwards, is the meeting point of all the central characters in the climatic moments of their lives. She is the "Delightful one", "forever holy, forever inexhaustible." If sometimes she appears as a bride, flowing to meet her bridegroom, the occean with all ardour,

some other times she has the allurement of a whore. In fact, as Dr. Mitra explains to the bureaucrat, 'narmada' in Sanskrit, also means 'a whore.' What interests Dr. Shankar, the archaeologist, in Narmada is not that it is a 'holy' river but that it is an immortal river. That is, "the Narmada has never changed its course. What we are seeing today is the same river that was seen by the people who lived here a hundred thousand years ago. To me such a sustained record of human presence in the same place□that is immortality." The cave drawings in the vicinity of Narmada are among the "oldest evidence of human life in India." The ancient Alexandrian geographer, Ptolemy, wrote about the Narmada. Vyasa is supposed to have dictated his Mahabharatha on this river bank and Kalidasa's works graphically describe the river and the nearby Vindya range. "It is as if reason and instinct are constantly warring on the banks of the Narmada. I mean, even the war between the Aryans and the pre-Aryans is still unresolved here."

Obviously, Narmada symbolises Life in general, and Indian culture and society in particular. The river, with Shiva and Supaneshwara temples on one side, the Muslim mosque and the tomb of the Sufi poet, Rumi, on the other and many Jain, Buddhist and tribal temples and shrines scattered over its course, symbolises the culture that is both ancient and modern, both monotheistic and theistic, and both Aryan and non-Aryan. In fact, *The River Sutra* could as well have been titled 'Bharath Sutra'.

Critical Essay #6

Gita Mehta blazes a new trail after her *Karma Cola*'s "entertaining account of the consumerist West struggling to gobble up Hinduism and choking itself in process." The enlightenment she tried to pass on to the West must have prompted her to probe deep into the intricacies of Hinduism that needs reinterpretation in a language that the modern world can comprehend. Her *A River Sutra* is, in contrast to her *Karma Cola*, a serious probe not only in the mythology but also in the psychic depths of the conscious/sub-conscious/unconscious. It was no surprise that scholars tried to vie with one another in examining it at the Sixth International Commonwealth Conference held at Hyderabad (Oct. 93). Another Conference on Indian Writing in English held at Indore (Dec. 93) also evoked interest in the book.

While campaign to "Save Narmada" has already been launched by environmentalists and social activists like Medha Patkar, Baba Amte, Shabana Azmi; interest in Narmada as a river acquires great significance. It would be in the fitness of things to examine first what Gita has to say about Narmada.

Critical Essay #8

Shankaracharya's poem on the river is a sublime hymn to Siva's daughter. She is Siva's *kripa* [(Grace)]. *Surasa* [(cleanser)], Rewa [(dancing deer)]. She is Delight and at the same is also the evoker of *Narma* (lust). She is twice-born, first of penance and then of love. If she evokes desire she also soothes. The serpent of desire is tamed on her banks. Though suicide is a sin it is a release from the cycle of rebirth if it is on the banks of Narmada. Because of its eroding power every pebble assumes the shape of a *lingam* as goes the proverb along her banks *Har Kankar ek Shankar* (every pebble is an object of worship). In order to attain Moksha one has to take a dip in the holy Ganges; but mere sight of the river ensures salvation. The devotees call her "Narmade Har!" (Cleanse us, Narmada, the Mother). The novel in this sense is not *A RIVER SUTRA* but *A RIVER STOTRA (STUTI)*: An eulogy to the great river.

In addition to the mythical probe that Gita brings to her work she also substantiates it with scientific data. Mr. Shankar, the archaeologist, explains why he loves Narmada:

"I'm afraid I only care for the river's immortality, not its holiness."

"It has a very fast current, which erodes the river bed, cutting deeper and deeper into the rock. But the Narmada has never changed its course.□To me such a sustained record of human presence in the same place□that is immortality."

"This river is an unbroken record of the human race. That is why I am here."

"You have chosen the wrong place to flee the world, my friend"□"Too many lives converge on these banks."

At this juncture we have to remind ourselves that if mythologically Narmada is Siva's daughter; here is a Shankar trying to explain its archaeological significance. By her choice of "Mr. Shankar" Gita Mehta has lent the narrative a subtle nuance.

From the literary point of view the river is not a *sutra* but a *sutradhar*. No, the narrator is not the real *sutradhar*. It is the river that unifies all the episodes into a great human drama. It integrates the tales into a coherence that several scholars fail to notice when they examine it from the narrator's perspective. Not only this, the river integrates Assam with the valleys of Vindhyas, the plains of Malwa. The tribal belief of Assamese folk-lore integrates Himalayas with the Vindhyas through Narmada□her capacity to cure the "possessed". There might seem an inner contradiction when we find that the two banks have different racial cultures, calendars, histories. Ved Vyas dictated *The Mahabharat* on the banks of this river. People still search for *Abhimanyu* , the elephant in the valleys of the Vindhyas. The Immortal Warrior of Supnaswara gives an indication of the legend. Though we are told that "instincts and reason" are warring here, yet people came here to seek solace and salvation. In this way, the title and the novel have an artistic relationship that establishes itself superbly.

Critical Essay #9

If Melville's *Moby Dick* can be regarded as a *whale of books* in context of the Whale it describes, *A River Sutra* has several *sutras* to lead to myriad interpretations. It can be explored in terms of narrative technique, psychological insight in probing the unconscious/sub-conscious as well as the racial consciousness; sociological, archaeological, mythological explorations could also be fascinating. Equally fascinating would be the philosophy of music as enunciated in two separate tales.

From the narrative point of view the fifteen chapters flow from the origin to its final destination in a natural gush with frequent detours yet returning again and again to the main current: flowing placid sometimes but quite often with gusto.

While the narration by Narrator-1 is removed once from the actual participants, those by Narrator- 2 (Tariq Mia) are distanced twice from the actual actors.

This paper, after such lengthy digression, seeks to study the characters under two categories: the fugitives and the steadfast. One must remember the fate of the fugitives in search of peace and serenity in the *Karma-Cola,* though in this case Gita Mehta begins a healing touch and grants them the desired enlightenment. The steadfast after their initial convulsions are rooted firmly and chase none; whereas the fugitives escape from some evil/fear to grasp some sheetanchor. The steadfasts are optimistically and confidently adhering to their piece of land. Their vision has reached beyond the horizon and have neither fear nor envy.

It must be noted that the characters are complementary. One can identify the mirror-images; the "other self" which when juxtaposed together can give fulness of character lending them the much desired symmetry. . . .

It is in the union of these opposites that we have a fuller view□the narrator-I who shuns society and abhors all mundane human activities (as mere *Maya*); Tariq Mia has the Sufi's wisdom to recognise "Don't you realize you were brought here to gain the world, not forsake it". Similarly, the Monk in Search of *Nirvana* has yet to reconcile to the idea that Naga Baba could grasp:

"Is this your enlightenment? Is this why you endured all these penances?" . . .

"Don't you know the soul must travel through eighty four thousand births in order to be a man?" Having earned life as man he does not want to squander it by renouncing. Hence as soon as wisdom dawns on him "Only then can it re-enter the world". Escape does not behove a man□the crown of creation, *Ashraful Makhluqat* (as the Muslims regard man). One cannot attain enlightenment through asceticism but through action□rational and benevolent. It is at this juncture that we discover the significance of the couplet from Chandidas' love song that acts as the foreword to the novel:

Listen, O brother.
Man is the greatest truth.
Nothing beyond.

Hence any sect that secludes man is myopic. This is what Tariq Mia was trying to convince the narrator.

Master Mohan, who failed as musician, tries to see rays of redemption in the blind disciple he adopted and yet was deprived of fulfilment of his ambition; the old father had his shock when his chosen disciple "escapes" and marries some other girl in place of the ugly daughter of the maestro. In one case the teacher was the failure, the disciple a success; in other, the teacher was a genius but the disciple a mediocre. If in one case there was a greedy and cantankerous nagging wife, in another, a patient and tolerant daughter. . . .

We see that these steadfasts are no longer goaded by any quest. Their patience, forbearance has been amply rewarded . . . banks of a river like Narmada. Her magic presence radiates the cure that can be an antidote to snake bite, or malevolent effect of the Saturn.

The old musician's daughter, the courtesan's daughter and the Naga Baba could act as nature and balanced person only because of the serenity that the river radiates on to people. Ugliness of body was compensated by nobility of soul. She is trying to become what her father wants her now to be:

"□that I must meditate on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed and can become again the ragini to every raga".

"I must understand that I am the bride of music, not of a musician".

That love, the noblest passion, should drive the bandit to risk his life to please his beloved is a fact that the 'socialities' will find difficult to swallow. The world where "drink, shoot, and f□□" reigns supreme; adoration for a woman might seem ridiculous. But having appreciated the sincerity and warmth of his love, the Courtesan's daughter forgets her "royal" expectations. Theirs became a companionship in which "we could be together for ever, and sometime we set to search for the warrior but never found him, distracted by our desire for each other". After her husband's death instead of returning to society's luxurious life as a Courtesan, she willingly drowned herself so that their love could remain untarnished.

The Naga Baba through his penances in the Himalayas and the deserts had developed capacity to conquer the limitations of the body. But his real *diksha* began when he was enjoined by his guru to beg at the houses of those who were untouchables, unclean or profane. This discipline to respect the humblest, to hate none, to find divinity even in the most depraved is initiation to wisdom. It is during such an errand that he rescues a child from a brothel resulting in a transformation of "chand" into Uma. The "moonlight" was transformed into "peace of night".

By the serenity they have attained. We are reminded of Milton's line: "They also serve who stand and wait."

The three persons who emerge out of the trial and painful experience undergo a process of transmutation. The stage that the Brahmin is asked to attain through Yoga, where grief and joy no longer disturb the soul, has been attained by them. Such alchemy is possible only on the . . .

The message is crystal clear. None can triumph by negating the MAN. The first step towards enlightenment is to be humble:

you will be a social outcast.
you will be insulted.
you will be hounded.

But this is only the beginning. One cannot renounce the world so long as there are teeming millions in agony. One cannot afford to leave the toiling and suffering humanity to its fate and achieving Nirvana/Moksha only for oneself.

Naga Baba's transformation from a fossilised ascetic to a compassionate person who cares for the child and after rescuing her from the brothel becomes her teacher and guardian is subtle. The teacher, in this process, himself learns to be kind and considerate. The enlightenment he attains enables him to realise that to shun people is not as challenging as to love and rear man. While the monk was unwilling to renounce the world twice; Naga Baba returns to the world he had renounced.

Tariq Mia, the mullah of a small village seems to the narrator "frozen in time untouched by the events of a larger world" but this is the stage that Yogis aspire to. He has "games for older men" because the ignorant is the most certain of his wisdom, "the young believe they understand the world."

Not only these three but even the fugitives do not miss their cup of bliss! The narrator and the executive become wise and more mature, balanced, calm and serene when they are brought to the proximity of primitive life: folk dance, nature's abundant austerity teach them the bliss of solitude.

Taken as a whole the novel is a significant contribution to Indian writing in English□specially to the feminine writing which has all of a sudden in its aggressive stance resorted more to libido than to good sense. In addition, having debunked the conmen of India in *Karma Cola* an attempt to restore the real saints to their pedestal was a necessity long felt. She has done her penance in a dignified manner.

Source: C. N. Ramachandran and A. G. Khan, "Gita Mehta's A River Sutra: Two Views," in *The Literary Criterion,* Vol. XXIX, No. 3, 1994, pp. 1-15.

The following brief review calls Gita Mehta's A River Sutra*, an embodiment of the art and craft of Indian storytelling, seamlessly weaving separate stories together into a*

wider framework, producing compelling narratives which do not shy away from the socio-political complexities of the geographical setting.

This novel of India beautifully embodies the art and craft of storytelling as Mehta (*Karma Cola*; *Raj*) portrays diverse lives touched by the river Narmada, a holy pilgrimage site "worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva." At the heart of the work is an unnamed retired civil servant, the narrator, who desires only the peace and quiet of a contemplative life on the river. His neighbor, a religious teacher, comments: "Don't you realize you were brought here to gain the world, not forsake it?" That world shows up in the form of various seekers□among them, a monk, an executive, a courtesan□whose stories occupy separate chapters but are seamlessly woven into the main narrative for our delight and edification (as the "sutra" of the title implies). Perhaps the most beautiful vignette is "The Musician's Story," in which an 18-year-old sitar player, daughter of a famous musician and teacher, comes to the river seeking relief from the ache of unrequited love. The music of India, the raga, figures prominently in other chapters too. As characters reveal the pleasure and pain that have shaped their lives, Mehta discloses the wonders of this country□ the Jain religion; savory samosas and pickled mangoes; bazaars where one can choose from "glass bangles," "clouds of spun sugar" or "a bar of soap with a film star's face on the wrapping." Mehta does not avoid the controversies of life in her homeland, including the caste system and political/religious rivalries; rather, she willingly exposes its complexities. A charming and useful glossary of foreign terms makes a second journey through the fascinating text irresistible.

Source: "A River Sutra," (book review) in *Publisher's Weekly,* Vol. 240, No. 13, March 29, 1993, p. 33.

Critical Essay #10

In the following brief review of Gita Mehta's A River Sutra*, Boyd Tonkin praises the novel as didactic and refreshing prose, part of an Indo- British wave of writers who confirm that the "cultural passage between south Asia and the west can still yield fresh perspectives."*

The stumbling nonentities who pass these days for cabinet ministers love to invoke the glories of our language. As if, with their ghastly off-the-peg cliches about village greens and warm beer, they had any right to act as its custodians. In fact, English as a literary medium has been rescued by regular shots of alien talent: Irish, American, Carribean and Asian. Most of its present glory comes from authors who would fail the Tebbit "cricket test" with flying colours.

Among them, the tribe of Indo-British writers conspicuously thrives. Two new works□both second novels□confirm that the cultural passage between south Asia and the west can still yield fresh perspectives. "A River Sutra" by Gita Mehta unfolds within a wholly Indian world of fable and folklore; but its implied reader is western and it reflects a cosmopolitan intellectual's rediscovery of roots. Mehta made her name with "Karma Cola", a caustic reportage on the charlatans who milked the hippie-era fascination with Indian mysticism. Here, she unearths the wisdom buried by such folly.

A civil servant retires to what he imagines will be a time of contemplation, as warden of a guest house beside a holy river. Soon, unbidden visitors arrive with stories that disclose the deep structure of Indian art and myth. A music teacher's tale explores the Sufi spirituality that softened Islam in India; a sexually obsessed executive pays unwilling tribute to Kama, god of love; and so on. "Adrift in the strangeness of other people's lives," the bureaucraft undergoes a refresher course in subcontinental civilisation. Mildly didactic it may be, but the compelling prose of "A River Sutra" flows as swiftly as the sacred stream. . . .

Source: Boyd Tonkin "A River Sutra," (book review) in *New Stateman & Society,* Vol. 6, No. 257, June 18, 1993, p. 41.

Topics for Further Study

In *A River Sutra*, Mehta describes the many diverse ethnic and religious groups that inhabit modern-day India and suggests that a common heritage and geography link them together despite their differences. Research the various ethnic and religious groups that live in India today. What traditions do they share?

Investigate how modern culture has impacted traditional Indian beliefs. How does Mehta present this culture clash?

Explore the Indian folk and religious stories about the Narmada river. How do these ancient tales compare to Mehta's river stories?

A number of the women depicted in *A River Sutra* have very little power. What opportunities do women have in India today? How are these opportunities affected by traditions such as arranged marriages?

What Do I Read Next?

In Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable*, the author explores the Hindu caste system through the eyes of a man deemed an "Untouchable" by Indian society.

Kim, Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel about an Irish boy growing up in India, describes the diversity of India through a particularly English perspective.

Gita Mehta's 1997 collection of essays, *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India*, documents the clash of modernity and ancient traditions in present-day India.

Mahabharata, the ancient epic poem of the Hindus, has been attributed to the Hindu sage Vyasa. The form and themes of this poem are drawn upon in Mehta's *A River Sutra*.

Salman Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) imaginatively describes the Islamic tradition in India.

Further Study

Beck, Brenda, *The Three Twins: The Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic*, Indiana University Press, 1982.

This book gives insight into the oral epic tradition in Indian culture and allows the reader to see how Mehta borrowed from such traditions in *A River Sutra*.

Mehta, Gita, *Karma Cola*, Simon & Schuster, 1979.

In her first book, Mehta explores the humorous ways in which Americans try to understand India and Indians try to understand America.

□□□, *Raj*, Simon & Schuster, 1989.

In this historical novel, Mehta presents a poignant picture of India under British imperialism and the struggle for freedom.

□□□, *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India*, Doubleday, 1997.

This collection of essays documents the hardships and successes of Indians adapting to the technological advances of the modern world.

Smith, Wendy, "Gita Mehta: Making India Accessible," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 244, No. 19, May 12, 1997, p. 53.

In this article, Smith explores Mehta's development as a writer.

Vatuck, Ved Prakash, *Studies in Indian Folk Traditions*, Manohar, 1979.

In this book, Vatuck provides background on the Indian folklore that Mehta describes in *A River Sutra*.

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Foley, Milton J., "The Hero's Quest: Heroic Visions in *The Bhagavad Gita* and the Western Epic," in *English*, 1993, pp. 89-100.

Review in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 13, March 29, 1993, p. 33.

Smith, Wendy, "Gita Mehta: Making India Accessible," *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 244, No. 19, May 12, 1997, p. 53.

Worthington, Christa, *Harper's Bazaar*, 1989, p. 73.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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