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EMERGING A 'NEW' WOMAN: GITA MEHTA'S *RAJ*

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ABSTRACT

Gita Mehta is one of the prominent Indian English women novelists, a reporter, a documentary filmmaker and also the daughter of a famous Indian freedom fighter Biju Patnaik. She occupies an exceptional position as a writer who explicates uniquely Indian experience in a clear and sharp voice. She relates a rich and ongoing history – its nuance, intricacy and negation – opening doors and windows into Indian life in ways few other writers do. Her works including her fictional and non fictional works constitute a distinct and valuable contribution to the literature of the world. While her first novel may be seen as thinly characterized and lacking in depth, the balance of her work, including her second novel, constitutes a unique and valuable contribution to the literatures of the world. The current paper deals with Mehta's first novel *Raj*. The novel *Raj* has kaleidoscopic themes. It can be read as a historical text where we can re-visit the history of India; it also focuses on the encounter between the British and the native princes and above all it is a text of a royal woman who is no exception to be a sufferer of the patriarchal society and the subject of the male chauvinism. This article mainly focuses on the transformation of the protagonist Jaya who accentuates herself from a sufferer and a neglected being to a confident and an assertive individual in the independent Indian society. Jaya shuns her identity as an Indian Princess and struggles to find a 'new' place and a 'new' identity as a woman politician in the Democratic India. The character Jaya represents the class of princes who turn into politicians of democratic India. Her character resembles the present influential politicians like Maharani Gayatri Devi, former M.P., Smt. Vasundhara Raje the present Chief Minister of Rajasthan State. Chhavi Rajawat the first and the youngest Indian village Sarpanch and so on.

Key Words: Historical text, transformation, the independent India, identity.

Gita Mehta's first novel *Raj* is a thorough and colourful historical story that delineates the life journey of a young woman born into Indian nobility under the British Raj. It also reveals the facts about early Indian struggle for independence, and its effects on a slim segment of aristocratic society. The novel delineates the issues of Hindu women in pre-independent and post-independent India in a very realistic way.

The in-depth study of the novel reveals the fact that the miseries and trails are the same as a woman in a patriarchal society whether she is a peasant or a princess. The novel *Raj* under the veil of historical events it represents a woman's – constant struggle to live with dignity. The novel revolves around the central character Jaya and her transformation from a mute observer to an active individual. Her struggle begins with her birth. It is a time of Indian renaissance. In her childhood, she learns the lesson from the Renaissance. She is

educated and sophisticated. However, she is like an ordinary woman has faced many problems with her husband and never be treated as a genuine life partner by her husband. She struggles very hard to protect her land and her powers as a regent. She loses her husband and her son. But she is not disappointed. At last, she sets her identity as a 'new' woman in the 'New India'. As Uma Bande observes:

Gita Mehta weaves the story of Jaya, the princess of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur. It is intricately interwoven with the political events but it has the tears and romance of a woman's existence in India which saves the work from being a mere record of the all-too-well-known history of our freedom struggle, or a racy account of the grandeur and frivolity of the exorbitant life-style of the princess. (Bande 239)

Gita Mehta's *Raj* reflects a crucial period in the Indian history comprising Imperial British India and Royal India under the Princes. *Raj* opens the year 1897 with the birth of Tikka, the brother of Jaya and concludes in 1950, the end of an epoch when India attained freedom and the princely states merged with the Union. It is a clear historical episode that follows the progression of a young woman born into the Indian nobility under the British Raj. Besides presenting socio-political and cultural events Mehta has also depicted the romance of a woman's existence in India.

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

The novel opens with the scenario of the Balmer state and Raja Jai Singh is the ruler of the state. He brings up both his son and his daughter equally in all respects. The influence of western ideology to bring up both his children at equal level is clearly seen in the very opening lines of the novel,

"On a cold January morning when Jaya was five years old, her father insisted she accompany him into the jungle. The Maharani objected. The Maharajah overruled her" (Mehta 1)

Maharani insists that Jaya should be brought up with traditional manners and as true Rajput woman in conservative family traditions and customs. That's how Raja Jai Singh arranges an English tutor Captain Osborne for Tikka to teach him the western education. At the same time, he arranges Mrs. Roy an Indian nationalist, for Jaya. It is with her Jaya has come to know about the national movement and gets a chance to meet the influential national leaders of the nation.

Jaya has been taught the customs and traditions of the Rajputs since her childhood. She was filled with valour and courage as being a princess with the family motto: "A man cannot govern unless he confronts his own fears." (Mehta 3) Along with her brother Tikka, Jaya has been exposed to wild animals, taught to kill tigers, stick wild boar, and play polo, tent-pegging, and cricket. She is also taught Rajniti, the philosophy of monarchy according to the four principles of the Arthashastra: saam - serve the people; daan-provide for their welfare; dand - be even-handed in punishing injustice; and bhed - maintain secrecy to preserve the kingdom. On the other hand Maharani who is reluctant to change and taken a vow to bring up Jaya in the ways of her processors. Maharani thinks that alone could protect the child from the harsh, changing world beyond the zenana walls. Zenana is a palace for the women of the state where eunuchs and concubines i.e. mistress of the princes live.

Jaya's education has alarmed the Maharani and she complained it to Kuki-bai who is a favourite concubine of Maharaja's Grandfather:

Who will marry such an overeducated girl? Her in-laws will resent her. Her husband will be insulted when she flaunts her learning in front of him. She is twelve years old. At the age, I was already

married. At the very time she should become a woman, her father is trying to make her into a son. (Mehta 4)

With these words, the Maharani announced her decision to undertake Jaya's training herself, and repair the damage done by the Raj Guru and the Maharaja. The Maharani instructed the zenana ladies to teach Jaya the 'sola shringar, the sixteen arts of being a woman.'

At the very beginning of the novel, Jaya is a meek and timid girl who has been influenced by her father, mother, Mrs. Roy and also by Kakubai on one side and the other by the sequence of actions that took place during the period. She does not know what to follow and what is right for her. With her mother and the concubine's guidance, she has learned the qualities of being a woman who is meant for pleasing their husbands and for bearing children to grow their clan. Jaya has learned woman liberation ideas of celebrating the idea of individualism from Mrs. Roy. Mrs. Roy teaches Jaya to upgrade her personality and urges Jaya to see life out of the zenana wall. She encourages Jaya to learn English and French to get exposed to what is happening outside the palace. She instigates Jaya's mind with nationalism and the ideology of the nationalists of India.

It was after the sequel deaths Tikka, Jaya's brother and Maharaj Jaya's mother exiles herself and becomes a Sati Mata. Raja Man Singh Jaya's uncles takes this situation as an advantage and with the help of the British Raj occupies Balmar and makes his son John as the successor. He finalises Jaya's marriage with Prince Pratap Singh of Sirpur and she is married by proxy, the sword of prince Pratap that represents the groom, as he is in Europe at the time. Under the influence of western culture, Pratap does not accept his wife as she is a native woman. His frequent visits to England and his inclination toward westernisation have driven him infatuated with an Anglo-Indian dancer, Esme Moore. He refuses to consummate the marriage because he finds his wife too "native" for his tastes. He considers all Indian women as "wild boars, bristling with coarse black hair". (Mehta 5) In their first meeting, he instructs Jaya that,

Wash all that nonsense off your hands and feet. And change out of these Christmas decorations.'
Remove your veil, Princess. (Mehta 6)

A Parsi dowager, Lady Bapsy Modi, is inducted to teach Jaya how to deport herself as a westernised maharani. Her hair is cropped, nails lacquered; she is taught how to mix dry martinis and dance the tango. She redeems herself when the Prince of Wales visits Sirpur by scoring the winning goal in a polo match.

Jaya knows the fact that Prince Pratap does not have any interest in marrying her and Pratap is forced to marry her. But then she tries to be obedient to her husband and waits for his acceptance as his wife. She spends futile nights longing for her husband's company. Pratap also understands that Jaya loves him very much but he is unable to come out of the clutches of Esme Moore. Jaya shares her inner feeling with Mrs. Roy and to Kuki-Bai. She cries and shares how horrible it is to bear the loneliness after marriage. She says how each night she waits for her husband in despair. The humiliation of the last five years has exploded inside her as she flung herself into Kuki-bai's lap and sobbed and said, "Do you understand? I disgust him. He will not touch me!" (Mehta 7)

Arun Roy the local political leader takes Jaya's unhappy conjugal life as an advantage and tries to get a chance to seduce her. He tempts her with his seditious behavior he says,

Poor Bai-sa . So many roles to perform, and not one of them allows you to be a woman. But perhaps you do not yet know what is to be a woman'... you are still so young, Bai-sa, Is duty enough? Will you become celibate, like our old Mahatma?' (Mehta 8)

Jaya's loneliness has been slipped away with Mrs. Roy's company and she deeply consoles Jaya. Mrs. Roy boosts up Jaya's confidence with her words and inspiring lines of the nationalists. Mrs. Roy advises Jaya not to become like her husband by being subjugated to the British and by being antagonistic to their own people.

Do not become like him or you will belong nowhere.'

'I warned you, Bai-sa. It takes courage to fight for your rights.' Read the words of our great poet Tagore: "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high, to that dream of freedom let my people awake." Every Indian should learn those lines. (Mehta 9)

After seven years, their marriage is consummated when he is in a drunken state and Jaya gives birth to a male child, Arjun. Jaya does not find any change in Pratap's treatment after the child is born. He is such a queer man that he never allows Jaya to breast feed to her son. He says, "Stop that!... The Maharanis of Sirpur employ wet nurses. I will not have my wife feeding a baby like a peasant woman" (Mehta 10).

These words amplify her anger but as a faithful wife, Jaya suppresses it in the depth of her heart. Mehta has brought out Jaya's inner pain in these lines:

Maharajah Pratap had already robbed her of the dignity of being a wife. Now he was stealing the rights of maternity. She lowered her eyes so he would not see the silent anger breaking in waves against the respect for a husband which had been ingrained so deeply by the prayers and ceremonies that had marked her whole life. (Mehta 11)

Pratap does not harbour any sentiments and emotions and never tries to win Jaya's heart. Jaya as an Indian woman follows her husband's footsteps, accompanying him in his journeys to London. Each day of hers is packed with activities of meeting with nationalist leaders and as a charming hostess to arrange parties for the whites.

Gita Mehta, being an eminent novelist has possessed deep insight into the female psyche. Focusing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them. Gita Mehta uses this point of view of present social reality as it is experienced by women.

Jaya becomes the Maharani of Satpur after the death of her husband's brother Victor.

Jaya knows that her husband's waywardness and his spendthrift nature would always be a threat to Sirpur. So When Pratap is threatened by Esme Moore, Jaya takes the initiation to settle the matter on a condition that her husband appoints her Regent of Sirpur. Mehta has brought out courage and confidence in Jaya's voice in this following scene:

There is a price for my services, hukam' ... "I wish to be named Regent Maharani of Sirpur, in the event of anything happening to you, until Arjun is of an age to take the throne." (Mehta 12)

Jaya with the help of her wellwisher, Tiny Dunga settles the Esme Moore episode by offering enough money to Esme Moore to become an actress. Soon after that Pratap dies in a plane crash and Arjun is made the Maharajah of Sirpur, while Jaya remains as a guardian to the throne.

The British try to abdicate the land after the Maharaj Pratap died. During this challenging time, her childhood English friend James Osborne is appointed as British resident at Sirpur who helps her in all respects. In the meanwhile, Arjun is sent to London for education where he gets wounded when he participates in World War II. National movement reaches its peak, consequently the "Direct Action Day" holocaust was ordered by the Muslim League in Calcutta in 1946. A frenzied Hindu mob attacks the car in which Arjun travels along with the Prime Minister. Unfortunately, Arjun dies in the communal riot while trying to save the Prime Minister Sir Akbar. This is the biggest tragedy that ever happened in Jaya's Life. It has taken a long for her time to get reconciled with the mishap in her life.

However, a chain of tragedies struck her; Jaya did not drown herself in the quagmire of despair, frustration, and disillusionment. She endured all vicissitudes with an indomitable will. Being a Rajput princess she has the inbuilt valour and ability to rule the state. As Simon de Beauvoir comments:

Thus a vicious circle is formed; for the less, she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resources will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as subject. If she were encouraged in it, she could display the same lively exuberance, the same curiosity, the same initiative, the same hardihood, as a boy. This does happen occasionally, when the girl is given a boyish bringing up; in this case she is spared many problems. (De Beauvoir 308)

After the series of mishaps, Jaya is strengthened by her mother's words. Jaya meets her mother after ten years of her exile. The Maharani burst into tears watching her daughter, Jaya as a widow. She consoles Jaya and instills hope in Jaya saying that 'True Sati' is not the one who puts an end to her life after the death of husband, but continues to live by withstanding against the hardships and ordeals. Maharani plays a minor role

in the novel, yet she is an influential character. At first she is pictured as reluctant to accept change and reconciliation. But as the novel progresses she accentuates herself, shuns her identity as the Maharani and becomes one among the ordinary women. Maharani after facing many humiliations and disillusionments emerges as an individual and soon imbibes the real meaning of Sati during her exile that, 'true sati continues to live when her world has shattered around her' (Mehta 14). Maharani participates in the national movement and sacrifices her life during the Dandi March.

Along with Jaya, Maharani also makes amendments in her life according to the changing circumstances. While reaching to the end of the novel Jaya realizes her duty as a leader and recollects Raj Guru's words and finally takes the decision to serve the people being one among them. She realizes the fact that she can't escape destiny and the words of the Raj Guru constantly rang into her ear: 'Your dharma is protection. Bai-sa. You cannot escape your destiny.' (Mehta 15)

Jaya tries all the means to protect her state both from the British and the nationalists. Jaya realizes that Arun Roy has betrayed. She thought he would protect Sirpur from the British accession. But reverse she falls prey to Arun Roy's false play. Jaya becomes more confident and strong at Arun Roy's the betrayal and she stands boldly and decides to face the circumstances as they come. As Simone quotes, "A woman who is not afraid of men frightens them" (de Beauvoir 698)

Jaya takes the timely decision to join the election fray after India attained independence. It is a part of her deeper realization and conviction that the Indian rulers have forfeited their claims to rule. She thought of making her life meaningful in serving her people not as a Maharani, but only as one of them.

Jaya joins the democratic process by filling her nomination for general election. The election officer seems to repeat what Maharaja Jai Singh had said years back, when Jaya was an infant; 'If the name is auspicious, let's call her Jaya, victory' (Mehta 17). True to her name Jaya is an ultimate victor, who triumphantly surmounts all impediments. She dedicates her life to fulfill her role as the guardian of her people. Before performing her dharma, she must first win her own freedom then lead her kingdom through the treacherous change of history.

By the time the novel ends the Balmer princess stands out as a free, self-assertive and self-confident woman of free India. Thus the novel does not depict Jaya's life as a totally dismal and hopeless struggle. It suggests "hope" and "change" for the better. As Shashi Deshpande quotes,

"We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope without that life would be impossible" (Deshpande 193)

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