

RE-PRESENTING CULTURE, REPOSSESSING HISTORY: CULTURAL NUANCES IN THREE INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

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“The schoolmaster is abroad, and I trust more to him, armed with his primer, than I do the soldier in full military array, for upholding and extending the liberties of his country.”

Lord Brougham in a speech in the
House of Commons, 29 Jan. 1929

Cultural implication of the colonial experience is one of the significant aspects of literature studies in the post-colonial period. The main preoccupation of the literature of the erstwhile-colonized countries has been to resist the imperial myths and fallacies by writing back to the center. The effort is to preserve one's self-image and establish an indigenous identity. As Franz Fanon opines, colonialism not only enslaves a people politically, it devalues their pre-colonial history and invades their culture. The victims of this historical process suffer loss of identity and undergo psychological conflicts. In the post-colonial era, therefore, the urgent need of the society is to re-possess its past and take control of its own reality by “charting the cultural territory,” to use Edward Said's words. In literature this is termed as *reinscription* (Said 1994: 252-59). What Said asserts in his *Culture and Imperialism* is that though identity is crucial to the post-colonial, it is not enough to define it as “a different identity” (257). The important thing is to be able to see and show others that even the subaltern has had a history capable of development, as part of the process of growth and maturity. That is where re-writing or reinscription assumes significance. While some Indian critics see post-colonial theory of literature as “ideologically an emancipatory concept” given to a “rigorous scrutiny on the continuities and ruptures in the de-colonized societies” (Mukherjee 1996: 3), some others question its efficacy and efficiency for the Indian situation. These critics feel that though the post-colonial literature tends

to write back to the center it does not solve the question of marginality. Post-colonialism, Jasbir Jain asserts is a “question of attitude which goes beyond the attempt to confront colonialism to become an attempt to transcend it, to step outside the influence and the framework, to reclaim an autonomous and free identity” (Jain 1999:35).

In this paper an attempt has been made to study three Indian English novels to see how the authors reclaim their identity by re-mapping their cultural territory and how by reverting to the traditional narrative strategies they work out an indigenous framework. The novels selected for discussion are Arun Joshi's *The City and the River* (1990) and *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993). The discussion will focus on the narratives, analyzing the cultural consciousness of the authors, which shapes their texts. In these stories, the Ganga, the Narmada and the Himalayas are the bearers of the culture, witness to a historical reality and the repository of ancient wisdom. The novels show the authors' cultural efforts to restore the community and repossess the culture. Both Joshi and Mehta uphold the cultural dynamism of traditional thought and hold a mirror to the destructive trends in power politics and consumerism-oriented greed. The fictional narratives, by re-creating an indigenous culture displace the historical discourse and help us read into the text the mythological, archetypal, metaphysical and religious perception in the native literature.

Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* was published in 1981. A Sahitya Akademi award winning work, this novel recounts the story of a modern Indian torn between the inner and the outer forces, the instinctive cultural leaning of the inner self and the rational, scientific yet consumer orientation of a Westernized Indian. The shares of Aftab's Company that Som Bhaskar desperately wants to grab are in the possession of Krishna in a temple on the Himalayas. Som's greed makes him undertake the difficult journey up the mountain, through the formidable crags and valleys, the glaciers and the frozen lakes; he dreads it, it is nightmarish but he is fascinated by it, all the same. As the author describes the mission one realizes that the Himalayas and Lord Krishna assume significance as cultural symbols. Som broods with a kind of cultural pride and admits unabashedly, “No, there is nothing simple about Krishna. Had it been so, He would not have survived ten thousand years. He would have died long ago with the gods of the Pharaohs, the Sumerians, Incas. Krishna was about as simple as the labyrinth of Aftab's Haveli” (Joshi 1981:173). Som's journey through the Himalayas is reminiscent of the last climb of the Pandavas commonly known as *Swarga-rohan*; only, Som lacks attitudinal change; he tosses between an urge for self-understanding and the inability to forget his recent past and consequently his journey becomes one of nightmares,

unfulfilled desires and failure. For a brief while, Som gets a kind of illumination, a short spell of peak experience that could have transformed him into a self-realized man, but as he admits, "This little flame of mine. . . yielded nothing beyond an ounce of tranquility" (p. 209). Throughout the climb we are not allowed to forget that it is the Himalayas the protagonist is climbing up on. Symbolically, his companions are Doctor K. and a friend called Vasudeva. K. could be read as an abbreviation for Krishna while Vasudeva is one of the many names of Lord Krishna. Thus the journey assumes obvious cultural overtones. The author juxtaposes the puniness of man with the vastness of the unfathomable. The entire fabric of the narrative is dominated by the author's efforts to re-claim the culture and the inability to revert to the past.

In his last novel *The City and the River*, published in 1990 Arun Joshi deals with the existential angst of the entire culture. It is a muffled portrayal of post-independence India, a kind of allegorical picture, where intrigues, nepotism, ostracism and violence are rampant. The regime of the Grand Master in a particular city is full of fawning sycophants, self-seeking ruling classes and the helpless, hapless masses. The scenario, in fact, draws parallel between the Emergency in India and the oppressive regime of the Grand Master. The city becomes the victim of the greed of the purblind rulers and is destroyed by the angry river. The 'City' is unnamed and so is the 'River' but both gain multi-dimensional meanings when read in the national and cultural context. The narrative pattern of story within a story told by an old, wise teacher to his keen disciple follows the typical Indian narrational technique of *Katha*. In the Indian narrative tradition a *sutradhar* or the main narrator recounts a story with the help of which the story (or the novel in the present case) advances. Often the framed stories are variations of some broad human behaviour. *Panchtantra*, *Kadambari*, *Katha Sarit Sagar*, and even epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and a whole lot of our traditional narratives follow the pattern of "framed narrative."

In *The City and the River*, the Great Yogeshwara tells the story to the Nameless-One. After giving enlightenment to his disciple in the 'Prologue' the teacher, the Guru, starts thus: "That is good. I shall tell you now a tale and in my telling, perhaps, you will know who you are. Listen, this is how it goes"(11). The story starts with the chapter entitled 'The Grand Master's Dream' and ends with the city's doom. Then follows the 'Epilogue'. Again the teacher-pupil duo appears. The novel ends but not the cycle of comings and goings. The Nameless-One has been entrusted with the task of purifying the city "of egoism, selfishness, stupidity" (263). The cyclical movement is thus inevitable: "On the ruins of that city . . . a new city has

risen. It is ruled by another Grand master," it has the same people – Professor, Bhumiputra, the boatmen and so on. Of course, the men have "other names but the forces they embody remain unchanged" (262). The Great Yogeshawara wants his disciple to try and "prevent this endless repetition, this periodic disintegration" (p.262). The circular movement communicates human continuity. The Indian concept of life-death-reincarnation implies the cycle from creation to the end and again a new beginning. The reappearance of the Nameless-One signifies a period of future hope for humanity.

The third novel I propose to discuss is Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*. A retired Administrative Officer decides to renounce the world and stay in a secluded spot. He gets a job as the manager of Narmada Guest House and during the course of his stay he learns much about life through interaction with Tariq Mia and the others who frequent the guesthouse. Gita Mehta also adopts the traditional Indian narrational technique. Its oral tradition of mythologizing is a well-chosen device that makes the novel gripping and convincing. The several threads of narrative run parallel with the main story and are held together by the frame narrator. Each tale, narrated from the point of view of some specific narrator, be it the diary of Nitin Bose or the first person tale of the courtesan/ monk, is discussed by the frame-narrator. The analysis and the comments bear upon the limits of human understanding. The novelist seems to have consciously evoked the Guru-Shishya (teacher-pupil) dialogue on the pattern of the Upanishadic framework. In the beginning of the novel the bureaucrat-narrator says: "Do you know what the word Upanishad means? It means to sit beside and listen. Here I am, sitting eager to listen" (13). While Joshi's novel *The City and the River* has third person narrator, Gita Mehta shifts between the device of first person and third-person narrative strategy, according to the exigency of the story. In Joshi's novel, the Great Yogeshwara tells one long tale of human greed and shameful actions and lets the 'river' take its revenge; in *A River Sutra* there are six isolated stories all joined by common threads: at the human level by Tariq Mia and / or the bureaucrat-narrator, at the archetypal level by river Narmada, and at the metaphysical level by the bonds of human love which lead to divine love. The movement of this novel is linear, meandering like the river but going forward. The Narmada has a life of its own — the pilgrims on its banks, the dancing waters eager to join the sea, the aquatic life inside the river, and the whirling eddies. The river is a living force with a personality. It is a delightful river. Joshi's river, on the other hand, can be angry, incomprehensible, and vindictive. Within these structural patterns, though alike to an extent but different still, the two novelists weave stories deeply

rooted in the culture. Both join the contemporary India with the ageless, immortal India; the present with the past, the modern with the traditional, the mythic with the rational.

The nameless river in Joshi's novel is the archetypal symbol of the great mother. It is interesting to note that the novel does not have any memorable female presence except the 'River'. True, the "headman" of the boat people is a woman but she is not a feminine figure, she is an abstract concept. There is Shailaja, but she fails to be a palpable presence. Only the river is the moving loving, protecting force to whom the boat people owe allegiance. For them the river "is a symbol of the living mother. Of God himself" (22). The rational, modern and consumer mind of the Grand Master is not ready to accept this superstition. He tells the Astrologer, "it is these things that keep our people down" (22), because to him what is the river but a stream of water. That the boatmen should have allegiance to the river than to their Ruler is beyond his comprehension. "They prefer a stream of water, no doubt beautiful, no doubt sacred, but nonetheless a stream, to me, the scion of a family that gives all to this city" (22). The boatmen consider themselves children of the river, their archetypal mother, the harbinger of peace and plenty. This tussle is a pointer towards the conflict going on in contemporary India – fast moving towards Western rational approach yet tied down to the unconscious, to the old beliefs. Joshi carries the question to the end of the novel when it assumes philosophical proportion and becomes a treatise on the question of man's allegiance "to God or to man" (262).

The answer to this question can be found in *A River Sutra* when the Naga Baba alias Prof. Shankar asserts towards the end, dismissing the divinity of river Narmada, "if anything is sacred about the river, it is the individual experiences of the human beings who have lived here" (267). Suddenly then, a reader returns to the epigram from the "Love Songs of Chandidas":

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

The novel, we realize, affirms human dignity. Narmada becomes a palpable symbol of love, life, and death. Born of Shiva's penance, the river is the "Delightful one" "forever holy, forever inexhaustible." To Prof. Shankar, it is an "immortal river", while for Nitin Bose and the tribals it has curative value. Narmada grants salvation to those who die in its water. Suicide is not a sin if committed in Narmada. And, the river sustains love and teaches

the lover not to be moved by the puny human passions but to see love as sublime. This is corroborated by the story of the musician who exhorts his daughter to “meditate on the waters of Narmada, the symbol of Shiva’s penance,” until she has cured herself of her attachment to what has passed in her life. The father exhorts his daughter to understand that she is “the bride of music, not of a musician. . .” (226). The tale of Naga Baba’s love for the child he rescues from the brothel and gives a clean life, is humanistic/ philanthropic, while the music teacher’s attachment to the blind boy is love at the level of Guru-Shishya tradition. The aesthetic framework moves round love, attachment-detachment, renunciation and involvement. Apart from these, there are rich motifs of divine love – the reference to Kama, allusion to Parvati’s penance to get Shiva’s love, the stories about Veena and the seven notes of music uphold the divinity of love. Gita Mehta quotes profusely from the great Sufi poet Rumi’s love lyrics strengthening the images of love as a purifying emotion, above the narrow worldly barriers. In Joshi’s *The Last Labyrinth* Gargi exhorts Som time and again to consider his love for Anuradha on the spiritual plain. Could Som get over the physicality of his passion for Anuradha he would have been saved the torture of schizophrenia after Anuradha’s disappearance. Som comes to realize the pure quality of love during his trip to the Himalayas but unfortunately for him he is unable to assimilate the lesson.

In *The City and The River*, Arun Joshi presents predominantly modern India scourged by self-seeking, shortsighted, lusty and power-hungry ruling classes. In *The Last Labyrinth*, he focuses on the greed and lust of an individual character. But in his scheme, there exists a greater, perennial India with its eternal wisdom. The clash of tradition and modernity, rationality and instinct will always be there. What is required is purification. This, however, is hard to achieve. The City is symbolic of the contemporary society. It is the inert battleground of power play. In *The Last Labyrinth*, Som seeks the power of money and passionate love in Benaras while in *The City and The River*, the Rulers of the unnamed City want unquestioned political power. The River is a primordial force to which all turn for help. In her anger, she becomes destructive though she is not life denying. On her bosom the Nameless-One is born to continue creation, life and its eternal quest. Taken as an Indian archetype, the river appears to be Ganga. In *The Last Labyrinth* also, it is Ganga at Benaras on whose waters Som is ferried to Gargi’s place.

Gita Mehta’s Narmada too is a microcosm of India. She is the organizing principle of the novel. The six loosely knit tales give the novel multiplicity but the river vouchsafes its unity. “The resulting figure,” as a critic observes, “is one of unitary pluralism.” The Narmada Guest House

is, indeed, mini-India and it reflects her culture. Here is the river with its mythology, religion, superstitions, spirituality and archaeology, representing traditional, primitive and modern India. People who converge around the area come from different walks of life and belong to different religious groups. The Narmada joins the north and the south. Its legends are as much known to the tribals in Assam as to the tribals of the Vano village. The pre-Aryan and the Aryan cultures prevail. It is thus a secular river. If the traditional wisdom chants: "O Narmada defend me from the serpent's poison," the rational mind interprets it as the "serpent of desire;" if it stings, the result would be schizophrenic state, symbolized by Nitin Bose in the novel and Som Bhaskar in Joshi's work.

The three novels do not advocate detachment in the sense of running away from life, from action. Naga Baaba enters the battlefield of life, "Kurukshetra," after ten years of ascetic wandering. Tariq Mia makes himself socially useful by teaching his students. He is content with his life. The music teacher was attached to his blind pupil; this led him to grief and suicide. The significant thing is to maintain balance. Non-attachment is difficult, as the ugly daughter of the musician says, "It is an impossible penance, to express desire in my music when I am dead inside" (226). But, it is worth trying as Naga Baba alias Prof. Shankar shows.

The novels under discussion are the authors' cultural efforts at the restoration of community and repossession of culture. The city in *The Last Labyrinth* is Benaras, the cultural city of India; it is not the colonial city of which Sunil Khilnani speaks in *The Idea of India*. The significance of Indian cities is given in a *shloka*, which refers to seven cities as *mokshadayini*. The *Shloka* runs thus:

Ayodhya, Mathuramaya, Kashi, Kanchi, Avantika,
Puri, Dwarawatishchaiva saptehta mokshadayika

Now, coming to the rivers, to the Indian mind, rivers are not only the geographical features; they are the very sum and substance of our existence. We have mythologized our rivers, given them a form and a life of their own. They are timeless, ageless and immutable on whose banks life has continued for ages and ages. They sustain and purify, give us joy, and in anger, they can even destroy, only to create again. Thus, hope is sustained; culture springs up around them and philosophy, religion, mythology, archaeology take roots. One cannot forget Lord Krishna's frolicking in and around the Yamuna so lovingly described in the literature of India; one is reminded of the Saryu of the Ramayana, Kalidas's Kshipra, the place of Godavari and Kaveri in the psyche of the South, the power of the

Brahmaputra (the only male) and the love and awe attached to the five rivers of the Punjab. As for the Himalayas, it is a part of the unconscious of the race. In the *Gita*, Lord Krishna calls himself Himalayas among the mountains.

Discussing the process of de-colonization Edward Said remarks: "After the period of 'primary resistance,' literally fighting against outside intrusion, there comes a period on secondary, that is, ideological resistance" (1994:252-53), when efforts are made to reconstitute a community and restore its dignity and unity. By this process the subaltern occupies his place self-consciously so as to gain his rightful place. Said gives examples from literature to make his point. Ngugi induces life in the river Honia in *The River Between* and Tayb Salih re-maps the power of the Nile in *Season of Migration*. When compared to Conrad's river in the *Heart of Darkness*, the above two rivers—Honia and Nile — appear living entities. Only an insider who has imbibed the culture with his/ her mother's milk can think of nationalism in terms of cultural practices (254-55).

Both Gita Mehta and Arun Joshi suggest a rethinking of Indian culture and tradition. Joshi hints at the self-destructive trends of the power politics and warns contemporary India. He advocates purity of thought and action through the story of the city and the river, and through Som's dissipation. Gita Mehta weighs the mysticism of *Vanprastha* in the scale of modern rationality and finds that the dynamism of Indian thought has always advocated detachment with action, and animism with humanism. The self-contained and interconnected characters and tales reconcile the rich diversity of doctrines in the flow of Narmada – the symbol of our cultural multiplicity and unity. The Narmada guesthouse is symbolic of this world where people come, stay awhile and depart. This oriental view reminds us of Omar Khayyam's Rubayyat likening this world to a "Caravan Sarai." The bureaucrat manager of the guesthouse represents the modern seeker – confused and unable to decide what to choose: this world or *Vanaprastha*. He is knowledgeable but his knowledge is pre-eminently in the shape of information, not wisdom. As Tariq Mia often says teasingly, one has yet to learn a lot about the world before one seeks renunciation.

At the end of Mehta's novel, the bureaucrat seeker broods as the river goes on and the lamps glittering on the current indicate a ray of hope for the soul marching for merger in the Higher Being. In Joshi's *The City and the River*, the river overwhelms a complete civilization yet it is a benevolent force because on its water floats the hope of a new life, of a new beginning. In *The Last Labyrinth*, the Himalaya, the Ganga, and Varanasi vouchsafe soothing, purifying effect but one has to get rid of the puny passions and desires if one wants to achieve self-actualization. The images created by

the authors and the significance of the images in their respective contexts can be safely studied in the light of the present imperatives. In his *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha points out that a nation is a cultural space representing certain events at every point of time that change and with it changes the image. But the myths and the archetypes grant the culture of that nation continuity, and a creative writer by his dexterous handling of these mythical frameworks and the synchronization of individual history with the national history reflect the social concerns and becomes the beacon light. By reverting to the cultural past, Arun Joshi and Gita Mehta subtly draw from the perennial past and give momentum to both the literary culture and history.

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