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Spiritual Quest And Human Experience In Gita Mehta's "A River Sutra"

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Abstract: The novel A River Sutra by Gita Mehta is a contemplative journey through spirituality and the experiences that everyone has as they go through their lives. The book takes place by the River Narmada, which has a spiritual significance, and is made up of connected stories about individuals from different backgrounds, class systems, and experiences, who are all linked by their struggles with grief, longing, loss, and failure. The river is an example of a strong spiritual energy that signifies the purification process, continuing to grow, and here is the possibility of rebirth from within oneself. Through the examples of ascetics, artists, widows, scholars, and seekers, Mehta views spirituality as a personal experience made through the realities of life and not as rigid rules and definitions of theological reasoning. This essay will explore how, in the River Sutra, Mehta portrays the journey toward spirituality as a continuous journey of self-discovery and not a final destination of enlightenment. Mehta connects the complex relationship between worldly attachment and enlightenment through a fusion of mythology, philosophy, and realism. The River Sutra is a significant work in Indian English Literature because it determines that compassion, perseverance, and knowledge of the limitations of humanity are the keys to attaining true spiritual enlightenment.

Keywords: Indian Spirituality, River Symbolism, Human Experience, Spiritual Quest.



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Introduction

The long-standing interest of Indian English Literature in the relationship between spirituality and human life is a reflection of India's heritage of thought and culture. One example of this is *River Sutra*, a work of contemporary Indian woman author Gita Mehta, who creatively fuses together the elements of spirituality, mythology and the modern human condition. The book is a contemplative study of the themes of life, suffering and the quest for meaning, published in 1993. The setting for *River Sutra*, is along the banks of the River Narmada, and it is presented in an episodic format, rather than in the conventional structural narrative style of other works of Indian literature. *River Sutra* is narrated by a retired government worker, who has taken to running a rest house on the banks of the river, and he tells a succession of stories, each of which is connected by their common themes of the search for the meaning of life, as well as their similar experiences of existential crisis, spiritual confusion and emotional pain. In these stories, Mehta depicts the river as a transcendent, spiritual force that is empathically aware of the struggles of the human condition. In this essay, I will explore how the spiritual search, as depicted in *River Sutra*, is inextricably linked to the human experience and that Mehta has portrayed spirituality as a journey of self-discovery and personal development through suffering compassion and self-awareness instead of as a prescriptive religious pathway.

The River as a Symbol of Spirituality

The representative function of the River Narmada in the *River Sutra* is highly symbolic. Rivers in Indian philosophy have been viewed as sacred and a source of life. Through the use of this cultural understanding, Mehta describes how the River Narmada acts as an outside force that both provides a change within each character's life and thus represents their transition. The river is a representation of change and continuity in every way. It is apparent that the river's continual flow represents the cyclical aspect of humanity and time. The characters who approach the river are usually in a state of transition where they are attempting to find peace with their emotional struggles or moral conflicts. As such, the river offers characters a space to reflect and to grow within themselves, and is not able to resolve the issue.

By showing the river as an intangible, contemplative force, Mehta communicates the sentiment that spiritual growth is an internal experience. Additionally, the river serves as the symbol for the very lengthy, gradual and transformative process through which one navigates the spiritual journey. This symbolism reinforces the primary premise of the book that spiritual development is more about one's experience than it is about instant gratification.

Storytelling & Narrative Structure

One of the most interesting aspects of *River Sutra* is its unique narrative structure. Unlike traditional novels that follow a straightforward plot line, *River Sutra* consists of many different, interrelated stories that are closely linked to one another. This type of story format reflects the oral traditions of storytelling that exists in India where individuals share their life experiences with one another, which gives wisdom. The spiritual aspect of the book is dominated by the narration of the stories by a

retired bureaucrat who serves as the narrator for the majority of the book. Through the narrator's perspective, readers are provided with a reasonable and pragmatic view of spirituality that eventually leads them to become more introspective as they listen to the stories of others. The role of the narrator also indicates how important it is for a person to possess empathy and understanding for others in order to progress spiritually.

Human Pain and Spiritual Enlightenment

River Sutra suggests that suffering leads to the search for spirituality. Most characters' travel to the river after having experienced emotional pain or loss, grief, or disappointment. Suffering provides an opportunity for a person to look within themselves and grow; therefore, Mehta views it as a cause for self-reflection and growth, not as something negative. Men who spend their lives pursuing fame, power, or love often find themselves disappointed. The pain they suffer from will enable them to delve deeper into their true selves and determine who they are, what they want to be, and how much value they place in material wealth. The author suggests that a crisis leads a person to become more aware of their spirituality.

Another shared theme throughout the book is the commonality of human suffering. Everyone is subject to suffering, no matter where they have come from or their position in society. This demonstrates that the quest for spirituality crosses all societal and economic boundaries.

Inner Conflict and Worldly Attachment

A continuing theme throughout *River Sutra* is the conflict between our attachments to the material world and our aspirations toward spiritual enlightenment. The characters struggle to balance their search for peace through spirituality with their ambition, desires, and emotional connections to others. The conflict between the pursuit of worldly things and spiritual freedom is a prominent topic of discussion in Indian philosophy, which generally opposes all forms of attachment in pursuit of ultimate freedom.

Mehta, however, does not advocate for completely renouncing the material world. She presents attachment as a fundamental aspect of being human, and something that individuals should understand, rather than reject or ignore. Characters who attempt to run away from their emotions often find themselves confronting their unresolved emotional issues at the end of their journey.

Mehta suggests that a path to spirituality involves integrating one's experience, not denying it. By addressing their desires with awareness and understanding, individuals achieve true spiritual development. This holistic view of spirituality presents spirituality as an active, caring pursuit, rather than something that is only regarded as an ultimate goal.

Spiritual Experience and Women

Women's perspectives in *River Sutra* bring new insight into the spiritual and suffering relationship and shed light on the intersectionality between being a woman and being spiritual.

While women are portrayed as strong, independent, and aware of themselves rather than solely being victims of their circumstances, the social, cultural, and familial pressures placed on them shape their spiritual journeys and provide references to their gendered experiences of self-discovery and suffering.

Through these perspectives, Mehta allows readers to explore another dimension of the spirit; Mehta's writing is open to every person, not only monks and dreamers, who have been faced with the realities of daily living and the intricacies of developing and sustaining relationships.

Philosophy and Myth

River Sutra provides additional insight into the subject of spirituality through the inclusion of Indian stories and philosophies. These ideas help bridge the gap between ancient knowledge and contemporary experience, as well as contribute to the culture of India.

As opposed to mere antiquity, the book presents myths as actual events which relate to human struggles. The book's philosophical inspirations stress self-awareness, acceptance, compassion, and a lack of stringent guidelines for spirituality. Through the combination of reality and myth, Mehta represents spirituality as an everlasting fixture in humanity that is connected to our daily life experiences.

Conclusion

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* examines the quest for spirituality through the many ways humans experience pain and transformation and sympathizes with where humans are at in that journey. In this respect, by placing the stories beside the banks of the holy River Narmada, Mehta has created a metaphorical landscape in which pain, reflection, and transformation intersect. This book illustrates that spirituality doesn't merely exist as an idea but, rather, is part of the process of living one's life with an awareness of who we are, the experiences we have gone through in our lives, and our pain.

Through its episodic structure, rich metaphor, and diverse characters, *A River Sutra* emphasizes that all people are searching for meaning in the world around them, but it is also very much a personal journey that may differ from one person to another. In other words, there is no single path to finding spiritual fulfilment. *A River Sutra* suggests we will find spiritual fulfilment if we deal with problems in a compassionate and understanding way rather than running away from them; therefore, *A River Sutra* represents an important literary work in Indian English literature as it provides a unique perspective of the relationship between what is sacred and what is human.

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