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## WOMAN IN SEARCH OF A NEW IDENTITY IN GITA MEHTA'S *RAJ*

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**Abstract :** *Gita Mehta's Raj presents a parallel around the life of the protagonist Jaya, a princess and the political turmoil in the colonial background. The narrative follows the progression of a young woman born in Indian nobility flourishing under the British Raj. The protagonist has her fortunes intertwined with those of two princely states - Balmer and Sirpur, which represent the country at large. The novel reveals the feminist leaning of the writer, who wishes to liberate women from the patriarchal shackles of society.*

**Keywords:** *Progression, liberate, women, patriarchal, independent*

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Gita Mehta is an Indian writer, born in Delhi, in a family of freedom fighters and has completed her education in India and at Cambridge University. She has written, produced, and directed a number of documentaries for American, British, and European television companies and has published *Karma Cola*, *Raj*, *A River Sutra* and *Snakes and Ladders*. *Raj*, her first novel, tells a historical story, resplendent in the colours of Rajasthan. The narrative follows the progression of a young woman born in Indian nobility flourishing under the British Raj.

The novel presents a parallel around the life of the protagonist Jaya, a princess and the political turmoil in the colonial background. The protagonist has her fortunes intertwined with those of two princely states - Balmer and Sirpur, which represent the country at large. Change comes in Jaya's life in two major ways, one through a succession of deaths in the family (she loses her brother and father, and after marriage her brother-in-law, husband and even her son) and the other due to the changing political reality in princely India and British India culminating in the freedom of the country. Mehta depicts her protagonist grounded in traditional values, but unique in her feminine sensibility to be able to adapt to many changes, throughout her life.

Gita Mehta's *Raj* highlights the issues of Hindu women in Pre-independence and Post-independence India in a very realistic way. Through Jaya's story, she shows the reader a portion of the British India's struggle for independence as it affected a slim segment of high-culture society. Mehta's focus is not just on the colourful pictures of Indian cultural extravaganza, but on the colonial perspective. *Raj* presents a re-reading of a significant chapter of Indian history dealing with human relationships in a colonial society. *Raj* is the first genuine counterpart to the imperial clichés of the popular British view of the Raj". Another critic evaluates *Raj* not just as another story of princely grandeur but more as a record of women's lives behind the stateliness.



Gita Mehta weaves a 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- to well known history of our freedom struggle, or a racy account of the grandeur and frivolity of the exorbitant life style of the princess.

Unlike the prose narratives that have used conventions of romance and vague historical past, *Raj* uses historicity to focus on the feminine point of view, adding a new dimension to it. The writer chooses to tell the story of the last 50 years of British rule through the eye of a princess of a small, remote and conservative kingdom. The novel highlights Jaya's constant struggle to live with dignity. Her encounter with education is only due to the socio-political changes during the Indian renaissance. She spends most of her early years in purdah and truly emerges from social confines towards the end of the novel. She is forced to marry the westernized Pratap Singh, who does not respect her traditional upbringing, and finds her traditional appearance, complete with nose ring and painted hands and feet physically repellent.

The novel reveals the feminist leaning of the writer, who wishes to liberate women from the patriarchal shackles of society. Jaya's quest for identity reveals the various social, religious and economic facets of her royalty, under which the emotions and sentiments of the real women lay buried. The writer strongly protests against the various practices, which annihilate the dignity and rights of women. The narrative boldly projects the realistic condition of women of the royalty, making fiction a powerful means to do so.

*Raj* has a very traditional setting, in two Princely states, and is ideal to analyse the status of women, in that period of time. The writer points to many social issues of marriage, widowhood, and education, through the protagonist evaluating them from a very feminist point of view. The writer describes this aspect in a very significant manner, through the letter written by a Maharani to the editor of The Bombay Chronicle quoted in the novel. Another prominent aspect is the dependence of woman in the patriarchal set up which is poignantly highlighted, through Jaya, who has no personal choices. The underlying politics in the marriage arrangements leaves her a helpless puppet. The institution of marriage and its related practices are depicted as a decadent and obnoxious tradition in the patriarchal system, in which women are turned into innocent victims.

Another moribund tradition, the treatment meted out to widows, is also highlighted in the novel. The widow is ritually cursed by the old women assembled at her husband's funeral as unfortunate, unclean and unholy, fit only to be cast out and abandoned (p. 159). Jaya, who in her revulsion at this humiliating practice on the occasion of her father's death hits out at the old women shouting a litany of abuse, herself suffers the same humiliation when she loses her husband (p. 355). Her hair is shorn like her mother when she is in a state of widowhood. All these practices strongly symbolize a loss of identity for women who are forced to live within the parameters of society. The author to make the reader realize the magnitude of the loss a woman faces prominently portrays these meaningless rites and rituals, which make life hell for women.



Donald Oken rightly points out that the loss of identity results in alienation. It would be interesting and instructive to attempt in depth analysis of Indian English novelist's search for identity and to see how far they have progressed at all in exploring and affirming it in their works. Dennis Wrong rightly suggests that the term "identity" and "identity crisis" have become the semantic beacons of our time, "for these "Verbal Emblem" express our discontent with modern life and modern society and the term "Identity\* has become a value charged, almost a charismatic term, with its secure achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation."

There are number of political-historical works of fiction which revolve around princely states and the British rule. Some notable ones are E.M. Forster's *The Hill of Devi* (1953), Mulk Raj Anand's *Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princess* (1963), and Kamala Markandaya's *The Golden Honey Comb* (1977). These works of fiction present a male sensibility while *Raj* presents the political scenario in a historical context from a very feminine angle.

The protagonist finds herself pulled apart in three ways: by the old traditional set of belief, she has grown with, secondly by the loyalty to her husband and his kingdom and thirdly by her growing awareness and understanding of India's need to be united. The princess is a woman who is mauled by the irony of fate, which has snatched her dear ones and left her alone to face the bitter realities of life. She is able to survive all the calamities around her by absorbing the wisdom and power of her traditional culture.

Jaya is born and brought up in Balmer, a tiny Kingdom in Rajasthan. She is educated in the manner her ancestral princesses have been. At five, Jaya accompanies her father to hunting, at ten she kills her first tiger, and at twelve she is trained in the art of personal decoration, "the Sola shringar" (p. 94). It is drummed into her that a "woman is a mood", and that she has to be desirable to her man. While her father is intent on her outdoor training, her mother is sceptical of its value for a girl. Under her father's command, she is trained in her riding, shooting, hunting, tent-pegging, and playing polo, by Major Vir Singh, a tough teacher, indifferent to the fact that she is a girl. Off the ground, her lessons in Rajniti continue with the Raj Guru, tougher still, whose austerity and discipline frighten her. The Raj Guru, in his dry and crackling voice makes her repeat the four arms of Kingship: Saam, Daam, Dand, Bhed, tells her that "merit and not birth, is the attribute of Kingship" (p. 89); and instils in her the ancient ideals which stand in good stead during her political and psychological difficulties. Jaya's mother, the Maharani, worries at her educated status as a major disability in the marriage market. Her inhibitions are supported by many traditional religious superstitions and practices.

The first book depicts a large span in Jaya's life and the beginnings of much emotional turmoil like her engagement to Prince Pratap, death of her brother Tikka, widowhood of her mother and finally her marriage to a proxy sword. "After protracted negotiations, and after agreeing to pay a large annual sum to Prince Pratap as well as Jaya's dowry, Raja Man Singh had finally prevailed on the Sirpur Council to permit Jaya to be married by proxy- to Prince Pratap's sword" (p. 168). Eventually Jaya is 'displaced' from Balmer, her birthplace, in



helpless and tragic conditions, shunning her father's desire to train her into a modern empowered woman.

Gita Mehta vividly describes the new home, Sirpur, in Book Two, where Jaya arrives grandly in her bridal conveyance. The Abyssinian eunuchs usher Jaya into the presence of the Dowager Maharani, the grandmother of Victor and Pratap. She is an old woman crippled with arthritis. Hard knuckles crack against Jaya's temples to remove the evil eye. Following the tradition, she hands over the storeroom keys to Jaya. The Dowager Maharani tells Jaya about Victor and Pratap and unscrupulously admits that she sent young concubines to remind them of their own customs, when they were in Sirpur. Jaya listens in shocked silence in the purdah garden, where the Dowager Maharani's describes in rasping voice, how she used to send smooth limbed girls from the harem to seduce the awkward schoolboys during their holidays, hoping to recapture her grandsons' souls from Britain through their loins (p. 180).

After a year of Jaya's arrival in Sirpur, the Dowager Maharani accompanies Jaya to the Kamini Temple. The Dowager Maharani thrusts her hand between the lips. Red liquid seeped through her stiff fingers as she smeared Jaya's cheeks and forehead, chanting, "May your homage to the Goddess bring fruit to your womb and May you enrich our house with sons" (p. 185). In Sirpur, Jaya feels that a harsh reality had treaded on her dreams as she is filled with remorse, as she realizes the implications of colonial education forced upon the two Princes. The ancient Kingdom of Sirpur is steeped in tradition and rituals and like the masses, even the royalty is in a financial crisis. The British had sent Prince Pratap and Prince Victor to England as hostages under the pretext of education. The British were successful in alienating these future rulers from their cultural and social mores and develop in them a taste for everything European. It is the motherland (Sirpur), which becomes a prey to the ploy of the British. The rulers are conditioned to be alienated from their roots. The elder brother Prince Victor obsessed with Cora Hart, an American actress, does not wish to return, while Pratap a compulsive flirt, carelessly squanders away the royal treasury by chasing white women.

Jaya's married life in Sirpur, acquires another level in her own quest for identity. Jaya continues to remain a married virgin and finally, when she meets Pratap, her excitement is nipped in the bud, when she realizes how her husband feels about her.

The Empire has instructed me to stay in India. If I am permitted to travel abroad again, I shall have to be accompanied by a wife. That's why I agreed to our marriage. So here we are, Jaya Devi. You cannot eat quail or wear a sari. You know no languages. Yet through you I must outmanoeuvre the Empire that forced me into this marriage (p. 191).

Jaya endures all kinds of insults and her husband's wishes for her to change, with traditional patience and sense of obedience. Her transformation is depicted as a parallel to the socio-political changes Sirpur was undergoing for the forthcoming visit of Price of Wales. The renovations are undertaken at a huge cost, at a time when Sirpur was devastated by flood. Maharaja Victor raises loans to exhibit extravagance and progress. Jaya tries to change in the



manner her husband desires, but is constantly emotionally and morally shattered as she learns about her husband's conjugal betrayals.

Once when Prince Pratap tells Jaya how he and other Indians, including Tikka, fought bravely on the front, in the First War and adds that it is the only time when they were permitted to be men, otherwise, living without pride is not a pleasant business; her immediate rejoinder is, "An unwanted wife shares that experience, Hukum." A Critic's comment on this aspect is absorbing:

The heroine is both a mute observer and an active participant; a mute observer of the events she cannot control, be they political whereby the princes were stripped of their power, or pertaining to human weakness whereby her husband and other princes invited their own downfall by their vagaries; she is an active participant in life when the demands her decisiveness and tests the strength of her character. (p. 48-49)

Book three portrays Jaya as a Maharani, though her status is changed, nothing else changes. After the demise of Victor, Prince Pratap takes over the throne as Maharaja of Sirpur. Jaya becomes the Maharani of the state for the people. But her requirements of love, satisfaction and human dignity especially from her husband, remain unfulfilled. All she finds is humiliation, and self-degradation. She realizes that her husband only touches her when he is in drunken state. Though she weeps over her fate, her husband blatantly gloats how, "Maharaja Pratap appeared in his wife's bedroom and drunkenly plunged himself into her body as if she were a concubine brought to him for the night" (p. 278). Jaya's status is no more than a concubine and Pratap's love for her is only a farce, but still she remains a typically obedient Hindu wife.

According to the British policy, Pratap is required to have a male heir, to be able to have the rights to his property. Jaya again becomes a means to provide the heir to Pratap. She conceives a male-child, but again her maternal rights are at stake, when she is not allowed to feed her own child. Pratap forbids Jaya saying that: The Maharanis of Sirpur employ wet nurses. I will not have my wife feeding a baby like a peasant woman" (p. 298). Pratap tries to keep her away from maternal happiness, making her bare and lonely from within.

His own extra marital affairs and flings continue unabated and he becomes totally detached from Jaya. She depicts her condition to Lady Modi:

"He can't touch his own wife until she is turned into a toy who no longer represents a woman. Or until he himself is so drunk he can no longer pass for man. He shrinks from the sight of his wife giving breast to his son, but not from wearing his ancient crest on his feet to visit a brothel. Is this the conduct of a husband? Of a king"? (p. 329)

Pratap's relationship with the dancer gradually turns into a scandal. Jaya's political awareness increases and she realizes that it is high time she demanded her rights as the regent Maharani of Sirpur. If she fails to do this, perhaps she may lose everything. Pratap also realizes her growing maturity and he is frustrated at his inability to suppress her rights;



therefore, in anger and frustration, he gives it in writing. Pratap dies tragically in a plane crash, unable to bear the desertion of the dancer and growing nationalism against the British.

Book four portrays Jaya as the Regent of Sirpur. She faces a period of turmoil and conspiracies as the Raj Guru of Sirpur tries to control the state administration. He tries to keep Jaya away from the administration and from her son, Arjun. He tries to turn the son against the mother. The traditional rituals, which kept the widow in seclusion, are used as a pretext to emotionally blackmail the son. "Your mother cannot be with you at this time. She is unclean" (p. 355). Rituals of widowhood keep her away from her son, who is too small to understand them. Her widowhood becomes a curse on her. She was treated thus:

"There were no bangles to be slipped onto her wrists, no long minutes spent combing the thick hair that had once fallen to her knees, no sindoor to mark the circle of matrimony on her forehead. She did not even have to cover her shaven head. A widow was not considered desirable, only unlucky. (p. 355)

Jaya knows that the people of the state do not accept her as Maharani, but she desires security for her son, the future Maharaj of the state. When she meets her widowed mother after so many years, life seems to have taken a full circle. Her mother had joined an ashram and the national movement under Gandhi. She advises Jaya to go back to Sirpur and guard her son and the state of Sirpur.

It was indeed time for anarchy in India. Communal riot burst out. Bloodshed took place in Bengal. The Maharani of Balmer died during that time. She told that she realized true meaning of Sati. She also told not to mourn her passing (p. 399).

Political crises and calamity shakes Sirpur, and Jaya requires legal assistance. Arun Roy helps her, and gradually their friendship and understanding grow and she finds some comfort and peace in it. Misfortunes continue to follow Jaya, as war breaks out and she loses her young son, her friend and confidant Arun Roy. Her estate goes through many kinds of economic and political crisis. All her life Jaya has suffered silently. Her protests never found voice, but it is only at the end of the novel, she seems to find her faith in democracy and applies to enter the government-thus suggesting the famous Maharani of Jaipur as a role model. She has come a long way from the world of concubines, eunuchs and purifying rites and rituals. Her quest for identity finally reaches a stage, where she begins to see her real self.

Gita Mehta is able to offer a complete story without bias or bitterness and leaves the readers to formulate an independent position from which to read history, she tells. She is not interested in pressing her political impressions, but presents historical facts in a beautifully woven tapestry based upon her female protagonist's strength of character.

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