3. MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA AFTER FREEDOM

> "Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and pepper pots. I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I -even I -had dreamed."
>
> ***(Midnight's children)***

> "Unlike your busy pantheon of Hindu gods, we Jains follow in the foot steps of a man. A great prince it is true but still only a man who found that all his wealth, power, beauty gave him no more than transitory pleasure and who yearned for a pleasure that could be sustained. Wrapped in the luxuries of a great court by day, a beautiful young wife by night, Mahavira longed for the freedom to find this state of bliss, if it existed."
>
> ***(The River Sutra)***

During the glorious hour of Independence, the ecstasy of freedom made people believe that India could finally define herself and reassert her identity with pride. However, the fact remains that the liberation of India from British rule was a long, complex and painful process. In sheer scale and savagery, the murders, rapes, abduction and destruction of properties that followed the advent of Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan far exceeded anything that had gone before. As Khushwant Singh, the celebrated novelist comments:

> A painful caesarian birth it was. An infancy seared by dark, pre-natal memories. Those figures still bustle with life. One Lord Louis Mountbatten, cousin of royalty, cheer leader of a retreating Raj, suave butcher. He landed on March 24 and, in three months, announced the land of Indies would be cut up in three. One Cyril Radcliff, who was to perform the actual

surgery. The musty India- ignorant lawyer's tools: a map and a scalpel. One Nehru, willing midwife(8).

Freedom was indeed an unforgettable experience. The ups and downs of India's life as an independent Republic were faithfully recounted by many writers during this period. But over the years, the soaring hope and joy of 1947 began to be tempered with cynicism and despair. Indian literature in English, especially, the novel form, also acquired a new dimension in the 1980s and 90s because creative writers attempted to encapsulate the broad spectrum of India's life from a totally different angle. Most of these writers, with their cosmopolitan background, put the many decades of India's unfolding history in revealing perspective. We have an impressive body of Indian writing in English represented by Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sashi Tharoor, Gita Mehta and many others. One can conclude that their confidence in the language and their originality, combined with unprecedented inventiveness has contributed collectively to the growth and development of Indian novel in English. However, these new generation of writers could not understand the idealism and sentimental concern regarding freedom which writers like Raja Rao brought out in their novels. What is however evident is a collage of memories and a sense of nostalgia in and for a lost world.

The post independence novels of the 80s by Indian writers writing in English thus gave voice to the harsh coldness of reality instead of idealism, hopes and dreams in the preceding period. There was also a clear shift in background from the traditional rural India of Kanthapura and Malgudi to the modern urban India of Bombay and Calcutta. Needless to say, Salman Rushdie, with his *Midnight's Children,* ushered in this new wave of fiction writing in India. In this respect Neerja Mattoo's views on Rushdie's *Midnight's children* can also be read as a telling comment on the post independence novels of the 80s. In her words:

> With a deceptively comic vision and a style of conscious mockery through the major part of the book, it raises deeply disturbing questions regarding our society, the institutions and values it has spawned, the cultural patterns, the hierarchies of power that have raised and

> which now threaten the very survival of the country. It tells of squandered talents, failed dreams and ideologies and idealism gone berserk. It is in the final horrifying vision, a scathing attack on those who are responsible for literally castrating the country and thus destroying its future(63).

It is from this point of view that this chapter seeks to analyze two pre-eminent novels - Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra.* When *Midnight's Children* was published in 1981, it became an immediate success. Honoured as the greatest of all Booker winners, *Midnight's Children* put Indian novels on the world map. While Rushdie's novel is a liberal interpretation of political and historical events that unfold in independent India, Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* published in 1993, offers authentic interpretations of Indian cultural values, music, art forms and ethos. Pointing out the need to assert one's freedom as a writer, in his collection of essays titled *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie remarks:

> Art is a passion of the mind. and the Imagination works best when it is most free. Western writers have always felt free to be eclectic in their selection of theme, setting, form...I am sure we must grant ourselves an equal freedom(3).

* * *

Midnight's Children is a book about India and recounts the experience of three generations of the Sinai family. Saleem Sinai is one of the elect children born in the midnight hour of India's Tryst with Destiny, thereby becoming a symbol of newly Independent India, full of promise and high expectation. Significantly, Saleem says, "I had been mysteriously hand cuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country."(3) Since Saleem's birth coincides with India's freedom, the important dates in the history of the freedom movement and post-independent India gain added significance. Consequently, he makes connections between himself and Independent India. He not only participates actively in the major political events, but also initiates many of them. For instance, he connects his own adolescence with the after- math of

partition and also the birth of his son Aadam with Indira Gandhi's Emergency. The novel is thus a faithful record of Saleem's experiences in an ever-changing India.

Freedom, Saleem realizes, does more harm than good. *Midnight's Children* contains sixty two years of twentieth century Indian history, almost three generations of pre and post –colonial India. Sadly all the children born on the fateful night, as Saleem Sinai, inherit linguistic, religious, caste and provincial rivalries. In other words, these children with multiple identities become a metaphor for Indian society. They mirror the fragmentation and multiplicity of Indian society and the confusion of social, religious, regional and parochial identities of the Indian people. Out of a total of such 1001 children only 581 children survive up to 1957.

The journey of Indian's march towards freedom also becomes the journey of the Sinai's from Srinagar to Amritsar, Agra, Bombay and finally Karachi. Saleem Sinai begins his narrative with a vision of his grandfather Aadam Aziz, who returns to India after five years in Germany studying medicine. Aziz belonged to a Kashmiri Muslim family and sadly watches his childhood paradise Kashmir messed up by the colonial regime. The feelings of alienation which Aziz has is clearly expressed in the novel:

> Instead of the beauty of the tiny valley circled by giant teeth, he noticed the narrowness, the proximity of the horizon; and felt sad, to be at home and feel so utterly enclosed. He also felt inexplicably as though the old place resented this educated, stethoscope return(11).

Freedom comes only after a sense of belonging. However, Aziz lacks this feeling of belonging. Referred to as a German by the boatman Tai, Aadam feels alienated in his own land. Tai also makes an attempt to chase Aziz out of the valley by inflicting his three year unwashed body on him. Aziz himself, with his liberal humanist ideals loses his sense of freedom and feels oppressed by the narrow thinking and religious bigotry of the people. The feeling of alienation was equally strong in his years in Germany when he finds himself unable to mix with his Marxist German friends. He learned many things

from Germany, including of course, his fragmented identity. The narrator recounts his experiences:

> Heidelberg, in which along with medicine and politics he learned that India- like radium had been discovered by the Europeans; even Oskar was filled with admiration for Vasco Da Gama and this was what finally separated Aadam Aziz from his friends, this belief of theirs that he was somehow the invention of their ancestors (11)

What we understand is that Aziz's feelings stand true for all those who emigrate to foreign lands. They are not accepted anywhere and they become strangers even in their own country. In his collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie points out this predicament.:

> I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated...and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all..... We are Hindus, who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result- as my use of the Christian notion of the fall indicates- we are now partly of the west. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools (15).

It might be his quest for freedom from such feelings of alienation that Aziz chooses to marry an orthodox girl Naseem Ghani. The perforated sheet with a seven-inch diameter hole through which he sees his patient Naseem in bits and snatches becomes the dominating symbol of the novel. However, the marriage becomes disastrous when Aziz tries to impose his liberal ideas on his wife. Through out his life, he fights a losing battle with his wife in an attempt to change her outlook. Asking her to give up purdah, he advises her: "Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl, start thinking about being a modern Indian woman"(34).

The question of women's freedom comes through at many places in the novel. The institution of purdah also comes in for sharp analysis. Naseem puts on the purdah because it covers her "deep, deep shame." Her grandfather Jamila conceals herself behind the purdah in order to hide her identity. Thus, the purdah is highlighted in the novel as a powerful symbol of women's identity. In this context, Janet Wilson remarks: "The purdah, while highlighting the repressed female side of the social context, also shows a repression of suffering Mother India under chaotic socio-political conditions" (18).

Aadam Aziz could free himself from the narrow confines of his Kashmiri Muslim identity only after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The bloody massacre became a major incident in the mainstream narrative of the freedom struggle. It also became the starting point in Aadam's quest for a nationalistic identity. Aadam Aziz, who becomes a witness of the incident, gets a severe and mysterious bruise on his chest. He remarks about the incident:"I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on the chest that turned me into an Indian." (40) In this way, Aadam Aziz identifies himself with the broader nationalist movement for freedom and feels his Indianness rub on to him.

It does not take long for Aziz to understand that religious fundamentalism had strong roots in India. It was, he knew, a major hurdle in the path to total freedom. Religious instruction was not serving its purpose any longer. Concerned with the education of his five children, he throws out their religious tutor and reveals the reason to his wife:

> "He was teaching them to hate, wife. He tells them to hate the Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who knows what other vegetarians. Will you have hateful children, woman?" (42)

It is this opposition to religious bigotry that results in Aziz's estrangement from his wife. In this context, Madhusudan Rao remarks:

> His marriage and life with Naseem is both an individual quest for freedom from religious shackles and the struggle

> of Mother India for Independence. Though Aadam Aziz does not seem to be overtly concerned with the Indian freedom struggle, his life is, nevertheless, crisscrossed by it (39).

The need for freedom arises when any social group feels the need to assert its identity. It is from this theory that Muslims, by virtue of their religious and cultural distinction form a separate group that the idea of a separate state for Muslims of the subcontinent arose. The Muslim League was a natural result of this viewpoint. In the novel, there is a reference to the Free Islam convocation, which opposed the partition of India on religious lines. True to his liberal and sophisticated ideas, Aadam Aziz becomes a great supporter of the convocation. He bitterly opposes the two-nation theory. However, inspite of his modern values and optimism, the partition takes place and religious fanaticism proves stronger. Commenting upon the secular credentials of Aadam Aziz, Salman Rushdie comments in ***Imaginary Homelands:***

> Midnight's Children enters its subject from the point of view of a secular man. I am a member of that generation of Indians who were sold the secular ideal(16)

The assertion of freedom, it must be maintained. cannot always be for a just cause. The question is – Was the two-nation theory merely an assertion of a distinct identity? The fact is that while members of the Muslim league were asserting their freedom, they were also getting enmeshed in their own selfish interests. The Muslim league provided a focal point for Muslim political aspirations. As Nadir Khan, Mian Abdullah's personal secretary, points out in the novel:

> Landowners- with vested interests to protect! What do they have to do with Muslims?...And what's more They are mad. Otherwise why would they want to partition India? (46)

The announcement of partition bred violence among the communities. Rushdie is quick to point out that this racial hatred was merely a façade and the reasons were strictly economic: "Anonymous phone calls, letters written with words cut out of newspapers

were issued to Muslim businessmen, who were offered the choice between paying a single, once only cash sum and having their world burned down." (72)

Interestingly enough, the perforated sheet with its symbolic spiritual sanction provides a frame to the canvas on which Rushdie traces India's journey to freedom. As Saleem Sinai narrates: "My grandfather drew out from the tin trunk of his past, a stained and perforated sheet, and discovered that the hole had grown; that there were other, smaller holes in the surrounding fabric"(111). Shortly after this prophecy, Jinnah announced the midnight birth of a Muslim nation.

Although Rushdie does not deal directly with the freedom movement or the problem of partition, Saleem Sinai becomes a tragic victim of these events. Along with the major historical events leading to freedom such as the Quit India resolution of 1942 and the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, Salman Rushdie also chronicles the major events taking place in the Aziz household. The novelist here points out to women's lack of freedom and her total dependence upon man for her own identity. As the novel states:" And now Aadam Aziz lifted his daughter, passing her up after the dowry into the care of this man who had re-named and so re-invented her, thus becoming in a sense her father as well as her new husband"(66). Although many women participated in the freedom movement, there was no definite shift in the position of women. They continued to have an inferior status. Malashri Lal has this to say:

> The intervention of the Indian national Movement and Mahatma Gandhi disturbed social order for a limited period of patriotic zeal but even there, none had questioned the old premise that a woman's place was essentially at home and her language was one of silence. It is a truism in history that most women activists returned to the hearth after the political crisis was declared to have ended in 1947 (5).

Rushdie depicts the various phases of the freedom struggle with the implied motive of making people conscious of the cause of freedom. The birth of Saleem Sinai becomes synonymous with the birth of the nation. The media celebrates the event by presenting a hundred rupee cheque to his mother Amina. In fact, the prospect of political

independence made everyone feel that all their problems will be solved once India become an independent nation. But the startling reality was that Independent India benefited only the rich people. This fact is substantiated in the novel by Joseph D'Costa when he tells Mary Pereira:

> You don't know nothing, Mary, the air comes from the north now, and it's full of dying. This independence is for the rich only; the poor are being made to kill each other, like flies. In Punjab, in Bengal. Riots, riots, poor against poor(104).

The dream of freedom, which many people visualized, was about being self-assertive, independent and sovereign individuals. They missed the fact that the need for social interaction is as important as the need for freedom. When people move from one historical period to another one where they enjoy more amount of political freedom, social interaction between individuals tends to decline. And this has a disastrous effect on the economic well being of the individual. British domination and the consequent loss of freedom had diverse effects on the Indian population. In the historical context, the popular view is that whatever may have been the evils of the British colonialism in India, they had left the country with an infrastructure which otherwise may never have existed. The vast Indian railway network, the post and telegraph system, modern irrigation works, are all held up as positive legacies of the colonial era. In the novel, the East India Company officer named Methwold voices a similar opinion. He says:

> Never seen the like. Hundreds of years of decent government, then suddenly up and off. You'll admit we weren't all bad: built your roads. Schools, railways, trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling down until an Englishman bothered to see to it. And now, suddenly independence (96).

Indeed, Midnight's child had to live with, and live out of illusions. The reality of free India was that it was divided within itself-polarities arising between the rich and the poor, the north and the south, the Hindu and the Muslim. Both the midnight's children

Saleem Sinai and Shiva, born at the same hour of India's freedom lived different lives. While Saleem was brought up in luxury, Shiva had to fight for survival from his earliest days. He was the real child of Amina whom Mary's crime had doomed to poverty. Unlike Saleem , Shiva grew up with no one to care for him. Such divisions were equally apparent in all other areas of Indian life. For those people who were already involved in living out the oppressive Indian reality, the death of Gandhi was a serious blow. Saleem Sinai adds in retrospect:

> The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time (166).

What is revealed is that the truth of the novelist is different from that of the historian. Rushdie justifies his occasional touches of fantasy by saying that even stranger things are seen to happen in India daily. As a novelist, Rushdie uses his freedom to arrange his material by mixing fact with fiction, thereby symbolizing his emotional relation to the events described.

Midnight's Child thus, came of age in India in a strange world. After the liberation from colonial rule, India struggled to barely keep pace with the burgeoning population growth. At the same time, transformations were taking place in every aspect of life. India was changing and every passing year recorded a new landmark in that journey of transformation. Geographically, India had been divided anew into fourteen states and six centrally administered territories. The reorganization of the states or the redrawing of the country's political map along linguistic lines was considered as a stupendous achievement of independent India. However, the narrator of the novel makes the comment

> But the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers or mountains or any natural features of the terrain, they were, instead, walls of words. Language divided us (189).

Thus, the dreams of a united India that freedom offered was shattered. The transformative upsurge in India was also overtaking the cultural scenario. The result was that divisions of caste, class, religion, the rich and the poor, the north and the south aggravated and became more pronounced. A movement of discontent variously expressed as assertion of cultures, revival of religion and acknowledgement of regional disparities emerged. Saleem Sinai documents the mood of the people in the following manner:

> I found children from Maharashtra loathing Gujaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian 'blackies', there were religious rivalries; and class entered our councils. The rich children turned up their noses at being in such lowly company; Brahmins began to feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables; while, among the low-born, the pressures of poverty and communism were becoming evident and on top of all this, there were clashes of personality(254).

Thus, the principal ingredient of the post-independence polity which was the establishment of a casteless, classless society could not be achieved. In short, midnight's child in India was condemned to remain in darkness.

During these trying times, India as a developing country, was also trying to overcome the after-effects of colonial rule. It had to ensure a sustained improvement in the standard of living of a half to two-thirds of a billion people. The most important fact was that all this had to be achieved within the restraints imposed by democratic governance. The efforts were not always fruitful and as Saleem Sinai notes. a number of midnight's children failed to survive upto their tenth birthday on account of malnutrition. disease and the misfortunes of everyday life.

However, the slavish imitation and love and reverence for the colonial masters continued unabated. This was perhaps one reason why Saleem Sinai falls in love with

Evie Burns. Justifying his love for the domineering and hot-tempered girl, Saleem Sinai explains:

> In India, we've always been vulnerable to Europeans. Evie had only been with us a matter of weeks, and already I was being sucked into a grotesque mimicry of European literature. Perhaps it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce(185).

Rushdie challenges the myth that the British had come to India in order to civilize India and the Indians. At the very beginning of the novel, he points out how the beautiful Kashmir had deteriorated under the beautiful foreign rule. British colonialism as represented by the character of Methewold is also attacked by the writer. When Methwold sells his estate, it is only on the condition that every object in the house should be kept intact. Methwold's condition can clearly be seen as an attempt to impose British life style on the Indian psyche, thereby endangering their individual freedom.

Saleem is a true representative of Indian's deteriorating condition after the attainment of freedom. Just as the landscape of India develops fissures and cracks and becomes barren and infertile, Saleem Sinai's body also get deformed. To begin with, he loses his hair when Mr. Emil Zagallo, his geography teacher pulled it out violently, thus creating a " monkish tonsure" on his head. The second mutilation of Saleem happens when he loses a finger during a fight with two boys. So at the end of his ten year old encounter with history, Saleem Sinai finds himself in an India where the idealistic notions of freedom had begun to splinter. Contrary to all expectations the urgent need for social, administrative and political independence simply did not happen. For India, it was a rude awakening, a time for self-recognition. Surprisingly, around this time, cracks began to develop in the political and social scene of India. Saleem Sinai becomes a witness as well as a victim of the turbulent decade. As Joyce Wexler points out:

> Saleem's heritage does not fit the categories that the current political situation allows...The variables of identity Saleem

> initially recognises are language, foods and religion, and he soon sees the effect of skin colour, region, class and even clashes of personality. Since none of these empirical factors can provide a unifying identity, Saleem looks elsewhere; he turns to myth (145).

Thus, through the novel Rushdie ascertains the fact that India was a nation of myths. He also makes the revelation that even India's freedom was a myth and as time went by, people were forgetting the myth. He explains in the novel:

> India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivaled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God (112).

Pakistan, born the day India regained Independence, literally means 'land of the pure'. However, it could not always live up to its name. The country's political history is replete with bloody coups and political upheavals. It is during his exile in Pakistan during this turbulent period that Saleem realizes the varied nature of midnight's children. He declares:

> Midnight has many children; the offspring of independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed... I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I-even I-had dreamed (291).

Saleem thus realizes that freedom had its own complications. During this selfsame period, cracks began to appear in India's relationship with China. This resulted in a border war in the high Himalayas in the autumn of 1962. The Indian forces suffered a humiliating defeat in this month long war with China. The national morale which disintegrated as a result was only restored after winning the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965. The war started when Pakistan launched operation Grand Slam in a bid to wrest Kashmir. Saleem Sinai takes upon himself the responsibility for this major historical

development, which is evident from his remark:

> The war happened because I dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers, furthermore, I remained impure, and the war was to separate me from my sins (339).

Despite winning the war, the soft blush of idealism which freedom generated, had begun to pale in the two decades since freedom. As Saleem Sinai grows older, he discovers that beneath the surface of a maturing India, pangs of self-doubt had begun to creep in. In other words, Nehru's vision of "a new life and freedom" somehow, seemed to be developing cracks.

The tragedy of India since Independence was that India was partitioned twice – first into India and Pakistan and then into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Both the partitions elicited comparisons in their own way and millions of people suffered as a result of it. Partition posed numerous challenges. The passions and fears aroused by the great divisions were taking their inexorable toll of innocents in the province. As the novel states:

> During 1971, ten million refugees fled across the borders of East Pakistan – Bangladesh into India – but ten million refuses to be understood.... Bigger than exodus, larger than the Partition crowds, the many-headed monster poured into India (357).

Thus, the Bangladesh freedom struggle achieved its chosen objectives but its negative hues swamped India and alarmed the government. The final wages of freedom was that ten million people were uprooted from their homes, to seek sanctuary elsewhere. While Bangladesh celebrated its Independence, Saleem Sinai notes down: "Once, long ago, on another independence day, the world had been saffron and green. This morning, the colours were green, red and gold." (451) In 1971, Saleem Sinai comes back into an India in which Mrs. Gandhi's New Congress Party had won the mid-term elections for Lok Sabha. It was an India, which along with Saleem Sinai, had lost much of its innocence. In 1975, Saleem Sinai marries Parvati – the witch and becomes a

witness of Indira Gandhi's Emergency Regime. Saleem's son Aadam is born at Delhi on June 25,1975, the moment Indira Gandhi imposed a state of Emergency. Aadam Sinai is actually the child of Parvati- the witch and Major Shiva, two other midnight's children. Because of the fantastic incident of the babies exchanged at birth, Shiva is Saleem Sinai and Saleem Sinai is Shiva in an interchangeable confusion of identities. The complicated geneology of the family represents the diverse factors, which influenced the making of Independent India.

After twenty-eight years of Independence, the freedom which India had gained was in many ways, curbed during the Emergency rule. At the momentous hour of Aadam's birth, Saleem Sinai wonders incessantly at what awaited India. He fully understood that many old notions of freedom had suddenly vanished while new ones struggled to be born. Every new decade brought with it the need for new freedom. *Midnight's children* thus encompasses the struggle for liberty in virtually every sphere of human activity. The restrictions imposed by the Emergency on freedom was felt mainly because it was unaccustomed and considered to be unnecessary, unreasonable and unjust. In the novel, Saleem Sinai gives an elaborate account of the Emergency rule and how it imposed constraints, thereby curbing freedom. In his words:

> The word Emergency was being heard for the first time and suspension of civil rights and censorship of the press and armoured units on special alert, and arrest of subversive elements; something was ending, something was being born (419).

The Emergency robbed people of their freedom. Saleem Sinai stands aside and scrutinizes the unaccustomed constraints on people, watching the movements and trying to discover his bearings in the muddied ocean of Indian politics. The Emergency created obstacles to the exercise and satisfaction of specific interests and forms of activity, which were accepted as possessing moral and social significance. As the novel states:

> Statistics may set my arrest in context; although there is considerable disagreement about the number of political prisoners

> taken during the Emergency, either thirty thousand or a quarter of a million persons certainly lost their freedom (434).

In other words, the nation's unfolding history becomes a complex of antagonistic forces called into play. Saleem Sinai realizes that the soaring hope and elation at the time of India's Independence was now replaced by cynicism and despair. The self-assertive notions of freedom, which was felt by the people, developed in divergent directions until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other. Political freedom could not improve the conditions of numerous people. The alarming multitude of half-naked, illiterate, diseased and under-fed people continue to mock the very essence of freedom.

Midnight's Children thus remains a poignant interpretation of the historical process. The most significant aspect of the novel is the connection of individuals with history. Saleen Sinai, the protagonist of the novel, voices the sad predicament of India after winning freedom. Saleem feels that he is both the master and victim of his times because if on the one hand he shapes history, at other times he is also shaped by history. It can surely be said that *Midnight's Children* extended the scope of the Indian English novel and contributed a lot to the future course of its development.

Undoubtedly, *Midnight's Children* cleverly captures the comedy and tragedy of India as an Independent nation. There is also the feeling that the legacy of the freedom struggle had been squandered. At the end of the novel, a general tone of despair is clearly evident – a despair linked to the loss of the past and the inability to understand the reality of freedom.

Towards the close of *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie re-examines his views on freedom through the narrator – hero Saleem Sinai. In a nostalgic tone, which no longer reverberates the celebratory spirit evident at the time of his birth, he concludes:

> I can smell other, more tarnished perfumes: disillusion, venality, cynicism... the nearly thirty-one year old myth of freedom is no longer what it was (457).

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Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* became an international literary success and contributed a lot to the growth and development of the Indian novel in English. It created a new generation of writers who were highly talented. Women's writing too acquired new dimensions and became a demanding presence in Indian-English fiction. Malashri Lal comments:

> That English is a language of acquisition for the privileged class in India is true, but in defense of its creative use by women, one must touch and test the compressed energy reposited in the voice of authors who are a displayed special category in their own country.

Indian women writers have always tried to strike a balance between their knowledge of English and their experience of being an Indian. Gita Mehta is one such writer who, in her novels, addresses questions, which have plagued the human mind.

A River Sutra published in 1993 is Gita Mehta's third novel. It offers authentic interpretations of Indian cultural values, music, art forms and ethos. With a peculiar Indian sensibility, the novel unfolds the enigma of human life. Rich in philosophical content, it reveals the writer's in-depth study of the river Narmada. Also, the novel attempts to discover and interiorize the truth behind freedom and salvation as evident in Indian philosophy. Shashi Deshpande states:

> Writing is a process of discoveries, often-serendipitous ones, a groping in the dark, during which unexpected gifts fall into your hands. And since, most often, you write to make things clear to yourself, it is mainly a process of self-learning.

From the narrative point of view, *A River Sutra* relates a series of experiences as told to a retired bureaucrat on the banks of the river Narmada. The tales are told by a wide variety of characters such as monks and ascetics, courtesans and bandits, music teachers and minstrels, scientists and astrologers, archaeologists and tribals. The bureaucrat comes to the Narmada rest house in search of freedom and peace. Here he meets Tariq Mia, the old mullah of the village mosque and his assistant Mr. Chagla. His

encounter with different types of people forms the main backdrop of the novel. However, it is the river Narmada that unifies all the episodes into a great human drama or Sutra, meaning thread. Rama Nair explains:

> The sutras were composed at a period when there were no books. The sutras were aphorisms that had to be expanded and explained. The ancient teachers amplified these aphorisms with their comments for the spiritual edification of their pupils. These practical aids to spiritual life often avoided a metaphysical speculation in its attempts to discover the nature of existence. The intention was probably to instill a level of psychological adjustment, which in turn could lead to a development of one's spiritual faculties (149)

Predictably, the quest for freedom and redemption centers on the bureaucrat, who is not given any identifying name in the novel. He gets his posting as manager of the rest house on the banks of the holy Narmada. The river is described in the novel as one of the holiest pilgrimage sites worshipped as the daughter of the God Shiva. The Narmada is also referred to variously in the novel as delight, as Rewa the dancing deer, as Surasa the cleanser and as Kripa, God's grace. Commenting upon the Narmada pilgrimage, which is undertaken by ardent devotees in order to attain salvation, the narrator says:

> I remind myself that the purpose of the pilgrimage is endurance. Through their endurance, the pilgrims hope to generate the heat, the tapas that links man to the energy of the universe (8).

The river Narmada is also believed to provide freedom from the bondage of soul, which is also termed as Moksha. Significantly, the Indian philosophy considers the attainment of *Moksha* or liberation as the ultimate goal of life. All the major religions of the world cherish the salvation of man as their ultimate goal. The Indian systems of philosophy give instructions about what a man ought to do in order to free himself completely from suffering and thus be absolutely independent. It is in this respect that the river Narmada acquires new significance.

There is also the belief that *Moksha* or liberation can be attained by a mere glimpse of the Narmada's waters. It cleanses a human being of generations of sinful births and helps him to attain salvation. Although suicide is a sin, it becomes a release from the cycle of rebirth if it is on the banks of the Narmada. As Dr. Mitra remarks in the novel.

> I suppose even the Greeks and the Alexandrines had heard about the Narmada's holiness and the religious suicides at Amarkantak –people fasting to death or immolating themselves on the Narmada's banks or drowning in her waters-in order to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth(152).

The doctrine of *Moksha* or liberation is a direct result of man's striving for immortality that was worked out and developed by the Upanishads. The river Narmada which helps people in gaining immortality is itself immortal. This fact is referred to in the novel by Mr. Shankar, the archaeologist, who substantiates it with scientific data. He justifies his use of the word immortality in different ways with regard to the river Narmada. In his words:

> It (Narmada) has a very fast current, which erodes the riverbed, cutting deeper and deeper into the rock. But 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 (264).

He further adds, "This River is an unbroken record of the human race."(268) It is this human aspect of the Narmada that becomes a matter of prime importance to the novelist.

Gita Mehta, thus probes deep into the intricacies of the doctrine of *Moksha* or liberation as derived from the Indian systems of thought. In her novel, she reinterprets it in a language that is easy enough for the reader to understand.The chief narrator in the novel who is a bureaucrat comes to the rest house in order to lead the life of a *vanaprasthi* – "Someone who has retired to the forest to reflect."(1) He has relinquished the privileges of his previous life as a civil servant working only in cities and attended to by an army of waiting clerks, traveling in especially reserved train compartments etc. As he says: "Bureaucrats belong too much to the world and I have fulfilled my worldly obligations" (1).

What is to be noted here is that although the bureaucrat says that he has renounced the world, he did so only because he had no one to call his own. His wife and his parents had died and he had no children to concern themselves with his decision. However, the mullah feels that the narrator has been brought to the Narmada banks "to gain the world, not forsake it."(228) It is clearly evident that the bureaucrat enjoyed a lot of freedom because of being in a position of power: He could do things as he wished. But the fact is that every position of power has its own limitations. For each individual, power varies from one situation to another. Commenting about the relationship between freedom and power, John Stuart Mill says:

> A bureaucrat, for example, is independent within a certain sphere, the sphere of his own discretion, while he is dependent on rules and regulations and on the order of his superiors, in many other spheres of his exercise of power (334).

In this way, Mill points out that freedom and regulation complement each other and can only exist together.

It is true that the bureaucrat wants to renounce the world. But the question is – Can true freedom be attained by renouncing the world? Gita Mehta tries to answer this question through the Jain Muni who is the supreme example of the man who has renounced everything. This is because along with the world, the Jain Muni also renounced the multimillion-business empire of his family in order to seek the ultimate truth. It made him free from doubts. Although he experiences cold, hunger, heat, thirst

and sickness, he had got mental peace. Talking about his earlier life, the monk tells the narrator how he renounced the world in order to attain freedom from desires:

> At the age of twenty-six, I had already become fatigued by the world, knowing that even at the moment of gratification, the seed of new desire was being sown (29).

He remembers how he used to go on the Rolls Royce with his father to distribute charity at the office of the Red Cross and UNICEF. Since he was wealthy, he had the company of beautiful women. He used to sleep with countless women and gratified himself with all worldly pleasures. However, as a monk, he freed himself from the pull of worldly pleasures.

The story of the monk makes us realize that although pleasure is one of the goals of man, *Moksha* is the highest goal. It is important to note that Indian philosophy considers sexual pleasure as valuable. For Hindus, it is one of the four goals of man. The body contains within itself life that produces life. According to Indian philosophy, the human body not only stores life but also transforms its energy into thought, and thought into power. The need for chastity and sexual abstinence is aimed towards storing life and vital energy. Therefore, the enlightened yogis and munis seek the path of abstinence and solitary meditation. They know that pleasure does not save them from death or free them from future incarnations. The Jain muni, who used to enjoy the company of women, finally casts his worldly life aside and becomes a monk. He tells the bureaucrat about the reasons:

> What do you lose by hearing Mahavira's description of the skepticism and nihilism that disturb a man when he finds he is not free, although he continues to perform the role that society requires of him? (32)

Thus, the monk upholds salvation as the ultimate freedom, which anyone can hope to attain. Fatigued by the world, the Jain muni renounces ordinary existence for a life of asceticism and austerities. By doing so, he seeks liberation.

It must be said that ascetic practices are a progressive mastering of the body. The yogi converts it into a weapon of liberation. While seeking liberation, he does not see his body as an obstacle, but as an instrument. The yogi eliminates all baser feelings. He disregards and fights the feelings of enthusiasm, dislikes, nostalgia, affection, ego and personal consciousness. And in so doing, he discovers the feelings of liberation. One of the secrets of the human heart is this desire for absolute freedom. Mahavira's teachings stress a great deal upon this aspect. As the Jain monk says:

> Many men die before they learn that the desire for freedom lies deep within them, like a dammed river waiting to be released. But once a man has had that momentary glimpse of freedom, he needs to be instructed further(31).

Among the Indian concepts of the bondage and liberation of the self of man. those elaborated by the ancient school of Jainism are unique in several respects. Jainism recognized the concept of a persistent self, which experiences both the states of bondage and liberation. The Jain monks are required to practice severe austerities. When they renounced the world, they were required to shave their heads. This ritual was meant to avoid human vanity. They have to wear masks on their mouths to prevent them from killing some blameless insect by sudden inhalation. They had to free themselves from worldly desires through the vows of poverty, celibacy and non-violence. Commenting upon the strict code of ahimsa, one of the characters in the novel, who is a Jain monk comments that it is the most difficult vow for a man to keep. As he says:

> It is very tiring to be worrying all the time that you may be harming some living thing. I must always look down while walking for fear that I may step on an ant. Even plucking bananas becomes an act fraught with danger. Who knows what small creatures live in the leaves or trunk of a banana tree? (11)

The chief feature of Jainism is the attempt to attain *Nirvana* or deliverance by showing respect for and abstinence from everything that has life. But every religion has its own paradoxes. Jainism observes respect for life but at the same time also permits

suicide. Jainism holds that it increases life. If asceticism is hard to practice, if we cannot resist our passions and endure austerities, suicide is permitted by Jainism. After twelve years of ascetic preparation, one can kill himself, since *nirvana* or deliverance is assured. As the monk's father pointed out to him:

> Do you know how that serene old monk hopes to die? Starving himself to death. He observes respect for life when all the time he is working towards the goal of denying his own life(34).

Jainism, like Hinduism, shares the practical ideal of deliverance or *moksha.* Nirvana or deliverance is not annihilation of the soul but its entry into a blessedness that has no end. It is an escape from the body, though not from existence. The supreme experience is freedom. Positive descriptions are given of the freed soul as that it has infinite consciousness, pure understanding, absolute freedom and eternal bliss. It can perceive and know, since perception and knowledge are functions of the soul and not of the sense organs. What is to be understood is that all the varying concepts of salvation, whether it is *Moksha* or *Nirvana,* stresses on the essentiality of absolute freedom. It is with this hope of liberation that Jain monks chant their prayers during the *diksha* ceremony for the newly initiated:

> You will be free from doubt.
> You will be free from delusion.
> You will be free from extremes(41).

A significant point of view regarding freedom and renunciation is given by Tariq Mia, another character in the novel. Tariq Mia is an acknowledged Islamic scholar and young clerics studied under him. He was nearly eighty years old. For Tariq Mia, love for humanity was more important and could be placed far above retirement from the world. When the bureaucrat boasts that he had renounced the world, Tariq Mia asks him a pertinent question: How can you say you have given up the world when you know so little about it?"(167) The reactions of the mullah indicate that renunciation from one's worldly duties is not the highest attainment that one can strive for.

The importance of choice as an element of freedom cannot be ignored. Equally important is the power of music to liberate man from his mundane earthly existence, even if for a brief period. We are told that the music teacher Master Mohan led an unhappy life because of his poverty and his constantly nagging wife. He listens spell bound to the song of the blind Muslim boy Imrat who was endowed with a golden voice. The force of the boy's song was such that it transported Master Mohan to another world where he became free of the day-to-day problems of existence. As the novel states:

> Listening to the purity of each note, Master Mohan felt himself being lifted into another dimension, into the mystic raptures of the Sufis who were sometimes moved to dance by such music. For the first time he understood why the Sufis believed that once a man began to dance in the transport of his ecstasy, the singers must continue until the men stopped dancing lest the sudden breaking of the dancer's trance should kill him.

Thus, love culminates in the ecstasy of devotion, where soul and God become one. Whatever route we approach by, the fact is that we end up in seeing, experiencing and living the divine life. In this way, creative activities like song and dance help in liberating the human being by giving the utmost pleasure.

Although Master Mohan wanted to teach Imrat in his own home, he did not have the actual ability to carry desire and purpose into operation. In this sense, he lacked freedom. After the boy's death, Master Mohan was deprived of fulfillment of his ambition for success and fame through the child Imrat. Shocked, he stays on the banks of the Narmada in search of peace of mind but after a short time, he goes back and commits suicide. As Tariq Mia tells the narrator: "Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind child"(91).

A River Sutra dwells at length on the many facets of love and how love binds people and curbs their freedom. Tariq Mia says in the novel that human beings are distinguished from others on account of their capacity to love. In most of the tales in the novel, love is presented as the dominant motivating force. The only difference is that the

objects of love are many and varied. The monk's father loved money whereas Master Mohan loved music and the child Imrat. All human actions are centered on love. Geeta Doctor comments:

> In varying degrees, the different tales are about love: the love of money, the love of beauty, the love of music, the love of flesh, the love of truth and the search for it that can lead to transcendence. Or to put it in other words, it is about the need for passion (Xiii).

One of the positive aspects of love is the ability of love to transform human beings and liberate them from any negative feelings. There is the story of Rahul Singh who earned the highest decorations for his valor in two wars with Pakistan. When his soldier's commission ended and he came home, Rahul Singh was shocked to find his family dead and his lands grabbed by a man prospering under the protection of local politicians. Pained and frustrated beyond measure, his love for the country lost its intensity and was replaced by hatred and vengeance. He swore revenge on his family's murderers and killed all of them. However, love again binds him when he sees the courtesan's daughter. In the words of Erich Fromm:

> Spontaneous activity is free activity of the self.... Love is the foremost component of such spontaneity; not love as the dissolution of the self in another person, not love as the possession of another person, but love as spontaneous affirmation of others, as the union of the individual with others on the basis of the preservation of the individual self. The dynamic quality of love lies in this very polarity: that it springs from the need of overcoming separateness that it leads to oneness – and yet that individuality is not eliminated (209)

Not surprisingly, a remarkable transformation takes place in the character of Rahul Singh who was the most wanted bandit in the Vindhyas, a man even the police feared. But he became a gentle person in front of the girl whom he abducted and loved.

As the courtesan's daughter told the narrator:

> He used to stand outside the cave in the dark, watching me as if trying to prove there was a greater art than all my arts, the ability to love someone as he loved me while I danced as if to amuse myself but really to taunt him(184).

Love, the noblest passion, drives the feared bandit to risk his life in order to please his beloved, to buy her little gifts and to make her happy. She finally understands the sincerity and warmth of his love and marries him. Even after her husband's death, she continues to be devoted to him.

The novelist seems to suggest here that love and the act of creation frees the individual of all limitations. It transcends all barriers and is the most precious possession of human beings. Erich Fromm explains:

> The dynamic quality of love lies in this very polarity: that it springs from the need of overcoming separateness, that it leads to oneness – and yet that individuality is not eliminated. Work is the other component, not work as compulsive activity in order to escape aloneness... but work as creation in which man becomes one with nature in the act of creation(209).

The novelist suggests that it is the human capacity to love that makes life worth living. Love as selfless devotion is also evident in God's worship. Tariq Mia recounts how *Quawwali* singers sing the praise of God and move their listeners to dance with religious rapture. In their devotion, they become "drunk with singing."(50) True liberation is this freedom of the spirit and selfless devotion. S.Radhakrishnan remarks about the philosophy of the *Upanishads*, in respect of freedom:

> Becoming one with God is the attainment of the highest freedom. The more we live in the presence of God, the more we assert the rights of spirit, the more free we are, the

> more we lose our grip on the whole to which we belong, the more selfish we are, the more is our bondage to our karma. Man oscillates between nature and spirit and so is subject to both freedom and necessity (247).

The freedom of each individual differs according to the goals he has set for himself. According to traditional ethics, human life has four goals – *artha, kama, dharma,* and *moksha. Artha* refers to the world of success and material gain. *Kama,* the domain of pleasure and sexual life, is ruled not by self-interest but by desire. *Moksha* is the liberation from the chains of existence. In the monk's father, we witness the desire for *artha* or wealth; in the Amarkantak pilgrims it is a desire for *moksha.*

The supreme value and significance of freedom is highlighted in the novel through the myth of Shiva. Shiva's personality was that of a yogi who had freed himself and mastered control of all his senses and desires with the strength of which he controlled the world. The novelist has presented passion or desire as a cleansing force that can inspire a person. The importance of *kama* or desire is established by the mythical legend of God Shiva. Rama Nair observes:

> In A River Sutra, the myth of Shiva, the Great Ascetic, is contemporized to communicate an aesthetic experience of salvation. Shiva is the supreme yogin, but he is also the lover of his spouse who is often called as Shakti, the divine energy without which the world would cease to move. Man himself would be a fragmented being if reason and desire did not fuse to ennoble and enrich each other(156).

The novel also refers to the fact that even the ascetic Lord Shiva was warned by the Gods that "he too must feel desire for without desire the play of the worlds would cease." (97) It is the Goddess who incinerated Lord Shiva himself in the fires of longing. It is this desire, which was described by conquerors as "the first born seed of the mind." (98) As Mr. Chagla explained: "Without desire there is no life. Everybody will stand still. Become emptiness. In fact ..... be dead" (142).

If Lord Shiva himself, the creator and the destroyer, could not free himself from the fires of longing, the reason lies in the feminine force. *A River Sutra* powerfully evokes the feminine force while describing the tribal world where the Goddess is the superior power. In the story of Nitin Bose, we have a description of tribal women of Vano village who have the power to enchant any man. The Vano village diety is a stone image of a half-woman with the full breasts of the fertility symbol. The tribal people believe that the goddess could liberate the possessed people from their madness. With their provocative laughter, their slender brown arms and the curve of their full breasts, the tribal women invoked sexual restlessness in the narrator.

A basic dichotomy that is inherent in freedom is the birth of individuality and the pain of aloneless. The story of Nitin Bose is a major inquiry into this facet of freedom. Nitin Bose worked as a young executive in Calcutta's oldest tea company and was highly successful. Living in isolation in the lonely tea gardens and faced with constant demands for advance by workers as well as the inefficiency of the clerical staff, Nitin Bose begins to drink. As he himself says,

> Perhaps my loneliness caused my mind to create its own enslavement or perhaps I had already become the victim of my grandfather's books (124).

It is a general truth that freedom is usually practiced under the name of privacy. Being isolated from city life, Nitin Bose enjoyed a great deal of privacy. He was able to do whatever he wished to engage in, without fear of reprobation. There was no kind of social pressure upon him. However, freedom of this sort invariably leads to contradictions. Beyond certain limits, such freedom turns, very often, into solitude. In this respect, Zygmunt Bauman points out:

> Privacy is costly in the sense of other personal needs, which must be traded off in its name. Above all, privacy requires at least temporary suspension of social intercourse; there is no one to share one's dreams, worries or fears with, to offer succor or protection (52).

The life of the tribals is a supreme example of a kind of freedom, which cannot be gained with sophistication. Tribals are free people governed by a rare spontaneity and love for nature. They have their own way of life, philosophy, set of values and beliefs. Love, desire and primitivism are the guiding principles in the tribal world. Songs and dances, uninhibited laughter and humour are a way of life for the tribals. The tribals also believe that the Goddess inspired love. Theirs is a spontaneous and natural reaction to the objects of the world, devoid of any artificiality. Untouched and isolated from the sophisticated life of the modern materialistic world, the tribals exude a great degree of freedom mainly through their spontaneous affirmation of life. Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm stresses upon this basic dichotomy inherent in freedom. He points out that independence and freedom becomes identical with isolation and fear. Total freedom can only be attained by man's spontaneous action. He remarks:

> Spontaneous activity is the one way in which man can overcome the terror of aloneness without sacrificing the integrity of his self, for in the spontaneous realization of the self; man unites himself anew with the world – with man, nature and himself (209).

Music is identified as one way of attaining liberation. It is an escape into a higher world. The musician tells his daughter that one can attain salvation through music of the highest order.

> The Vedas say that by playing the Veena with the correct rhythm, keeping its notes and its character intact, a man can hear that sound and attain salvation (207).

Thus, true music is a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world, just like the song of the birds at dawn and at sunset. The sounds emanating from the animals such as lowing calf, a bleating goat and a trumpeting elephant – everything is a response to beauty. The six ragas of music are each related to a particular season, a time of day and an emotion. Every note played by a musician sends new music into the universe. In short, every kind of sublime music adds to the beauty of the world. Although the musician's daughter realized that music created its own beauty, she began to be

preoccupied with her own ugliness. Deeply hurt by her mother's resentment and despair, she could no longer concentrate on her music lessons. As she says about her father:

> Through music he tried to free me of my own image. So I could love beauty wherever it was to be found, even if it was not present in my mirror (211).

There is the parallel story about the young man who came to the musician to become a student. The musician offered to teach him only on one condition-that he should marry his daughter. However, after instructing him in music, the musician freed his student from the bargain telling him that the marriage would take place only if he himself wished to marry the girl. What follows is that the young man who was freed from the burden of marrying the musician's daughter chooses to marry another girl. The girl's father sends the message:

> "Your student thanks you for granting his freedom. He is betrothed in marriage to my daughter"(225).

What the young man means by freedom is the removal of constraints upon him at odds with an intention most intensely felt. However, much more than freedom, it is love for humanity that is more important. Rejected by the young man, the great musician's ugly daughter learns this fact. She picks up the broken pieces of the glass of a painting so that it would not hurt any passer by. She conveys the fact that it is love and freedom from individual desires, which elevates the human being.

Renunciation is one of the ways in which freedom can be attained. However, man is not totally free unless he has conquered the limitations of the body. "The Minstrel's Story" relates the life of the martial ascetics called as Naga Babas who perform severe penances in the Himalayas and the Deserts in order to conquer the limitations of the body. The Naga Sadhus have knowledge of roots and berries and plants, which could suppress thirst and hunger. They also perform certain yogic exercises, which slowed down the metabolism so that a man could endure the extremes of heat and cold. In the story, there is a reference to a Naga Sadhu who is made to undergo harsh discipline by his teacher. In the early years of his austerities, the Naga

had sometimes walked two hundred miles before seeing any human being. His teacher told him :

> "You cannot be a Naga without overcoming human limitations. Learn to survive without water"(239).

He is also asked to beg at the houses of those who were untouchables, unclean and downtrodden. Sometimes, he even begs at brothels. He learns that liberation can be achieved only through the progressive mastering of his body. The freedom he thus gains is unconditional and absolute. He possesses limitless power over himself and over the reality that surrounds him. He lives beyond passion and compassion, good and evil. A.G.Khan observes:

> 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 (98).

The fact is that one cannot attain enlightenment and freedom only through asceticism but through rational and benevolent action. Although isolated from society, the Naga Sadhu keeps himself well informed. He listens compassionately to the Dom who attended the funeral pyres and complained to him bitterly about being an outcast. Every year, he would hear about the cruelties endured by those people whom the society considered as untouchables. Sometimes, the Naga Sadhus even sacrifice their life for the good of their countrymen. As the novel states: "During the Indian mutiny, twenty thousand Naga ascetics, naked, ash coloured with matted locks, had come down from their caves in the Himalayas to do battle with the red-coated Englishmen ambitious for empire."(241) The attitude and action of the Naga ascetics points out to their belief in the goodness of life and the Indian philosophy of Karma or action resulting in the attainment of *moksha* or liberation. Surendranath Gupta explained the concept of liberation in the following manner:

> Bondage is due to attachment to worldly objects and liberation is produced through the direct realization of God. This is produced in various ways. Experience of sorrows of worldly existence, association with good men, renunciation of all desires of enjoyment of pleasures...self-control and self-discipline(316).

An the end of the novel, the bureaucrat, who is the main narrator of the story, is introduced to Prof. V.V.Shankar, the foremost archaeological authority in the country on the river Narmada. It is also revealed that Prof. Shankar is the Naga Baba.

A River Sutra asserts the fact that renunciation from one's worldly duties is not the highest attainment that one can strive for. The mullah asks the narrator: "How can you say you have given up the world when you know so little about it?" (50)

Professor Shankar's reincarnation as the Naga Baba and then reverting to his earlier self presents an example of a truly enlightened person. His simultaneous experiences as an archaeologist and as Naga Baba helps him to see and understand things in the correct perspective. Through him, the novelist points out the significance of a live interaction with human beings.

It was the beauty of the Narmada, which made it a perfect retreat for people like the bureaucrat, who wanted to liberate himself from the mundane activities of the world. But the reality was that the sacred river taught people to understand the true meaning of freedom in proper perspective. The bureaucrat, who proudly boasts that he had renounced the world of rampant corruption, realizes his mistake. He admits:

> I was thinking of the people I had encountered since I had come to the rest house and Tariq Mia's observation that they were like water flowing through lives to teach us something. Perhaps destiny had brought me to the banks of the Narmada to understand the world (268).

Towards the end of the novel, Gita Mehta upholds the fact that survival is better than renunciation, quest is always better than statis and that dedication is always better than alienation. *A River Sutra,* thus confirms the saying in the *Gita,* that man is not liberated only through renunciation. Action also liberates.

* * *

It is quite evident that the highly individual rendering of the two novels-Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* is an impressive achievement. Salman Rushdie, with his linguistic experiments in English, makes an impressive effort to conquer the larger expanse of English literature. Gita Mehta, through her detailed interpretation of Indian values, establishes its cultural supremacy and recreates India in Indian-English fiction. In short, both the novels enlighten us in their own individual manner, on the unique capacity of India's culture and civilization for self-regeneration. It promises to liberate Indian-English fiction from its limitations and assert its supremacy while bringing about a new awareness of the many facets of freedom.

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