

THE FLUIDITY OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN GITA MEHTA'S *RAJ*

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Abstract:

*Gita Mehta, in her fiction and non-fiction, has dealt with the contradictions of the old and the new as a noteworthy factor of Indian culture. Scholars appear to believe that the factors of tradition and modernity are not negating to each other, as some earlier thinkers used to consider. The ambivalence of these contrasting factors is productive and, in fact, society draws strength from the both for its progression. Taking into consideration the interpretation of scholars on the features of tradition, modernity, modernization and westernization, the present paper is an attempt to explore the dual strings of the Indian ritualistic past and its modern rationalistic present, their interaction and their impact on the Indian culture. For this study, Mehta's fiction *Raj* is being taken into consideration as it deconstructs the philosophy of tradition and modernity as two separate water tight compartment and show cases them as compromising.*

Key Words: *Indian culture, Tradition, Modernity, Modernization, Westernization, Ritualistic Past, Modern Rationalistic Present, Antithetical, Co-exist.*

Introduction

Romila Thapar labels tradition as “the handing down of knowledge or the passing on of a doctrine or a technique” (267). It is a conviction that has subsisted in a society for a long time and has maintained its presence during the course of its transmission. Etymologically the word 'tradition' comes from the Latin noun '*tradition*' that means to hand over for safeguarding. Due to association of traditions to a cultural group, social thinkers acknowledge them as an integral part of culture also. The continuity of a culture is, at the same time, related to its inherent traditions. Thapar further relates the handing down of traditions to change as she argues, “Even the concept of *parampara*, which at one level appears to be frozen knowledge, reveals, on investigation, variations and change” (267). A variation in a tradition has a firm footing, if there is adaptability to the contemporary demands for the advantage of the relevant cultural group or society in general. However, there may be a point of time where a social group may experience a break from the bonds of tradition resulting into a novel set of values. The fresh standards give rise to newness or what one may call modernity which is perceived as a factor of time based on the notion of 'now.' As it refers to a certain consciousness of time, a sense of innovation about the present is always there. To be modern, is to understand the world in the form of its comprehensive advancement.

Tradition and modernity are not the negating factors as some of the earlier scholars used to believe. Naresh K. Jain calls it “a colonial construct” (“Tradition, Modernity and Change”10). He quotes from Heesterman who asserts, “We are prone to overstress the stability of traditional societies and the upheaval caused by modernization” (9). The later thinkers believe that these two elements should be considered as complementary to each other. Peter Wade, in his study on an anthropological approach to modernity, mentions from Barry Smart: “term derives from the fifth century Latin term, *modrenus*, used to mark an official transition from the pagan to the Christian” (49). Here, it would be relevant to mention that both the terms are interrelated as “they do function dialogically...in relation with each other.... Satisfyingly asymmetrical in their relation, they require us, in talking of one, to talk also of the other...” (“Mirror to

Mirror”31). But separately they have individual implications. In modernity, there is a dominance of economic force and acceptance of scientific procedures. Escobar notes, “These processes crystallized at the end of 18th century and became consolidated with the Industrial Revolution” (Cited in Wade 50). Modernization is a product of the factors like industrialization, urbanization, education and diverse professional openings while tradition is a product of the culture of a particular social group. Nevertheless, positive growth of a society is the result of the hybridization of the two. The quality of the resulting hybrid is the mark of the modernization of a cultural group. Ashis Nandi, while conveying his ideas on changes in society, also claims: “Unmixed modernism is no longer fashionable, not even in the modern world. The ultra-positivists and the Marxists, once so proudly anti-traditional” (252) have begun to criticize some crucial parts of the modernist vision and critics like “Lionel Trilling and Peter Gay have gone so far as to call such criticism ... a unique feature and a mark of modernity” (252). Discarding the unproductive elements of modernity and incorporating the creative aspects of the past and the present gives rise to modernization. The modern practices of the present, when endured for a long time, take the form of traditions for years to come. This, in turn, results in the progression of a culture as traditions are very much a part of its entity.

Although Indian independence was the commencement of the practice of social and political development for Indians, the greatest irony was its awe-inspiring mixture of the Western reasoning and the traditional ritualistic approach. India has registered its presence globally by sending indigenously built satellites into space and has carved a niche in the field of Information Technology. In spite of their growing inclination to use more and more technology, Indians are tradition loving people. Despite the modern approach, “... our mindset remains anchored in social prejudices and superstitions more in keeping with the 12th century than the 21st...why as India progresses in material and technological terms economic growth, the spread of mobile telephony, 24x7 television it seems to regress in terms of social values and norms?” (12), questions Jug Surya, the famous journalist. On one side, the Indian courts are addressing the issues of decriminalization of same sex marriages and live-in relationships while on the other, the instances of honour killings and female-foeticide have become a regular news items. In reality, Indians appear to live with an astounding flexibility in the two largely divided time-settings, at the same time. Richard Lannoy, while attempting to explore the thoughts that enthused movements for social reforms and the nationalist upsurge in India, remarks:

The introspection resulting from the impact of Western values, knowledge, and institutions was to some extent the continuation ... of a mood which came naturally to Indian thinking.... But the Western method of detached and objective research, of historical and scientific thinking, was something entirely new to the Indian outlook ...especially in attitudes towards national and cultural identity. India rediscovered herself. Re-orientation consists of two strands, Westernization and Indianization; their synthesis results in a modernized Great Tradition, usually called Universalization. (243)

The “modernized Great Tradition” or “Universalization”, as indicated by Lannoy, points towards the presence of the cohabitation of the customary and the modern trends prevailing in Indian society.

Gita Mehta, in her fiction and non-fiction, has quite objectively handled the relationship of the old and the new as a significant component of Indian culture. Taking into consideration the aspects of tradition, modernity, modernization and Westernization, the present paper is an effort to study Gita Mehta's venture to explore the interface of socially active dual strands of the Indian ritualistic past and the modern rationalistic present. The study will help not only to understand the intricate nature of tradition and modernity, but may also pacify the rigidity of hardliners on the issue of breaking of traditions.

Mehta's second book, *Raj* (1993), is a historical saga of a *Rajasthani* kingdom of Balmer and the North-Eastern Indian dominion of Sirpur, languishing under the British rule. The protagonist is from the royal family of Balmer, a young princess, Jaya Singh who finds herself torn between the warring factors of

the troubled times. *Raj* is a third person narrative of the life of Jaya presented through her constant struggle to live with dignity. The novel guides the readers through Jaya's life from her birth to the time she fills her nominations for elections in free India in 1950.

Gita Mehta apprises us of one of the most striking and upsetting experiences of cultural aggression of colonialism. She depicts those fifty years (1897 to 1947) of the colonial India in which the country was suffering from a high degree of British imperialism. By dramatizing within the narrative the important events of the national freedom movement, the novelist has presented a deeper standpoint of pseudo-modernization under the influence of the Western culture. The characters are seen getting shattered under this false sense of modernity, but some, like Jaya, enduring the upheavals of the traditional times, achieve what one may call, the true progressiveness without becoming the Westernized. The writer weaves an elegant word picture of the Indian traditional culture, which at many places is brought into conflict with the prevailing modernity of the whites. In this way, as Bande has rightly asserted, Gita Mehta has tried to recreate history and position it within the socio-cultural context (*Gita Mehta: Writing Home /Creating Homeland* 84).

Historical facts unfold that the *pardah* used to be a strict code of conduct for the women of Rajput royalties and it barred them from coming in contact with the outside male world. A girl child being groomed in such an atmosphere normally grows in her mother's image. However, the case of Jaya is different from that of a normal *pardah* girl. She has a traditional mother but a progressive father. On one side, her mother teaches her the customaries of being a conventional Rajput woman, on the other her father endeavours to groom her as a fearless ruler.

Jaya's mother, the Maharani of Balmer, is a staunch traditional woman governed by the conventional *Rajput* culture. It is through Maharani's obsession for *pardah* and the vivid depiction of the life within the *zanana* walls, Gita Mehta has successfully conveyed to her readers that the *Purdah System* was an important part of traditional Indian culture. Maharani's resilient traditional nature is revealed through her immediate reaction when Maharaja Jai Singh of Balmer asked her to discard *pardah*. When the drought in the state turned severe with no rains continuously for three years, he told her, "You (she) must break *pardah*" (*Raj* 31) to accompany and assist him in the drought relief activities as some other Maharanis were already doing so. The Maharani was shocked to hear the pronouncement: "A paralysis held her motionless as she waited for the moment to pass and her husband to withdraw those few words which would destroy a thousand years of tradition" (31). Here one witnesses a rigid attitude towards an age old tradition. When Jai Singh did not reverse his command, she begged him, "Hukam, ask anything from me but this" (31). But he asserted, "What is more important, your veil or your people's despair?" (31-32). She went to Kuki-bai, the old revered concubine of Maharaja's father, for advice. Kuki-bai persuaded her by saying, "Oh, child, you are too rigid. You must learn to bend with the times, or you will snap in two like an old neem twig..." (33). Here Kuki-bai comes forward as a symbol of communion between tradition and modernity. She has an inclination for change and acknowledges the psychological fact that inelasticity is always averse to growth.

Sometimes when the times are uncompromising, tradition and modernity are like the two rails of a railway track that never meet. The clash between the progressive ideals and the traditional ethics comes again into play when the Maharani removes her veil outside the security of the walls of the *pardah*. Here Usha Bande rightly asserts: "Removing the veil in the tradition-bound setup is easy said than done. It has its repercussions" (*Gita Mehta: Writing Home /Creating Homeland* 107). Maharani shrank back before removing her veil, as "unveiling her face would be as final an act of immodesty as unclothing her body; ... or bare her face before men who were not father, brother, husband or son to her" (*Raj* 33).

Towards the end of the fifth year of the drought, the Maharani gave birth to Jaya. When Jaya was three years old, the fortune of Balmer took a turn after many years of unrelenting skies. But before Jaya could make a sense out of this unexpected situation, the Maharani, with an obscured expression, led her up

the steps to the *pardah* pergola.

Another theme that will assist in studying the interplay of tradition and modernity is that of *Sati Pratha*, a conventional practice of burning widows together with the mortal remains of their husbands. *Sati* and the plight of widows are dominant themes that run all along the saga of *Raj* and which are some of the important causes of Jaya's pre-and post-marital dilemmas. For this purpose, the mythological and the historical perceptions of *Sati Pratha* are being taken into consideration.

The root of *sati* practice seems to lie in the male dominating traditions of Hindu society. However, according to Indian mythology, as narrated in *Shiv Purana*, *Sati* was the name of a Hindu Goddess who, in one of her incarnations, was the wife of *Rudra*, another name of Lord *Shiva*. She immolated herself by jumping into the holy pit of the *yagya's* fire to oppose her father who had openly insulted her husband by showing his blatant contempt towards him (Chaturvedi 14). Her death enraged *Shiva*, who in a rare display of fury began the *Tandav*, the dance of destruction. The myth not only shows a display of a wife's devotion but also depicts her husband's deep affection towards her.

However, while turning from the myth to historical reality, one finds that the practice took a perverted form in which women were forced to sit on their husband's funeral pyre. How this conversion took place may be a matter of further research, but at least one thing is obvious that this evil custom somehow became an essential feature of Hindu tradition in many sections of medieval Indian society. The exponents of *sati* advocate that its sanction has been given in the *Vedas*. However, the historians and the sociologists claim that the *Vedas* have never supported *sati*. Mandakranta Bose, citing hymns from the *Rig Veda*, infers, "... the custom (*Sati Pratha*) was neither approved nor practiced in the Vedic age" (23). The scholar further asserts that even the commanding *Manusmrti*, the ancient Hindu law giver "known for its restrictive injunctions on women, does not prescribe the act of wife burning" (24). Another researcher submits: "the earliest literature of Hindus such as *Vedas* does not mention the practice of *Sati*" (*Srivastava* 3). Sahajanand Swami, the originator of the Swaminarayan sect, while advocating against the practice of *sati* argued, "The practice had no Vedic standing and only God could take a life he had given" ("Sati Practice"). According to one description, the practice of *sati* received acceptance during the Mughal era because, at the time of invasions, it was considered indispensable to protect the honour and safety of Hindu women.

Ironically, the word *sati* literally means the woman who follows the *sat* that is the path of the truth, who is a pure and a virtuous woman. Initially, *sati* was any woman who was virtuous, devoted to her husband and confined herself to her husband. Giving a traditionalist point of view Quoting the words of Harlan, Parrilla writes, "this Hindu practice (*Sati Pratha*) symbolizes the epitome of wifely devotion, especially among the Rajput caste of Northern India" (80). Besides this, there was a belief that the act of self-immolation by a widow gave divine redemption to her dead husband. Moreover, the woman who performed this practice attained the honour of being called *Sati Mata* or *Sati* goddess and secured a place for herself in heaven along with her husband. According to A.L. Basham there might have been some practical reasons. He believes, "The widow herself, if she had no young children, might well prefer even a painful death ... to a dreary life of hunger, scorn, and domestic servitude" (188). Consequently, it is not unexpected that altars to worship *Sati Mata* can be found in many places of India.

Coming back to *Raj*, it can be seen that Gita Mehta has very intelligently portrayed the traditional as well as the progressive ideology about *Sati Pratha*. The Maharani of Balmer stands for the traditional view point while Kuki-bai and *Sati Mata* are the personifications of the progressive facets of this conventional practice in the novel. The Maharani, strongly supports the *sati* practice despite knowing the fact that it was prohibited in Balmer. Kuki-bai, admonishes the Maharani against the acceptance of such wicked traditions and comments: "But you young women are still blinded by the heroic tales of the *sati* queens of Balmer" (*Raj* 33). The cult of *Sati Pratha* was entrenched in girls to such an extent that right from their childhood it acquired a deep rooted state in their consciousness. Parrilla reports the version of a

Rajput woman in her article, "... it is a tradition that has been instilled in us (*Rajput* girls) since childhood. It is very, very ingrained in the *Rajput* psyche. In addition, it is glamorized, eulogized, it is drilled into us, whether we are educated or not, that the husband is a god figure" (5). From the moment Jaya was born, "the Maharani had vowed her daughter would be raised in the ways of her predecessors..." (*Raj* 42). In this way many baseless traditions were being forced into the consciousness of a young girl who might not have been more than six to seven years of age. The Maharani did not realize that instilling traditional inflexibility into a young child would be disastrous for her personality and for her future adjustments.

Against this traditional view point, there are forward looking personages in *Raj* the grandfather of Maharaja Jai Singh who had prohibited *Sati Pratha* in Balmer. Kuki-bai, although quite old, wants to perpetuate the modernist tradition set by Jai Singh's grandfather. Taking into consideration the historicity of the novel, one may find that this comment of Kuki-bai comes very close to some similar facts in Indian history which can also be notified from the point of view of tradition and modernity. History has always witnessed a universal interaction between these seemingly opposite factors, which have always been in a state of transition whenever the present redefines the past.

One segment of such transition came forward in Indian History when some enlightened nineteenth century social reformers, taking cue from the *Vedic* resources, raised their voices against some dismal Indian traditions like *Sati Pratha*, Child Marriage, *Purdah* System, miserable widowhood etc. Citing the words of Bhikku Parekh, N. K. Jain states, "Many of the nineteenth-century reformers made use of these resources to successfully challenge unacceptable practices" ("Tradition, Modernity and Change" 10). Prominent among them was Raja Ram Mohan Roy. J.T.F. Jordens writes, "As a social reformer, Ram Mohan's interest was mainly in the appalling condition of women.... He is rightly famous for his long and successful campaign for the abolition of *sati*" (367). Ram Mohan Roy "wrote and disseminated articles to show that it was not required by scripture. He was at loggerhead with certain section, who wanted that Government should not interfere in religious practices ..." ("Sati Practice"). It was he who advocated before William Bentinck, the Governor-General, to take regulatory steps and pronounce the observance of *Sati* illegal. Consequently, by a regulation of December 1829, the practice of *Sati* was made liable to be punished by the criminal courts as culpable homicide. Initially the ruling was for Bengal Presidency but gradually the other states also followed the suit, and by 1861, *Sati Pratha* was lawfully forbidden in all the imperial states of India. Thus, Roy and the other reformers came forward as the spokespersons of Indian modernity as they were able to rouse the will of the masses by giving a new meaning to traditions. Accordingly, India paced further in her journey from tradition to modernity.

Coming back from history to fiction, the prohibition of *Sati* by the Maharaja's Grandfather can be looked upon vis-à-vis with the new awakening brought by the social reformers and the consequent banning of *Sati Pratha* by the princely states of India. The debate of tradition and modernity in the novel is further highlighted when the Maharani of Balmer visits *Sati Mata* along with her daughter Jaya. The Maharani was shocked when *Sati Mata* delivered a progressive statement instead of glorifying the *Sati* tradition. The true *sati*, says the ascetic, is a woman of righteousness, not the one who ablaze herself. She adds, "And the greatest virtue is endurance The true *sati* has the will to continue when the familiar world fragments around her" (*Raj* 127). Such a lesson of progressive ideal comes to the Maharani from the most unexpected quarters. *Sati Mata* establishes herself as a significant link between tradition and modernity and, therefore, people like Kuki-bai and *Sati Mata* can be termed as the fictional counterparts of the social reformers of the nineteenth century. Naresh K. Jain has rightly asserted that if the novel "dismisses the ill-treatment of widows, it also tries to rediscover or redefine tradition" ("From *Purdah* to *Polo* to *Politics*" 209).

The journey of the Maharani of Balmer does not end here, but takes an interesting but strange turn. Soon after the Maharaja's death, Raja Man Singh annexed the kingdom of Balmer. He exiled the Maharani on the plea of her being polluted due to widowhood. She started living in an *ashram* and got engaged in social welfare activities. Gradually, due to her genuine involvement, she was raised to the figure of an

ascetic having a chain of followers. With the passage of time, Maharani grew into a nationalist, deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's ideologies. Gita Mehta brings the narrative to this crucial point where one observes a staunch traditionalist metamorphosing into a nationalist-modernist and, ironically her followers started calling her "Sati Mata". Jaya contemplates, "... the woman from whom she had learned her sati prayers was at Gandhi's camp, waiting to break the British Empire's laws" (*Raj* 372). Jaya herself seems to be awestruck by this transformation. One may wonder, whether such a makeover in the character is possible? This type of alteration appears to be conceivable if one experiences life in the raw like the Maharani did. Her psychic movement from orthodoxy to progressiveness becomes a reality mainly due to some lessons that she had learnt in the past and partly due to the tragic ordeal that she went through, first after the death of her son and later, her husband. Life taught her a lesson of adaptability to the call of the time which she boldly imbibed.

Tradition and modernity are not dichotomous and they can never be two separate water tight compartments. When any social order undergoes a change, the members of that order need to have two important features - endurance and adaptability. As they belong to a traditional environment, initially they have to endure the upsurge of newness and accept changes with patience. Simultaneously, they have to learn to adapt themselves to the new set-up. The Maharani seems to have understood the eternal fluidity of tradition and modernity that makes her comprehend the true meaning of *Sati*, earlier explained to her by Sati Mata of Balmer. She consoles her broken daughter, Jaya, "It is not easy, child. It has never been so. Remember the Sati Mata's words, Bai-sa. The true sati continues to live when her world has shattered around her" (*Raj* 363). She has realized the futility of running blindly after customs that never gave her any peace of mind. Consequently, she finds herself in her new role in which she is able to find her identity not only as a woman but also as a human being and as a nationalist. In a way, the novel seems to affirm the fact that change is the law of life and a conformist attitude is undesirable. Although it is not the climax of *Raj*, this segment of the story, by far, can be termed as the pinnacle of the tradition-modernity dichotomy presented in the novel.

It has been indicated earlier, the forces of tradition and modernity come together under one roof in the family of the Maharaja of Balmer. Unlike his queen, he is a forward-looking progressive ruler who "had decreed that his daughter was not to be raised in purdah" (44). He seemed to have a forewarning of the changes that might come in her life. Modernity appears to be in the air and Jaya is the child of the new dawn. Consequently, she was trained in riding, hunting, shooting and playing polo as well as *Rajniti*. The Maharaja was also very particular regarding Jaya's upbringing and grooming. He engaged the services of Mrs. Roy to impart teaching of English Language to Jaya (64). Daily after indulging in her *sati* prayers with her mother, Jaya would love to go for her outdoor trainings. She would feel free of the *purdah* walls "with their weight of tradition on one side, their threat of change on the other" (64). This immediate shift of the environment represents Jaya's frequent swings from tradition to modernity and vice-a-versa.

Researches done in the last decade on the psychology of a young girl have reported that there is a damage of self-worth in girls in their teens. Rachel Simmons, in her book *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* based on her researches on the problem of self-esteem in young girls writes, "... now psychologists have measured an alarming loss of self-esteem in girls as they approach adolescence ... at this moment girls become aware of the necessity to be conventionally feminine, to be liked at all costs, to be pleasing, to be passive, to be modest" (Quoted by Regunathan 4). In case of Jaya these findings reflect the expectations of her convention bound mother. However, under pressure girls gradually lose their ability to articulate and manage their conflicts. Simmons further asserts, "... a psychological glass ceiling exists as well and it is the product of a culture that is telling girls, yes ... but ... If we have to make girls resilient we have to give them the skills to navigate the challenges relationships pose" (4). Jai Singh perhaps understood the mindset of a typical traditional Indian girl like Jaya. So he did everything to protect his daughter's self-confidence and prepare her to deal with future challenges. He brought railway to

Balmer and then the first motorcars arrived in the Balmer fort (*Raj* 54). He employed engineers for new constructions, redesigning irrigation system and for increasing the electricity supply (64). He was forward moving but was strongly against the British Imperialistic philosophy.

Here, it would be interesting to co-relate Edward Said's interpretation of imperialism and colonialism with the British subjugation of Balmer. "Imperialism" Said conveys is "a means of thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others" (5). He further asserts that the imperial masters are impelled by the ideology that "certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination" (8) because they are inferior and require authority. Inherently, this may also be a result of man's instinctive hunger for expansion of power that can conveniently be done by exercising it on the weaker people. During the nineteenth century exceptional power was focused in Britain. Said adds, "This century climaxed 'the rise of the West', and the Western power allowed the imperial metropolitan centres to acquire and accumulate territory ... on a truly astonishing scale" (6). Colonization, on such a large scale, nurtured fear of annexation in the royalties. Maharaja Jai Singh lived with this insecurity because if he failed to fulfill the undue demands of the British like paying their heavy taxes or sending his heir to England for study, his kingdom would be seized. Despite his apprehensions, he did his best for the state. His attitude towards conventionality was not rigid. He was flexible enough to ensure the growth of his state and family. Jaya inherited this flexibility which helped her to adapt herself to the painful conditions in her later life. The progressive gestures of the Maharaja left an indelible mark on Jaya, making them an integral part of her consciousness all along her life.

The novel also presents before us a flip side of modernity the concept of Westernization as a new face of progressiveness and its dichotomy with the element of tradition. Westernization and modernization are sometimes assumed to be synonymous to each other and are invariably used as interchangeable terms. On the contrary, both the processes, though inter-dependent, play different roles. Westernization is a practice wherein the influenced ethnic group adopts the Western ideologies not only in the areas of industry, technology and economics, but also in the ways of living, food, attire, language, religious principles and moral values. Problems arise when Westernization uses suppressive tendencies to manipulate a traditional culture as it happened in the expansionist eras. This can be dangerous as it may lead to a cultural disintegration. The Western advocators undermine, as Conrad Philip Kottak asserts, "...the fact that the models of culture that they have created are inappropriate for settings outside of Western civilization" ("Westernization"). Moreover, the compellingly Westernized people follow only those trends which are already allocated by the Western way of life. Conversely, in modernization there is an endeavour to strengthen financially, socially and scientifically weaker groups within the structure of the indigenous culture. Aliceve opines that this practice makes "the society self-sufficient ... (that) looks towards the present and existing treasures in one's own culture..." (2).

Modernization is synonymous to progressiveness which can be achieved only after adopting the best out of the past. Here, Indian society would be a good example, as one can observe, that although Indians have welcomed modernity, there are instances which show their love for traditions. A. L. Basham has aptly commented, "In fact the whole face of India is altering, but the cultural tradition continues, and it will never be lost" (484). The freedom of a woman to have an inter-caste marriage is a modern idea but to live in a live-in relationship is Westernization. N.K. Jain writes, "...but being modern is not the same thing as Westernized. Indeed the modern West need not be the model of social change" ("Tradition, Modernity and Change" 10). Westernization is surely a dangerous affair as it destroys the continuity of culture, which in turn negates the very identity of a Westernized individual.

There are characters in *Raj*, like Tikka, Jaya's brother, who nurtures a deep desire to get Westernized. Historically speaking, the British tried to infuse Western values into young princes by forcing kings to send their sons for study to England. They used political diplomacy as a tool in front of the helpless kings. In the guise of giving a modern education, their clandestine strategy was to transform the

Indian princes by making them pro-British and to make them adopt Western culture as their way of life. However, this invariably generated a sense of an East West divide between the traditionalists and the Westernized. The fictional Balmer is not an exception to this historical fact. Maharaja Jai Singh, was forced to send Tikka to England for studies. However, under the influence of the *Angrez* tutor, he got distanced from his traditions. He would “regard his father as a ruler blind to the advances of the real world He avoided his mother ... desperately wanted the *Angrez* tutor to acknowledge that he was not like them ...” (*Raj* 58). The books of Kipling, Burke, Baden-Powell, Macaulay and British newspapers shaped his vision. Jaya was afraid “that her brother was becoming an *Angrez* himself” (58). Thus, Balmer became a prey of the British policy of Cultural Imperialism. The exasperation of the Maharani of Sirpur over her grandsons' Westernized escapades and obsession for an American actress is evident from her words: “Tell me what magic these foreigners possess. How have they so corrupted my grandson's soul that he is prepared to place a white whore on the most ancient throne in India?” (223).

The conflict of tradition and modernity enters a new phase when Jay enters into matrimony, getting married to Prince Pratap of Sirpur. The marriage is against her wish as she had despised the prince due to his Westernized escapades. Moreover, the solemnization is done in absentia of the husband as he is in England. He returns almost after two years. He turns out to be an ultra-modern who is obsessed with Western values and views anything Eastern as inferior. But ironically, he has the traditional male dominating attitude towards women, which is in direct contrast to the progressive thinking of Jaya's father.

With her husband's return, Jaya had her confrontation with the Rajput tradition of the everlasting compliance of a wife and Pratap's westernized disgust for Indian women as he regarded them “just a lot of overfed buffalos” (*Raj* 92). He abhors his wife's traditional bridal attire, “I am afraid you won't do, Princess. You really won't do at all Wash all that nonsense off your hands and feet. And change out of these Christmas decorations” (189). He informed her about the proposed visit of the Prince of Wales to Sirpur and gave her a year to adopt Western values with the help of a Westernized Indian tutor who would teach her “the intricacies of Western society” (192). Jaya, courageous and assertive as she was, could have given a befitting reply to these insults, but the traditional values that were expected from a wife, made her helpless. With a silent response, she felt hurt both as a wife and as a woman.

Although Gita Mehta does not appear to be a feminist writer as her other works deal with the variety of issues other than feminism, the story of *Raj* is surely a feminist text that has interwoven the issues of women's emancipation with the factors related to tradition and progressiveness. Jaya's state as a woman, desperately struggling to wriggle out of the bonds of conventionality can be understood from a letter published by a maharani in *The Bombay Chronicle*. The letter recorded the issue as follows: “For generations we have quietly suffered untold and unbelievable wrongs But the new generation has started to protest. Why should we not protest? We are also human. Even we dare to dream...” (*Raj* 237-38). Jaya's character is a perfect blend of the shades of modernity and tradition. She has the courage to choose her own limits. She would eat on dining tables, carry hand-bags, cover hands with gloves; but, would not cut her hair or dance with a stranger. N.K. Jain rightly comments, “In an atmosphere where everyone is mindlessly fashionable and trendy, there is a positive merit in being traditional” (“From Purdah to Polo to Politics” 211).

Mehta presents Jaya a resilient woman with strong existential instincts. Although she strives hard to win her husband, she has a thinking of her own. She establishes her independence by accepting only the necessary ideas of the West without compromising on her traditions and her identity as an Indian woman. The novel puts forth the fact that the co-existence of Westernization and conventionality is a difficult task to achieve. However, the conjugation of the two is possible, if the stakeholders genuinely make efforts to adopt the positivity of both the extremes. In this sense, Gita Mehta presents Jaya as a true modern who moves ahead assimilating the experiences of her encounter with the West, the progressiveness of her father and the conventionality of her mother. She reminds us of women who took grave responsibilities on

themselves and have performed such commendable deeds of valour that would defy even the strongest of men. Maharani Laxmi Bai and Sarojini Naidu are some to be kept in mind for their daring accomplishments. According to Mehta, Sarojini Naidu “shocked Indian sensibility by marrying beneath her own high caste. Such women were fearless, whether they were on the barricades or...leading marches against mounted police” (“Upfront Daughter” 124).

Sometimes conventions subjugate progressive ideas, especially when it comes to the treatment meted out to a widow in the traditional Indian society. Jaya once again got engulfed into the folds of a depraved tradition, and this time it was her widowhood when she lost her husband in an air-crash. She was restrained in an unventilated cramped room for fourteen days, her head was shaved and was constantly cursed. Here, one can clearly observe that the novel condemns the ill-treatment of widows. But it can also be observed if on one side the novel dismisses such ill-practices, on the other, it reconstructs the same by giving them a progressive aura.

However, traditions were not able to suppress Jaya for long. Although she had to remain in *purdah* during the period of mourning for one year, she kept a watchful eye on the schemers who were trying hard to negate her claim on her Regency. As soon as the mourning got over, she emerged stronger than before to take on the responsibilities of the Regent Maharani of Sirpur. As a Regent she worked with dignity keeping in mind her lessons of a ruler's *Dharma* that she received in her childhood. She launched a well planned development programme for Sirpur. After being a victim of the power, she became its executor. Unfortunately, as Jaya started making sincere efforts to develop Sirpur, she received the most tragic blow when her son, Arjun was killed in an attack of communal frenzy. While Jaya was trying her best to recover from this irreparable blow, she realized that there was no heir to the Sirpur throne and she was the sole guardian of its ancient line. Her ministers informed her that India and Pakistan had become two independent nations and the new government was pressing the royal kingdoms to sign “an instrument of accession and merge with India” (450). Jaya found herself standing on a crossroad where she had lost all her father, her brother, her husband, her sympathizers, her faithful prime minister and finally her young son no one to share her dilemma and guide her to such an important decision related to her kingdom.

She had reports that if she denied accession to India, her kingdom would be under the excessive pressure from the government and the nationalists alike and this might result in blood-shed. Moving ahead with her father's instinct of progression and her *Raj Guru's* admonition, “Your dharma is protection, Baisa. You cannot escape your destiny” (454), gave her written consent to merge Sirpur with the Union of India and thus formally declared Sirpur as a democratic state. Jaya finally had a glimpse of light the light of a new modern India, and she, along with the old *Raj Guru*, comes forward as personifications of true modernity.

Conclusion

At this stage of discussion, it can be argued that the novel, *Raj* witnesses moves of time from tradition to modernity, orthodoxy to progressiveness and a ritual bound social order to an independent, skill oriented society. This evolution appears to go forward on two levels – on the level of the character and on the level of the nation's growth. From the characters' point of view, one can observe that the protagonist Jaya, her father, the Maharani of Balmer, the *Raj Guru*, the *Sati Mata*, *Kuki-bai* and many more are the earnest voyagers on the path of modernity without getting uprooted from their traditional soil. Recurrently, Jaya finds a compromise between the old and the new, accepting change with flexibility. Fighting against the odds of Westernization, she marches ahead facing the challenges of her life with dignity. Bande rightly affirms “Jaya tosses between tradition and modernity all through the book” (“*Raj: A Thematic Study*” 242).

On the second level, the novel can be interpreted as a delineation of India's sojourn from colonial to post-colonial era, from aristocracy to democracy. The royalties like Balmer and Sirpur are the integral part of this evolution. The seeds of nationalism sown in the latter half of the nineteenth century sprouted forth in the form of country-wide agitations against the British imperialism. The nationalists can be termed as the

moderns who guided the country to become a republic and achieve its democratic status. Here, it can be maintained if aristocracy was India's traditional pattern of governance, self-government is akin to its modernity.

On a different scale, Jaya's journey from tradition to modernity can also be inferred as metaphorical in nature. Her exploration is a symbol of India's march to the new era. It is at this point of time Jaya files her nominations to contest free India's first general elections with an aim to continue with her *dharma* of protecting her people and giving them a voice. As she acquires a position of a democrat, her journey and that of the nation converge at one point, to move ahead with the same mission. Major Vir Singh's comment summarizes Jaya's expedition in one sentence: "I see the man who anointed your father a ruling king has now anointed you a democrat, Bai-sa" (*Raj* 454). The elements of tradition and modernity, their interplay and vitality, play a dominant role in shaping Jaya's personality. The novel depicts a metamorphosis of a girl, primarily groomed in the security of the institution of the '*Zanana*' and suppressed by the traditional demands of matrimony, into a progressive, self-confident and self-assertive modern woman of the independent India. A critic has aptly declared her "a child of the Indian Renaissance" (Thangalakshmi 1). *Raj*, has depicted India to have reached a point of time where the country has just ended the first phase of its voyage; and thereafter, has to further advance on the path of modernization in its post-colonial construct.

Although the focus of this paper is on *Raj*, Gita Mehta's fourth book, a non-fiction, *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India* (1997), is worth mentioning here, as it is a witness of country's second phase of its sojourn. On a deeper scale, the fictional elements of *Raj* and the non-fictional elements of *Snakes and Ladders* unite on the common platform of the theme of tradition and modernity. Both the books share a strong impartial dialogue on good as well as bad practices of India, the Western influence, the existing disparities of the old and the new and their mutual acceptance. Swami Vivekananda touched the pulse of India when he wrote, "On one side is modern Western science, dazzling the eyes with the brilliancy of myriad suns ... on the other are the hopeful and the strengthening traditions of her ancient forefathers" (71). India lives with these paradoxes, which is also its greatest strength. Mehta, while discussing this contrast in her interview with Shailaja Neelkantan, asserts, "India's dynamism shows in its contrasts" ("*Snakes and Ladders*"). The explorations and deliberations in the present paper tend to deconstruct the viewpoint of tradition and modernity as water tight compartments. At the same time, they establish a valid point that for a futuristic development of society and for inter-personal and intra-personal harmony, they must always cohabit.

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