



Politicization of History in Gita Mehta's *Raj*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the spectrum of politics and history in Gita Mehta's *Raj*. *Raj* is a historical fiction that describes the decline and fall of royal India with a fervent understanding of the political climate of India during the period of fifty years prior to independence. The prologue to the novel has a clear symbolism of the novel's main theme. The Maharani Jaya's narrative revolves around Raj. The novel takes place over a period of fifty years. The story follows Jaya as she grows up and becomes the ruler of her realm, Balmer, while weaving the drama of India's struggle for independence into the story. This novel offers a wonderful look into a woman's historical period. The novel, which spans over fifty years, captures the drama of India's fight for independence in its scope while also charting Jaya's ascent to the position of state ruler. *Raj* is a piece that depicts a montage of contemporary India in addition to a vivid description of a Maharani's lengthy historical moment.

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Gita Mehta, a most influential Indian English author, has been recognized as acknowledged novelist both in India and abroad. She looks at a more crucial aspect of Indian culture that is at a crossroads due to the influence of the British on India and Western attempts to encroach on the country's cultural environment. Given her political background, Mehta's engagement in the Indian liberation struggle was only natural. It was a traumatic experience for the royal family to give up their position and authority, and the shift from ruling

monarchs to commoners was a fascinating phenomenon. In order to feel their pulse and learn about their former splendour, she had conducted extensive study and met with a number of men and women from the old princely houses of India.

Mehta, who is from the post-independent era, tackles this subject in her novel *Raj*, which appears to be a wealth of knowledge, in a very creative way. Because of the masterful way in which the historical information is weaved into the story, it never becomes encyclopaedic. She is a gifted storyteller who delves into the innermost recesses of the human heart. An omnipotent-narrator



uses the third person to narrate Raj. The majority of the story is told through Jaya's consciousness. The narrator takes the readers from Jaya's birth until the end of the novel, when she submits her application for the first election in independent India, by weaving together current political and historical threads.

As the story's protagonist and heroine, Jaya simultaneously watches events unfold around her in silence and actively participates in them. She watches helplessly as political events deprive the princes of their authority and when her husband and other royal family members fall from grace due to excess and extramarital affairs. These are occurrences over which she has no control. Instead, she takes a proactive stance when she predicts that a crisis would emerge from a socio-political upheaval. She implements changes inside the state in her role as regent Maharani. She is also flexible enough to accept the changes that come with Indian freedom. She resists the pressure in a different way than the Indian prince's did. Amina correctly emphasised the following:

Mehta creates a circle of oppressive forces which impinge on the lives of women like Maharani Jai Singh and Princess Jaya reducing them to the pawns in the socio-political game their men-folk play for them. ("Claiming Space for Oneself: Politics of Gender and Imperialism in Gita Metha's *Raj*," 155)

The Royal India ruled by the princes and the British India are the subjects of the novel. It begins in 1897 and paints a vivid picture of significant occurrences like the famine of 1898, rising British meddling in the affairs of princely nations, and at the same time, their disregard for the starvation-stricken populace. The novel depicts the rise of Gandhi and other national leaders, their call to the nation, the First and Second World Wars, the awakening of the democratic spirit among the populace and their protest, finally leading to independence after which the princely States merge with the union - some willingly and others unwillingly. Mehta skilfully weaves the tale of Jaya Devi, the princess of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur, within this framework of significant historical occurrences, ensuring that the narrative never loses its focus. As Usha Bande, in "*Raj: A Thematic Study*," rightly avers:

It is intricately interwoven with the political events but it has all the tears and romance of a woman's existence in India which saves the work from being a mere record of the all-too-well-known history of our freedom struggle, or a racy account of the grandeur and frivolity of the exorbitant lifestyle of the princes. (239)

The woman's perspective, which offers it a new depth, sets Mehta's Raj apart from other post-independent Indian English novels that deal with the princes.



The author depicts a lady who is thrust into the conflict by an unrelenting fate that robs her of her brother, father, husband, and kid and leaves her on her own to deal with the consequences. Mehta takes up every plot thread and leads us through Jaya's life. Both a silent observer and a vocal participant, the heroine plays both roles. She can only watch events that are beyond her control in silence. She is powerless to alter the political circumstances that forced the royal community to ally with the Indian Union. She is also a powerless bystander to her husband's and other princes' vices and irrationalities, which invite their own destruction in their life. When the situation calls for her to make a decision and puts her character to the test, she takes part actively. She accepts the shift, both personally and politically, and is cunning and diplomatic.

Four sections - Balmer, Sirpur, Maharani, and Regent - make up the entire work. A "prologue" and an "Afterword" are included. Little Jaya, her father Maharaja Jai Singh, and her older brother Tikka go hunting in the prologue, which establishes the narrative's pacing. She initially feels afraid when she witnesses a giant panther being murdered, but over time she progressively feels "as though she had lost the capacity to fear" (4). Here the Maharaja imparts his lesson of courage; "Rulers are men and men are always frightened. A man cannot govern unless he confronts his own fear" (5). Even though Jaya was too young to understand at the time that the Maharaja was teaching his children Rajniti, the principles of monarchy, she was not able

to appreciate the words' significance until she assumed the role of the ruler herself.

Jaya was born and raised in the Rajasthani kingdom of Balmer. The novel describes the kingdom of Balmer in great detail as well as the unique lifestyle of the royal families in such princely realms. The harems, court intrigues, tiger hunts, polo matches, horse races, ignored Maharanis, and dazzling mistresses are just a some of the things that go on. These are the typical celebrations of every Indian kingdom, and Balmer is a prime example of such a state in India before independence. With considerable liveliness, a beautiful narrative about the idiosyncrasies, extravagances, and shallowness of the men in such Royal circles is constructed.

Balmer is experiencing a terrible drought at the beginning of the novel. Jaya emerges from her mother's womb under such turbulent conditions to face countless difficult challenges in her life. Unlike her brother, who made a difference to the community, she was born in a place where there was a severe drought. The Maharaja must depart for England to attend the Coronation ceremony of the British Emperor because the British are apathetic to such a big disaster. The Maharaja Jai Singh christens the infant "Jaya," which means "Victory," after his return from England. Before she experiences rain, Jaya is three years old. While the Maharaja has determined that his daughter would not be raised in a *pardah*, the Maharani insists that her daughter be schooled in accordance with the customs of Balmer princesses in all other respects. At age five, Jaya goes



hunting with her father, at age ten, she kills her first tiger, and at age twelve, she begins training in the "sola shingar" style of personal adornment (94). She has been repeatedly told that a woman is a mood and that she must be alluring to her boyfriend. Jaya's father is adamant that his daughter be trained in outdoor sports including polo, horseback riding, shooting, hunting, and tent-pegging. Unconcerned with the fact that Jaya is a female, Major Vir Singh, a strict instructor, instructs her in outdoor games. Lessons from Mrs. Roy and the Raj Guru in Rajniti are much more challenging. She is terrified by their rigorous rules and austerity.

Although the English have written about the king's divine right to rule, Indian kings believe that merit, not birth, is what makes a person a king. Jaya has spent years studying the principles of civil and criminal law found in the Arthasastra. She is shocked to discover that Chanakya's revenue system served as a model for British India's revenue system. Her English teacher, Mrs. Roy, a fervent nationalist, made the status of ruler's sound as fragile as that of men sinking in quicksand while the Raj Guru spoke of a world that is inviolable. She describes the assassination of the Portuguese king, which led to the declaration of Portugal as a republic, the assassination of the Greek king by the Republicans, the overthrow of the Ottoman Sultan by young Turks who rebelled against him, the assassination of the Russian Empire's prime minister, as well as the open rebellion in Ireland against the British. She grimly assures Jaya, "Mark my words, Bai-sa, the British Empire will bleed to death from the

wounds inflicted by these two lances - Home rule for Ireland, Home Rule for India" (90). While Mrs. Roy passionately chants the slogan of Tilak "Freedom is my birth right and I shall have it," (99) every day that goes by, Captain Osborne's hold upon Tikka grows stronger. According to him, Tikka must move to England if he wants to continue as the successor to the Balmer throne. The chambers of Tikka are piled high with British periodicals and newspapers. Tikka views his father as a monarch who is blind to the advancements of the actual world outside the rules of his realm with a growing sense of betrayal. He views his mother as a woman who practises harem superstitions to a great extent. He cries out for the English tutor to recognise that he is different from his parents. Captain Osborne, the English tutor, continues to pique Tikka's interest. Jaya's lessons, on the other hand, are wholly of a different type. Jaya is left to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of both modernity and tradition for herself. She found enormous support from the old ideas instilled in her during her political and emotional difficulties.

While Jaya is being prepared for the outer world by her father, her mother is upset that the Maharaja is trying to turn her into a son. Being a woman who adheres to tradition, the Maharani worries that a girl with excessive education will offend her in-laws. Jaya is compelled to adopt traditional beliefs and qualities at her direction. It makes sense that Jaya alternates throughout the novel between tradition and modernity.



In the second chapter of the novel "Sirpur," Jaya is changed into a young wife and enters the second phase of her existence with the terrible awareness that her childhood is vanishing before her eyes like damp sand. Prince Pratap of Sirpur is her husband. The prince's sword stands in for the wedding party while the prince is in England. Jaya hesitantly accepts the role of Sirpur's princess and bride. Mehta makes it clear in the novel that Jaya's marriage is a very traumatic event in her life, and the young bride wishes that a paranormal force might stop the entire process.

Jaya submissively takes down the ornaments she had painstakingly decked herself with in order to appease her husband; her demeanour belies her wrath. Jaya instantly understands that her conventional ideals are useless in the current environment. She is horrified when her husband uses rude and insulting language to further degrade her: "Jaya Devi, our union is purely one of convenience. If the need for children ever arises, I am confident that both of us will be able to fulfil our obligations, but for now" (190).

Jaya is well aware that the British Empire forced her husband to wed, and that she, in turn, was imposed upon him. The Indian Princes were viewed by the British Empire as being highly careless and play boyish, therefore they insisted that they get married before being allowed to travel abroad. Pratap admits detestably, "I accepted to our marriage for that reason. So, Jaya Devi, here we are. You cannot wear a sari or consume quail. You lack language skills. However, it is through you

that I must outwit the Empire that compelled me to be married" (191). Jaya is a rough diamond in Pratap's eyes, and she needs to be polished before she can be displayed to the British Empire. He hires Lady Modi, a very respectable Bombay-born Indian woman, to instruct her in the nuances of Western culture. Even though Jaya's ego is severely wounded, she still makes every attempt to please her husband and live her life in accordance with him, just like any other tradition-bound wife. He turns to her, but strangely, she is disappointed and dreads his companionship because his "intimacy ... soiled her as his remoteness had never done" (287).

Under Lady Modi's guidance, Jaya gets rid of her self-consciousness. Pratap Singh is pleased by Jaya's plucked eyebrows, arched eyebrows over her lovely green eyes, and lacquered nails that extend beyond her tiny, unpainted fingers. He is pleased that Jaya's proficiency at the game of polo impresses the British. She dared to come before the British sans gloves and maintained her dignity and integrity throughout, creating positive ripples with her beauty and elegance in the British Court.

Jaya is described as a Maharani in third section. She gives birth to her kid and now feels like she is a part of Sirpur because she maintains the Sirpur line. She feels an odd sense of security after the birth of her son. Her existence begins to take on colour and purpose. But when her husband forbids her from feeding her child, she is in shock. Jaya was shocked to learn that her husband was now taking advantage of her parental rights after



already depriving her of the dignity of being a wife. While the wet nurse feeds her infant in her apartment, she sits silently and hopelessly next to her husband in the Durbar Hall. She accepts her husband's obscene display of power with unwavering stoicism. Her rage is subdued by the reverence for a husband that has been so firmly entrenched by the prayers and rituals that have characterised her entire life, and she accepts the role of a mere wife without any sense of self-respect.

While Jaya experiences the same lack of respect for herself as other women in the royal family, she never loses her composure or sense of honour. Through Jaya's poised quiet, the author illustrates the subordinate position of women generally and particularly in royal households. In the novel, her silence speaks louder than her words. As a mother, Jaya finds great joy in seeing her son develop. She longs to be with him and provide for him directly. Sadly, both her husband and the business of the state interfere with a mother's small pleasures. She is compelled to assist the Maharaja with state business. It gets increasingly difficult for the rulers over time.

The independence fight picks up steam, and as time goes on, the princes' situation becomes more insecure. Jaya has a full schedule of events each day. She is required to attend talks with national leaders while also acting as a charming hostess at parties that Pratap hosts to win over the British. She is compelled to make a quick journey to London in order to assist Pratap in getting through the Esme

Moore scandal. Jaya sees the violence coming to a head with Pratap's passing.

Jaya is referred to as a Regent in fourth section. With the assistance of her Prime Minister, Sir Akbar, and the new Resident, James Osborne, she tries to manage the administration effectively. The course of events is unmistakably moving in the National movement's favour. Indian National leaders publicly state that they believe that backing the British Empire is risky and is equivalent to accepting death. Jaya's reforms and charitable endeavours are futile in the face of Arun Roy's instigation of widespread anti-princes' sentiments. In an attempt to save Sir Akbar, her son Arjun perishes in a riot. In the end, Jaya decides to become a member of the new order after seeing the futility of maintaining the old one.

Mehta first presents Jaya as a submissive and meek character. Jaya is a highly bright and brilliant youngster, but after being married, she becomes very quiet and meek. She progressively transforms into a woman who embraces change graciously and shows courage while remaining enthusiastic. She astounds everyone, including her husband, with her polo prowess and causes a stir by walking into the British Court without gloves. Maharaja Pratap relies even more on her as a result of his recognition of her competence and her audacity in handling the Esme Moore scandal. She is mistreated because she is a neglected wife, but she never comes out as pitiful. She accepts her fate in a respectful silence. She does occasionally let her spouse know, though, when she



feels mistreated. Jaya's immediate retort is, "An unwanted wife shares that experience, Hukum" (265) when Prince Pratap describes how he and the other Indians, including Tikka, bravely fought on the front in the First World War and adds that it was the only time when they were permitted to be men. Jaya, falling prey to Arun Roy is quite understandable and natural. There are definite hints in the novel that Jaya has more romantic sentiments for the blue-eyed English guy, James Osborne, but Osborne and Jaya maintain a respectful distance from one another. This demonstrates how respectable the Englishman is compared to Arun Roy.

Mehta draws attention to this important nationalist movement by quoting from the speeches of national leaders, the Indian National Congress proceedings, Churchill's comments, and indirect references to Mahatma Gandhi. In fourth section, the quotations at the start of each chapter act as a linking thread. Raj is the story of triumph, according to Usha Bande, "the triumph of 'the people,' of democratic principles, and of a woman who gracefully accepts the inevitable changes" ("*Raj: A Thematic Study*," 240). At the conclusion of the section, Jaya is revealed to be a courageous woman, and her laughter blends with the "silver waters of the rivers." She also bravely fills out the application for election candidacy. This demonstrates how gracefully she was able to accept the shift. She prioritises the needs of the populace. Jaya recalls her sessions with the Raj guru, who claims to have taught the Indian ruler's democracy,

despite James Osborne and Arun Roy's claims to the contrary: "As the two men argued above her head, Jaya remembered the Raj Guru's harsh whispers under the painted frescoes of the Fort Library, demanding, 'what is the first principle of Rajniti, Bai-Sa?' and her stuttering reply, 'The people'" (461).

The Rajniti principles vibrate and remain in Jaya's consciousness throughout the story. The right to follow one's "dharma" belongs to the Indian royal community. The Maharani and Maharaja Jai Singh dedicated their entire lives to carrying out their dharma, which emphasises the significance of "Rajniti." Jaya is told by the Raj teacher, "Your dharma is protection, Bai-sa. "You cannot avoid your fate" (454) When Jaya chooses to be a part of the bigger picture, she feels lighter and relaxed and is content that she is able to fulfil her obligation to her people and her country.

A parade of political figures, Raj Gurus, cultural advisors like Lady Modi, in addition to Maharanis, Maharajahs, captains, and other characters, appear in the novel. What stands out is how practically all of these leaders' lives seem to be a façade. The story revolves around Jaya Singh, a princess from the Royal House of Balmer, and provides a vivid view into one Indian woman's significant historical period. The study of India's political unrest during the Raj is fascinating. It revolves around Jaya Singh, the main character, a princess born into the Royal House of Balmer.

Beginning with Jaya's birth and upbringing, the novel goes on to detail her experiences as a child, a wife, and a



mother on a personal level, and as a princess, a maharani, and a regent on a political level. It ends almost as Jaya is entering her final years when she declares herself a candidate in the elections of a free India. In this novel, history and fiction come together to create a lavishly adorned brocade that is embroidered with sex, politics, landscape polo, and tragedy.

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