

## Salvation in A Jiffy: Gita Mehta's Karma Cola

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**Abstract:** Diasporic fiction constitutes the core of postcolonial discourse. An expatriate man of letters differs radically from a stay-at-home writer in that he experiences culture shock in the land he adopts. Beginning with Raja Rao, Indian diasporic fiction demonstrates rich diversity and complexity. Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry and Amitav Ghosh have added a new and significant dimension to Indian diasporic writing. Though Gita Mehta is an expatriate writer, she restricts herself to depiction of diverse strands of Indian life. She is firmly rooted in India and as such, her novels are steeped in Indian sensibility. Her first novel, *Raj* deals with the impact of colonialism on the life of a royal family in India and its resultant struggle to adapt in a new milieu. *A River Sutra*, her second novel, is a multilayered work that deftly demonstrates the profundity of Indian ethos. In this narrative, the Narmada, a river, is an important persona in the novelist's scheme of things. In *Karma Cola*, Gita Mehta seeks to debunk a Western myth about yoga and Moksha (Salvation).

**Key words:** Diasporic, expatriate, debunk, yoga, salvation

On, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat;  
But there is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the  
ends of the earth.

— Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West".

### 1. Introduction

Diaspora is a complex, global phenomenon which involves a paradigm shift. Diasporic experience implies dislocation the psychological consequences of which are far reaching. Exile, self-imposed or enforced, offers a writer, a vantage point to view his/her native land with detachment and ruthless objectivity. Indian writers of diaspora added a refreshingly original dimension to the postcolonial discourse. In the twenty first century, the creative epicentre shifted from the centre to the margins. The postcolonial writers are "writing back to the centre" and in the process, they challenge the Universalism which offers a hegemonic view of existence.

Gita Mehta is a diasporic novelist whose thematic preoccupations are characterised by a rich variety and diversity. Her first novel, *Raj* deals with the impact of colonialism on the life of a royal family in India. In this

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work, she views history from a subaltern perspective. *A River Sutra*, on the other hand, is a richly profound account of Indian life with all the mysteries of East that continue to baffle West. *Karma Cola*, the third fruit of Gita Mehta's fertile imagination, however, does not deal with diasporic experience. This paper attempts to examine *Karma Cola* as a text as pretext to debunk a Western myth about salvation (*Moksha*).

## 2. East-West Clash in Indian English Novel: A Review

Some Western intellectuals and creative writers came under the influence of Indian scriptures. They set out to seek a remedy for the ills plaguing the West. If Eliot prescribes the doctrine of *Datta*, *Damyata* and *Dayatwam* in *The Waste Land*, Emerson's "Brahma" and Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* capture the essence of Hindu philosophy.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *A New Dominion* too deals with the motif of East-West encounter. Here too, the Westerners play themselves into the hands of an Indian Swamiji who runs Universal Society for Spiritual Regeneration of the Modern World. The "guru" methodically breaks the will and mind of his disciples until they surrender totally and become "nothing". All the three characters, Evie, Margaret and Lee endure extreme states of self-negation-hunger, filth and heat and in the process, become nervous wrecks. Likewise Bhabani Bhattacharya focuses on the dichotomy between Eastern and Western value systems in *A Dream in Hawaii*. Bhattacharya's work exposes the spiritual bankruptcy of the West and the hollowness of the pseudo-spiritual approach to the problems of human existence.

East-West encounter forms the crux of the narrative in Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*. The novel, with a shocking boldness, highlights the evil effects of English racism. Srinivas, the protagonist, fails to 'belong' in Britain, his adopted land even after fifty years. Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* explores the lives of immigrants who seek to forge a new identity in the "chosen" land. They share a love-hate relationship with the country of their adoption. Jyothi, a young Punjabi, in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, undergoes a magical transformation as she takes a new identity at every turn of life. Her transition from being an illegal immigrant to a true American is the thematic purpose of the novelist.

## 3. The Four Purusarthas

In Hindu way of life, there are four aims the pursuit of which assumes great significance. They are *Dharma* (Righteousness), *Artha* (Material Wealth), *Kama* (Desire) and *Moksha* (Spiritual Freedom). The *Sriti* enjoins that man should not step away from *Dharma*. He should follow *Dharma* in order to enjoy life here and after. By properly following the way of *Dharma*, man can get liberated. The duties of man are laid down as rites to be performed, rules to be followed, customs to be honoured and code of conduct at each stage of life. Discussing the significance of *Dharma*, Radhakrishnan observes:

The *Dharma* has two sides, which are interdependent, the individual and the social. The conscience of the individual requires a guide and he has to be taught the way to realize his purpose and live according to spirit and not sense. The interests of society require equal attention (Radhakrishnan, p. 64).

*Artha* stands for the acquisition of material wealth in all its forms. It is regarded as the means to the accomplishment of all needs. According to canakya, *Dharma* is the source of happiness and *Artha* is the source of *Dharma*. Thus *Artha* governs the social and personal needs of man in the material world. *Kama* means any desire

and indulgence in objects of senses in general; it refers, in particular, to the physical attraction between man and woman. This desire can be said to be of two types — which belongs to the lower plane and that which belongs to the higher plane. *Moksha* means true realization of the Immortal Soul (*Brahman*). A man who seeks liberation and knowledge has nothing to do with wealth or desire.

#### 4. Karma Cola: Text as Pretext

*Karma Cola* projects a vivid image of a phenomenon that marked the arrival of Westerners who were in search of the 'missing magic' in their otherwise sterile existence. India, a spiritual treasure house, promised enlightenment to the hollow men and women who believed in a cultural revolution. Gita Mehta received a letter from a woman who was in a lunatic asylum in the U.S:

The writer described herself as having been among the hundreds of thousands of Westerners who travelled to India in the belief that they would find holy men able to free them from the boredom and despair of an increasingly material world ... the young woman encountered a man clothed in the saffron robes of renunciation who offered to be her spiritual mentor ... The Gurus gave her food laced with drugs. When she was incapacitated, they sexually assaulted her (Mehta, p. ix).

Mehta's narrative is a vitriolic attack on "global escapism masquerading as spiritual hunger". The self-styled gurus exploit the "new nomads" in the name of salvation. The hippies and the star freaks are the victims of spiritual tourism. According to a view, *karma* is a spiritual drug for the Occidentals and their comeback to the world of reality is on the wings of insanity (Kalaamani, pp. 128–29).

The sixties and the seventies witnessed a mad bid for liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. (Incidentally the subsequent perversion and disillusionment were depicted poignantly in Dev Anand's film, *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*.) They sought out gurus, mostly phoney, from whom they hoped to derive "Shakti" or cosmic energy. Gita Mehta narrates thus:

Thousands and thousands of them, clashing cymbals, ringing bells, playing lutes wearing bright colours and weird clothes, singing, dancing.....(Mehta, p. 5).

*Karma Cola* offers a series of vignettes of ashram life in which hordes of thrill-seekers flock in pursuit of enlightenment. Gita Mehta's image is lively:

The American student nodded sagely and sat down, grasping the moral significance of nuclear war for the first time. And India acquired another willing convert to the philosophy of the meaningfully meaningless (Mehta, p. 17)

To the spiritually hungry aliens, *karma* is just a commodity; it symbolizes everything they want. For the Indian mind, however, the spiritual truths are an inseparable part of the collective unconscious. One foreigner observes:

We were in India, expensively, voluntarily and intelligently, seeking release from the Wheel of Existence (Mehta, p. 32).

The "gurus" in *Karma Cola* cleverly exploit the gullible and the knowledgeable alike. When asked about what he was doing in India, an inmate of an ashram replies, "I am being" (Mehta, p. 34).

A Westerner once learnt from his Indian guru about the reincarnation meditation. It involves staring into a mirror without blinking, taking no notice of the tears that begin streaming down the cheeks. One's past lives begin to appear in a series of images. The Westerner narrates the experience of a girl who went crazy about it:

She did the meditation with her husband. They were up in their bedroom with their mirrors. Suddenly she starts going crazy, pulling her hair out of its roots — What she saw was that she had been her husband's mother in the life just before this one (Mehta, p. 40).

Irony operates as a narrative strategy in *Karma Cola*. Once a reputed guru was asked to restore his dead disciple to life. A bewildered American disciple was a witness to the miracle. When queried about the miracle, the American thought for a long time before he answered:

Yeah, I saw a miracle. You should have seen that morgue, guys rushing all over the place, clerks, morgue attendants and administrators. Nobody knew where anything was. I reckon the real miracle was when the Master found that body (Mehta, p. 50).

The “gurus” profess to know the path to self-realization. The disciples submit themselves to the inscrutable logic of their gurus whose ‘magical powers’ can cure any mental ailment. In a nutshell, he is a spiritual mentor.

Karma is a word which fired the Western imagination. To many a Westerner, it is a soft metaphysical option which ensures an escape from the terrible materialistic Western world. One American observes:

The fact is that I did not really come here to get here, I sort of drifted here to get away from there (Mehta, p. 64).

A.G. Khan raises a valid point:

Gita Mehta blazes a new trail of entertaining account of the consumerist West struggling to gobble up Hinduism and choking itself in the process. The enlightenment she tried to pass on to the West must have prompted her to probe deep into the intricacies of Hinduism that needs reinterpretation in a language that the modern world can comprehend (Khan, p. 7).

The Karmic Law suggests that there is no heaven but only a series of life sentences and that salvation occurs not in an after-life paradise but with a successful death:

For us external life is death-not in the bosom of Jesus. But just death, no more being born again to endure life again to die again. Yet people come in ever increasing numbers to India to be born again with the conviction that in their rebirth they will relearn to live (Mehta, p. 101).

The gap between appearance and reality is at the core of the culture shock. One Indian guru whose powers are limited to controlling the bodies of others, not his own, makes a convenient deal with his disciples. He maintains:

You have the Karma, we will take Coca-Cola, a metaphysical soft drink for a physical one (Mehta, p. 103).

Another “guru” in an ashram in Western India confides in *Time* correspondent:

My followers have no time. So I give them instant salvation. I turn them into neosanyasins (Mehta, p. 102).

Gita Mehta hints at the fact that a simple Hindu has not incorporated such concepts as “instant salvation” and “neosanyasin”.

The phoney gurus offer spiritual balm for every malady of the West. A guru, who sits on a cushioned chair

with blue denim on his head, speaks of perfection:

Everything is perfect. But the Third World War is coming. That is going to be perfect too. It will kill utterly (Mehta, p. 103).

Another “guru” in an indoor football stadium in Delhi promises the proof of God’s existence. He observes that God exists because if one looks up the dictionary, one can eventually find the word ‘God’. He is so popular that he gives benediction from a helicopter.

Gita Mehta narrates one of her personal experiences with a Maharshi who taught the Beatles. When one of the Western disciples complained that the mantra was not working any more, the Maharshi consoled her thus:

Then we must give you another. Use the new Mantra for four days, then let me know, and he pointed to a man kneeling piously in the dark corner, whether it is working. I won’t be here. I must fly back to Switzerland tomorrow. My work requires me there (Mehta, p. 106).

In another instance, a mendicant’s six-year old daughter is brutally tortured. Her father inserts iron nails through her cheeks and flogs her outside a temple:

People flung money at them in recognition of their asceticism and in respect for the child, who, everybody realised, would be reborn a saint for the penances she was undergoing in this life (Mehta, p. 153).

Exploitation of the ignorant Westerners and ostentatious display of pseudo-spirituality are what Gita Mehta scoffs at in the narrative.

## 5. Conclusion

*Karma Cola* addresses the issue of decay of Indian spiritual fabric the pace of which is carcinogenic. Calling *Karma Cola* a book of a very different kind, K.R.S. Iyengar observes:

*Karma Cola* expatiates breezily on the pseudo-spiritual trade between India’s “God-men” and their Western acolytes, and is written with a no-holds barred freedom and a style that is a cross between studied smartness and wit on the one hand and a reckless slipshodness on the other (Iyengar, p. 464).

The materialistic ‘gurus’ offer salvation on a platter which, the novelist points out, is the height of hypocrisy. Self-knowledge can be attained only through the guidance of an enlightened soul. The “gurus” in *Karma Cola*, however, are modern prototypes, out to encash the craze for liberation. Throwing the four *Purusarthas* (values of life) to winds, they violate *Dharma*, seek to fulfill *Kama* and acquire *Artha*. In the process, *Moksha* is the casualty. Gita Mehta subverts the Eurocentric framework of assumptions about yoga and salvation. Thus *Karma Cola* emerges, in the ultimate analysis, as a significant postcolonial text.

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