

## GITA MEHTA'S *A RIVER SUTRA*: A PASSAGE TO NATURE

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### Abstract

*In the age of accelerated and globalized technological development the dualism of nature/culture has gained a great momentum for critical consideration. Earth being considered a feminine entity hints at the link between the oppression and exploitation of the earth and woman. The paper will try to map out Gita Mehta's A River sutra from the cultural dynamics of nature, woman, patriarchy, and spirituality in the Indian context. The stories in the novel present intense human dramas that not only explore the desire for enlightenment but also express the complex roots of India's cultural and political heritage. The paper is not dealing with any empirical evidence linking feminism and the environment. But it will try to show how the dynamic relationship between nature and culture receives a spiritual dimension in the Indian context.*

Key words: Nature, Woman, Patriarchy, Oppression, Culture.

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If we were to look at some of the hoary literary texts of India, we realize that they have a history of environmental activism and consciousness. The hymns of the 'Rigveda', the First of the four *Vedas* which were, according to Maxmuller, composed sometime between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., celebrate different phenomena of nature like the sun for their contributions to the wellbeing of the mankind. Nature occupies an important position in both the Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The presence of Panchavati in *The Ramayana* speaks of man's ability to live in harmony with nature. The classical Sanskrit literature abounds in the message of the harmonious relationship between man, nature and culture. In Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, nature and culture are happily reconciled in the hermitage of Marica in the last Act of the play. In some of the postcolonial novels written by Indian women writers in English, like, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by Anita Desai, *A River Sutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998) by Sohaila Abdulali, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) by Anuradha Roy and *Monkey-Man* (2010) by Usha K. R, these Indian authors voice their concerns on globalization in India, and its impact on gender and family relations as well as the environment understood in its broadest sense. In Mehta's *A River Sutra* one may perceive an Indian cultural flavour with its indigenous diversities, its city and village, its forests and riverscapes. The novel bears the suggestion that man/woman reaches out to pristine nature, in time of utmost need or crisis, for self-realization or consolation.

Instead of weaving one unified whole, Mehta in *A River Sutra* recounts a series of six episodes strung together in the reportage manner by a chief narrator/reporter, who is less a persona than a 'Kathak', the folk narrator of the old type, to be found in any village of India even the other day. People converge on the banks of the Narmada and partake of

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peace and mental serenity by telling their experience and by residing on the banks of this canonical river. The narrator reports not his personal experiences but those of strangers who have narrated them, either to him, or to his priest friend Tariq Mia, who again, repeats it to him. The stories are told by a male narrator, an aged government officer who has opted for a post in a remote rest house after his wife's death so that he could live on the bank of the Narmada. 'Sutra' is the theme of love that runs through all the stories, threading them loosely together. Perhaps she uses Narmada as the thread/string holding together the main story and the sub-stories. River Narmada is the 'Sutra' which threads together the diverse people who live on its shores or who come to worship at its water. *A River Sutra* is, in fact, a garland of stories held together by the 'sutra' (thread) of the river Narmada.

The Indian novelist appears, in tune with the ethos of her society, to have raised her subtle and serious voice of critical consternation against the exploitation in society and of nature. The eco-feminist issue is well apparent mainly in three out of six stories in the novel. Mehta draws parallels between woman and nature and seeks to show how women reach out to nature in their crisis and despair. Coming close to nature the women imbibe the serenity and strength of this unchanged 'immortal' Nature. The last three stories, namely, "The Courtesan's Story", "The Musician's Story", and "The Minstrel's Story" show the novelist's design to make her women characters either co-exist with nature or find shelter in nature i.e., in River Narmada. These women are seen to realize that when everything has failed, all shelters fail, the River Narmada or nature should be the ultimate inspiration or 'home'.

In *The Death of Nature - Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, Carolyn Merchant argues that from its beginning the discourse of modern science in the West was informed by imagery that portrayed nature as female. Mehta has presented the Narmada as a young, beautiful and attractive woman. The nameless narrator says: 'The river is among our holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva' (2). The river is drawn as an organic being full of human emotions: 'I can hear the heart beat

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pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at last to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank of Amarkantak' (5). And then:

The stream took the form of woman—the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at yet another as a romantic dreamer, a seductress loose limbed with the lassitude of desire. (8) Again,

I watched the water sparkling and disappearing like the anklets encircling a woman's foot, and thought of the Ascetic watching the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from his own penance. (96)

It is seen that all the ideas that characterize the river are later incarnated in Uma, the chief protagonist of "The Minstrel's Story".

"The Courtesan's Story" is about a mother, courtesan by generations, and this indicates the victimized self of those women who have been treated as a priced commodity. The story also relates the story of the courtesan's daughter who is abducted by an anti-social Rahul Singh. Eventually Rahul and the girl fall in love with each other. But when Rahul is caught by the police, the girl ends her life in Narmada. This is an escape from the life of a courtesan, from police, and from society. And nobody is disturbed, even her mother is 'happy that her daughter had died in the Narmada because she would be purified of all her sins' (190). Earlier in the novel, we came across the same belief: 'Even the chief narrator discovers that attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself or herself in the waters of Narmada' (3). A mere glimpse of the Narmada's water is supposed to 'cleans a human being of generations of sinful births' (151). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> story, "The Teacher's Story", the teacher, Master Mohan, commits suicide in the water of Narmada to free himself from the life of grief and gloom.

In "The Musician's Story" the story of the music teacher and his daughter also suggests an undercurrent of women's plight in Indian society. In the story the ugly daughter of the musician gives an account of the origin of first musical instrument, *veena* and of *ragas*.

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Musicians believe that one morning after Lord Shiva had made love to the Goddess all night and saw the Goddess still asleep and was moved to such tenderness by the sight that he created an instrument to immortalize his wife's immortal beauty. The music of *veena* is the expression of Shiva's love. The seven notes of the scale – *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni* seem to be the imitation of the animals' and birds' voice. These are taught by the genius to his ugly daughter. When she is jilted by a young student of her father she stops singing and all her spirit is dead. She says to the chief protagonist that she has come to the Narmada to get restored to her inspiration for music and life as well. Although she is not very sure whether the river has really such power, still she hopes for the rejuvenation of her self under the benediction of nature.

"The Minstrel's Story" is in two parts: the first part is about a girl child who represents the typical maltreated, abused lot of a girl child in a poor household in India. Although apparently the feeble girl has nothing in common with the great river, she eventually attains a kind of identity with the river after she has been saved from her life in a brothel by a Naga monk. The girl learns to live a new life in tune with trees and creatures. She is taught that Narmada is her home and mother. The monk lowers her into the water saying, 'The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become a daughter of Narmada'(255). The second part is about the grown-up girl, formerly anonymous, but now endowed with a new name, Uma, a minstrel, and the Naga monk who reenters mainstream life as Professor Shankar. In a poetical way the author suggests the equation of Uma and the Narmada. About the river it is said: 'From Siva's Penance you became water/From water you became a woman' (273). And, 'The river is ... twice-born, once from penance, once from love' (275). And Uma also, like the river, is twice-born: first from the monk's penance and then from his love. Tariq Mia remarks: 'If Narmada was born of Shiva's penance, then surely Uma was born of the Naga Baba's penance' (258). Narmada is also described in terms of the image of a desirable woman: 'Purple waters slip like a garment/From your sloping banks,' so that one cannot leave her and go away. This provides the appropriate backdrop for Shankar's return to the river and Uma as well. Shankar comes back after three years with the assertion: 'I love this river' (263).

Uma and Shankar meet. In the last few sentences we see that he offers to take Uma to Rudra. Their jeep 'roared down the twisting path' to Rudra, where Narmada met her husband. In *A River Sutra* the woman and nature have been made to appear as extensions of each other. Uma had been treated as a commodity, and she gains a new life, and learns to live in tune with nature. "The Minstrel's Story", in a way, 'sums up all the previous stories, transcends them and creates an atmosphere where Uma and Shankar become the earthly embodiments of the Narmada and the god Shiva, and nature and woman merge in perfect gyno-ecological harmony" (Ray 2010: 179-180).

Although eco-feminism, particularly the cultural one, does not take into account that men can also develop an ethic of caring for nature, what we see in *A River Sutra* is that it is not women alone but men also have been victimized of the technological-spiritual pollution, and the victimized and victimizer role reverses in a given context. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> story, "The Teacher's Story", the teacher's wife's mindless 'patriarchal' attitude towards the orphan boy who had been adopted by the teacher is a very simple example of the fact that both men and women alike have been implicated in the epistemologies of rule and hierarchical constructions of social identity. According to Michael Zimmerman, it is not only men but also women who have been distorted by the effects of patriarchies. Mehta seems suggest that she is not against male or men but against patriarchy, the culture of domination.

Ashok's forsaking of his father's wealth and choosing the life a monk in the 1<sup>st</sup> story is a withdrawal from the society, from money-woman-muscle nexus, and living close to nature and getting regenerated with the cosmic power of nature through renunciation. The 3<sup>rd</sup> story ("The Executive's Story") is a pointer to the mystical heritage of the pre-Aryan Indian tradition. India is a land of rivers and they are worshipped as mother. It is a land of jungles which are worshipped and venerated as goddesses. When Mr Bose, the sophisticated urban executive, loses sanity, and libation is offered at a shrine that overlooks Narmada, since 'only that river has been given the power to cure him', the tribals 'beg the goddess to forgive Mr Bose ...' and he comes back cured.

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So, in *A River Sutra* Narmada which may be said to stand for nature is viewed as a woman and the main woman protagonist in the novel is Narmada/nature. Narmada is not only a river to its natives but also a sacred site and life supporting system. The novelist ties woman with the life-supporting feminine principles of Narmada or nature. The novelist projects, as a whole, a passage, a pilgrimage which is both literal and metaphorical, physical and spiritual, to the lap of nature which seems to be offering its primordial benediction to its devotees. Although the novelist maintains a studied distance from the 'Save Narmada Movement' which gained momentum after the publication of the novel, her treatment of the eco-feminist equation of nature-woman relation shows her concern for both, nature and woman, and this concern has been imbued with the fine simple spiritual beliefs of the people of India who have their quest for peace or spiritual consolation in nature.

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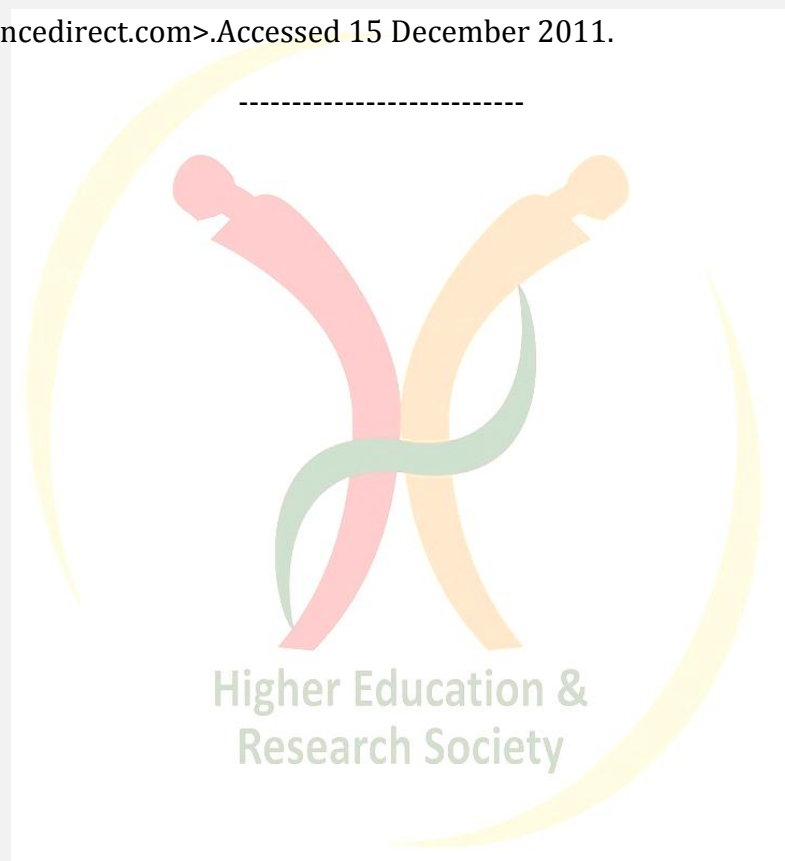
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