

**ATWOOD'S SURFACING AND MEHTA'S A RIVER SUTRA:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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Abstract

It is interesting to note certain similarities and differences between the Canadian Margaret Atwood's novel Surfacing and the Indian Gita Mehta's novel A River Sutra. Separated as they are by 21 years and thousands of nautical miles, the novels sound akin to each other in certain respects. Of course there are diverse differences, differences in backdrop, in cultural-geographical aspects, but the novels seem to have similarities in certain fundamental issues, particularly in the nature-philosophy envisaged in both the novels. In Atwood's novel the focus shifts from city through town to the countryside of Canada and finally rests on its farthest and densest forest with the original inhabitants of the land with their myths and ways of life. In A River Sutra one may perceive an Indian flavour with its indigenous diversities, its city and village, its forests and riverscapes. Both the novels bear the suggestion that man/woman reaches out to pristine nature, in time of utmost need or crisis, for self-realization or consolation. The paper will endeavour to map out the superficial differences and the fundamental similarities between the two novels.

Key words: Nature, Woman, Exploitation, Culture, Self-realization.

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Although Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*(1972) and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*(1993) are both 'New English' fiction and written by women writers, they have apparently very little in common. If the Canadian novelist declares war on all constricting and restricting social norms and conventions, the Indian counterpart appears, in tune with the ethos of her society, to raise her subtle and serious voice of critical consternation against the exploitation in society and of nature. *Surfacing* offers a living chunk of Canada with its cultural and geographical nuances whereas *A River Sutra* smacks of an Indian flavour with its ethnic variety, myths, fields and riverscapes. But, inspite of the spatio-cultural differences between the two novels, they have parallels to each other. A close look into the vision-consciousness running through, either overtly or covertly, both the novels makes one aware of the rich and fundamental affinities amongst the diverse discrepancies.

Surfacing is a novel about a young woman's search for her lost father in the Canadian wilderness. What is remarkable in the novel is that she is not given a name. The journey of the nameless narrator from the city to the wilderness may be viewed as coming back to one's roots or going back to the nature since the search for her lost botanist father virtually becomes a quest for self-discovery and self-realization/identity. Having been caught up in the meshes of lust and aggression of the industry-oriented social hierarchy, the female protagonist, in a nostalgic and approving mood, remembers that her father 'admired what he called the eighteenth century rationalists, he thought of them as men who avoided the corruption of the Industrial Revolution...'(Surfacing 38). The narrator

notices, in course of travelling through the forest, the gigantic stumps, level and saw out and she laments:

The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they are killed as soon as they are valuable... the trees they cut on have grown swollen edges around the wounds, scar tissues. (*Surfacing* 46)

In the novel while exploring the island the team chanced upon a dead heron. The narrator wonders: 'I couldn't tell how it had been done, bullet, smashed with a stone, hit with a stick...They must have got it before it had time to rise' (*Surfacing*115).The bird was strung up 'like a lynch victim' (116), and the nameless narrator exclaims: 'Why didn't they just throw it away like trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill'(*Surfacing* 116). The needlessly murdered heron comes to symbolize the victimization of the innocent, which is a theme that appears throughout the text. The killing of the heron presents a sort of ecological parallel to the narrator's personal experience.

Atwood presents the 'Americans' as an epitome of consumerism, muscle power and man's insatiable greed. When they stab the bass and begin to cut it the protagonist muses: 'We were committing this act of violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it these were no longer the right reasons. That's an explanation but no excuse' (*Surfacing* 117). She again says, 'That was the armour, bland ignorance, heads empty as weather balloons straight power they maintained it' (*Surfacing* 127). The Canadians who killed the heron become Americans for the narrator, regardless of their nationality. She says:

It doesn't matter what country they're from ... they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. (*Surfacing* 129)

Hence, the cultural map is not conformable to the geographical one. To understand the Canadian cultural map was one of the central concerns in the time when Atwood came to prominence, being well-known that she promotes a politics of national identification in her writing.

The narrator tries to make us aware of man's suicidal violence against Nature and strikes a strong note of protest: '... it wasn't the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They'd their chances but they turned against the gods' (*Surfacing* 154). She is even ardently bold enough to destroy the Americans as a reaction against the violence on Nature:

I wanted there to be a machine that could make them vanish, a button I could press that would evaporate them without disturbing anything else, the way there would be more rooms for animals, they would be rescued. (*Surfacing* 154)

Even the protagonist identifies herself with Nature: 'I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning...I am a place' (*Surfacing* 181). And again: 'I am part of the landscape. I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock' (*Surfacing* 187). Although she was 'amputated' with death implanted within her, she did not end up there. Alone she 'registers her protest by withdrawing from the society and returning to primeval Nature for spiritual regeneration' (Ray 2001: 241). Rejecting everything that is associated with the 'metal killers' and plunging in the ancient glacial lake she 'resurfaces' with the power 'to refuse to be a victim' (*Surfacing* 191).

In respect of the narrative technique and the narrator-persona, Atwood in *Surfacing* employs 'an impassioned continued narration by a single anonymous woman' (Kundu5), in a tone of sustained emotion. Mehta in *A River Sutra*, instead of weaving one unified whole, narrates a series of six episodes strung 'together in the reportage manner by a chief narrator/reporter, who is less a persona than a 'Kathak' (Kundu5), the folk narrator of the old type, to be found in any village of India even the other day. The narrator in Mehta's

novel 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 in Mehta's novel 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 narrator is shown in a relaxed mood, and he has attained a calm which is part of the traditional Indian psyche:

At the mouth of the river on the Arabian Sea, the pilgrims must don white clothing out of respect for Shiva's asceticism before walking eight hundred kilometers to the river's source of Amarkantak. There they must cross to the opposite bank of the river and walk all the way back to the ocean, pausing only during the monsoon rains in some small temple town. (*A River Sutra* 7-8)

Even this extreme hardship does not stop the legions of devout who have been walking this route 'millennium upon millennium' (*A River Sutra* 8). What is essentially personal and lonely pursuit in *Surfacing* becomes a shared venture, joined by a large number and accepted respectfully by the society. Although the narrator in Mehta's novel achieves a degree of 'detachment by getting doubly distanced from his subject though it is rendered in the form of recapitulation' (Kundu5), of a long soliloquy by some persona, Atwood's narrator seems to soliloquize her absorbed and anguished, deeply personal losses and search. Narmada is not a deserted or ignored phenomenon, like Atwood's lake, but widely venerated and worshipped.

In the first story of Mehta's novel, if the diamond merchant father represents the mechanical, materialistic mind which has been blatantly condemned in Atwood's novel, his son, like Atwood's protagonist, likes to come out of the sophisticated, cynical society and feels that suffering could make one human. The second story of Mehta's novel, completely de-linked from the first, is the story of a music teacher who adopts a blind orphan boy as his only model pupil; but his greedy wife torments the boy and sells him out to moneyed people who are powerful and kill 'for sport.' The murder of the innocent prodigy goes unpunished thanks to the murderer's money-power; these powerful and heartless people are the Indian replica of the killer society in *Surfacing*, who lynch the heron, fish out the lake, and destroy the forest. 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 woman imbibes the serenity and strength of this unchanged 'immortal' Nature. Mehta explores the nature-woman relationship from a special dimension. The last three stories, namely, Courtesan's Story (Chapter X), The Musician's Story (Chapter XIII) and the Minstrel's Story (Chapter XV) 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'.

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' (*A River Sutra* 2). The river is drawn as an organic being full of human emotions: 'I can hear the heart beat pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at last to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank of Amarkantak' (*A River Sutra* 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. (*A River Sutra* 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. (*A River Sutra* 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, which, 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). 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' (*A River Sutra* 273). And, 'The river is ... twice-born, once from penance, once from love' (*A River Sutra* 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' (*A River Sutra* 258).

So, if the nameless protagonist in *Surfacing* identifies herself with nature, the river Narmada which may be said to stand for nature is viewed as a woman in *A River Sutra*. Atwood addresses the domination of women and nature by recognising the oppression imposed by the patriarchy, and also through the character's inner journey and embracing of nature. The protagonist undergoes a deep process of self-analysis throughout her quest. Using the search for her father as an excuse, she sets off on an inner journey to, in the end, find herself. The ecofeminist struggle can be perceived not only in *Surfacing* but in *A River Sutra* also. Like the Atwood heroine, Uma had been treated as a commodity, and like the nameless narrator in Atwood's novel, she gains a new life, and learns to live in tune with trees and creatures. When in the darkness of the night the monk lowered her into the water saying, 'The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become a daughter of Narmada' (*A River Sutra* 255), one remembers the Atwood heroine taking her symbolic plunge in the glacial lake towards the end of the novel and emerging revitalized. In *A River Sutra* the

woman and nature have been made to appear as extensions of each other. So long as woman is under the clutches of the mechanical, repressing society, she is repressed, exploited and crushed. But when she is under nature as recluse, she is restored to the natural process of being, becoming and fulfillment in which she becomes a replica of the Narmada/Nature itself. Mehta probes the nature-woman relationship from a special perspective which also constitutes the essential Indianness of the novel. If one finds an explicit feminist approach in *Surfacing*, Mehta's is a implicit assertion of gender-consciousness.

Separated as they are by thousands of nautical miles, both the works appear to highlight certain interesting points of affinity. The forest people on the banks of the Narmada, like the ancient forest tribes in *Surfacing*, are rooted in nature. In both the novels there is a withdrawal from the society, from the technological-spiritual pollution, and getting regenerated with the cosmic power of nature. Both the works end on a hopeful note of the restoration of ecological balance and a fundamental fibre of affinity is verbalized by both Atwood and Mehta. The recounting as well as the pursuit may differ, but a discernible semblance emerges between the perspectives of these two writers in respect of the physical-cum-spiritual journeys.

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