

Embodied Streams: Nature, Gender, and the Sacred in Gita Mehta's A River Sutra

Ms. Alaguharani A B

Assistant Professor, English, SRM Arts and Science College

Abstract:

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* intricately weaves mythology, human relationships, and spirituality against the sacred backdrop of the Narmada River. This paper investigates the symbolic and thematic parallels between the river's feminine essence and the complex narratives unfolding along its banks. Far from being a passive setting, the Narmada emerges as a sentient, dynamic force—a spiritual and existential thread that unifies the diverse stories. The river becomes a metaphorical embodiment of resilience, grace, and burden, echoing the lived experiences of the female characters who, like the river, are made to bear the weight of societal sins. Through an ecofeminist lens, this study critiques patriarchal structures that commodify both women and nature, revealing how cultural and spiritual narratives uphold systems of exploitation. In doing so, it situates *A River Sutra* within broader global ecofeminist discourses, while anchoring its insights in Indian cultural and ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Women, Nature, Exploitation, River Sutra

INTRODUCTION:

India is a nation known throughout the world for its myriad customs, traditions, cultures, languages, food practices, flora, fauna and film industries. There is so much beauty in the chaos that ensues from the crowded classroom or a house filled with guests before a function. The country is filled with intense and passionate people, who connect with nature and live their lives in ways that are symbiotic to their milieu. It does not necessarily mean that there is no exploitation. The lives are entangled with nature and the culture encourages its people to be one with nature in ways significant to their environment. Every ancient civilization we look up to will have a prominent river on whose bank they would've started the life and gradually would've delved into upgrading their livelihood. The relation between Rivers and civilization can be traced way back to the earliest recorded ones.

One of the other ancient river valley civilizations is Indus Valley civilization, based on River Indus or Sindh. The records of fossils excavated from Mohenjo-Daro, show traces of a well-developed civilization back then. The Ganges valley civilization is also a significant one in India. The civilizations based on river have intricately developed system of flood control and irrigation system. But the drawback with these river based civilization seems to be the inter-dependence of their very life upon river and climate which is highly unstable. The rivers are not just the resource for production of food but they were also the entrance for many trade routes and for many discoveries made possible because of rivers. There are few rivers that are said to be lost but in reality they are deranged from their usual path, for example River Saraswati of India.

Gita Mehta was born in 1943 to Biju Patnaik and Gyan Patnaik, of an affluent Odia family in Delhi, British India. Her father Biju was an Independence activist who later became the Chief Minister of Odia (Orissa), in Independent India. Gita graduated from the University of Bombay and then from University of Cambridge, in India and United Kingdom respectively. She is a writer and a journalist. Her first work, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* was published in 1979. It was a collection of satirical essays, based on the then craze of the westerners on the mystic East. This custom was so popular in the 1960s and Mehta skillfully portrays not just the incidents but also the aftermath of it.

AN INTRODUCTION TO A RIVER SUTRA:

A River Sutra is her second novel published in 1993. This novel is critically acclaimed for its intricate characterization and narrative style. There are layers to this novel which exceeds just a cluster of tales; it provides a mixture of the spiritual richness of India and the characteristic of river Narmada around which the tales are woven, bringing together the ancient culture of the country and its modern situations like a harmony. She blends the modern and ancient country together through her wit and laudable narrative techniques. She is believed to have brought considerable amount of limelight on the ordinary yet exhilarating life in India, without any exaggerations or usual feeling of longingness like other diasporic writers.

A common topic in literature from many civilizations is the mutually beneficial relationship between women and the natural world. The Narmada River weaves together tales of human need, spirituality, and sorrow in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*, acting as both a major narrative thread and a symbolic entity. This essay uses ecofeminist theory to reveal the novel's complex similarities between the river and women, examining how their common challenges and assets mirror larger socio-ecological processes.

This work is written in a reactivate form, where it unfolds in the form of series of stories narrated to a listener. This was the same way in which epics like Mahabharata etc. were written. An ex-civil servant who is a widower after his retirement takes up the position of manager of a government bungalow situated near the River Narmada.

The manager gets his life changing experience from the story of an executive, Nitin Bose, who is now close to losing his sanity. His diary which the manager reads narrates the life of Nitin Bose. Nitin was a successful executive who went to the rural tea estates as a part of his job. Lately, he develops an affair with a village woman whom he imagines to be from the Naga clan as he read in the stories. But he soon realises his mistake and cuts the affair and the enraged woman exorcised him into madness. He has come to the rest house to get in touch with the Vano villagers with whose help he gets rid of his curse.

The story of courtesan and her daughter takes the manager back and forth between the glorious past and the sad state of courtesan's in the present. The woman lost her daughter two years back to a kidnapper and now that she got news about her daughter she has come to rescue her. Whereas the story narrated by the daughter is totally unimaginable. She was kidnapped by Rahul Singh, who was a famous bandit. Though she remained unfazed by his advances, she soon fell in love with him and he taught her to use guns to safeguard her from the police and other enemies. She became pregnant with his child and he started risking his safety to bring her gifts and was injured once and died. She wanted to avenge his death but couldn't do it. Soon he sees how her mother accompanies her to the girl's suicide.

The next one is the story of a Musician, a woman who has lost belief up on love and the art she breathed. She is the daughter of a musician, one of the best in the whole country who teaches her nuances in the art through the nature. The deformity in her face worries her mother who thinks no one will marry her

daughter. She grows up into a talented musician. Soon a young man meets her father and wants to learn music. They both fall in love and after finishing the training the musician releases him of the condition believing he is already in love with his daughter but the guy marries someone else. She has given up both music and her hope and came to the river because her father thought it could change her but when she is dead on the inside nothing really matters. The final story about the river minstrel and Naga Baba brings the manager closer to the understanding of what life can really be. The Minstrel is the small girl who was adopted by Naga Baba from a brothel.

Ecofeminism, as discussed by thinkers like Vandana Shiva and Karen Warren, highlights the deep relationship between the exploitation of the environment and the subjugation of women. It critiques the dualistic views that place nature below culture and women beneath men. By questioning these divisions, ecofeminism promotes a holistic approach to both ecological and gender justice.

WOMEN AND RIVER NARMADA:

The story is set around the River Narmada who is burdened with the process of cleansing and healing sins and souls. The women in this story are from various walks of life, which are considered mad, exotic, seductive, weak, and dependent and are forced so hard to diminish their identities to live a normal life. The eco-feminist analysis tries to put forth the emphasis that the river and women are subjugated and exploited by a very similar system, that ultimately succeeds in profiting off of the backs of them. The river here offers a plethora of space for this narrative as it not only serves as a geographical feature but also as a symbolic presence, reflecting the lives and struggles of women.

Traditionally the river Narmada is considered as a goddess, mother and lover in Indian culture, and Gita Mehta taps into the tradition effectively presenting the river as the milieu, which becomes the source of healing and a witness to the suffering of women. The courtesan, the ascetic, and the tribal woman, among others, find themselves drawn to the river, seeking solace or redemption. Their stories underscore how women, like the river, are simultaneously revered and constrained by tradition. For instance, the story of the courtesan depicts the commodification of the women body and the rejection of a women's autonomy over herself as every one of her decision is curtailed by strict patriarchal conditions.

The Courtesan and her daughter bring into light another dimension of love and sacrifice. The manager on finding guns near Jain cave calls for the police. But before they arrive the girl narrates her tale and then the duo leave. The manager witness the girl jumping into the river, which her mother recounts, is to purify her of all sins. The girl chooses it happily now that she has no purpose in life. The river sees the best and worst of people. It takes the sins of the people up on itself. Many people commit suicide on the banks of the Narmada, so they could free themselves from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

The musician narrates her story which is laced with unrequited love. She says her father brought her here so that she will be cured of her attachment to something that has passed. The river that was the result of Lord Shiva's penance, her father says can cure her broken heart and once again she will become the ragini of the raga. The woman musician is brought there by her father so that she could give up her grief and start living again. The courtesan's daughter finds her end by drowning into the river and the monk is starting an entirely new life from the banks of the river. Then there is the river minstrel who has no purpose other than singing songs about River Narmada. Every one of them portrays a totally different kind of life and beliefs, yet all of them converge at the river and they are embraced by her without any partiality.

The women are not given much respect other than naming rivers after them. They are just treated as inferiors who are not supposed to have any say in the lives of the men. Be it the dead wife of the manager, whom he talks about as if she was just a passenger in his journey and then there is Ashok's wife who stands there watching her husband retreat from the world and no one ever asked her opinion. The woman musician had no say when her father decided to marry her off to the young man or when he released him from the vow and now she is expected to miraculously become the same girl again, forgetting the scars. Women in Nitin's life are seen just as plain seductresses and even exorcists. The portrayal women seem incomplete for there are so many empowered women in the country who are just swept under carpet. Life simply can change the prim and proper Nitin Bose to come looking for a river from so long and make him seek his redemption through rituals at the same time it can make a renowned archaeologist out of an ascetic. The nuances of life are unique in their own way.

Mehta intertwines spirituality with ecofeminism, suggesting that reconnection with nature can also lead to a reawakening of feminine power. The river's sacred status in Indian culture is both a source of empowerment and a burden, reflecting the dual-edged sword of spiritual reverence that often traps women within fixed roles. Characters go through significant personal changes in the liminal region of the Narmada. This motif emphasizes how the river serves as a symbol for women's ability to develop and rejuvenate despite repressive systems. By intertwining the fates of women and the river, Mehta's novel underscores the need for a holistic approach to addressing gender and ecological injustices. The degradation of the Narmada due to dam construction and pollution parallels the systemic oppression of women, illustrating how patriarchal and capitalist systems exploit both natural and feminine resources.

CONCLUSION:

Gita Mehta artistically brings together the myriad women, their stories and the omnipresent Narmada River to highlight the common difficulties of oppression and resiliency. This article tries to put forth a change of perspective as the narrative power is shifted from the man who stands as the collector of all these peculiar stories, to the women who grapple through the imminent challenges life throws at them. The river and women, serve as the powerful reminder for their potential, resilience and generosity. Though burdened by the intricate passive aggressive often very aggressive systems of exploitation, the women and river never cease to exert their strength. The decisions, renunciations and sometimes the much needed push for metamorphosis stems from the instances where the humans and nature meet each other without prejudices and preplanned notions.

REFERENCES

1. Mehta, Gita. *A River Sutra*. Penguin Books, 1993.
2. Bite, Madhuri. "An Exploration of Narrative Technique in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*." *Www.the-criterion.com*, 2011, www.the-criterion.com/V2/n2/Madhuri.pdf.
3. Blake, Robin. "BOOK REVIEW / Paperbacks: *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta, Minerva Pounds." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 23 Oct. 2011, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review-paperbacks-a-river-sutra-by-gita-mehta-minerva-pounds-599-1421986.html.
4. Swarnalatha, T.. "Feminist Issues In Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*- A Study." *SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH* [Online], 7.8 (2019): 8. Web. 8 Nov. 2019