

REVERBERATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SENSE & SENSIBILITY



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A River Sutra : Thread Of Compassion

- Madhvika Mathur

Lord Byron wrote:

*"Dear nature is the kindest mother still
Though always changing, in her aspect mild
From her bare bosom let me take my fill
Her never weaned, though not her favourite child
Oh! She is the fairest in her features wild
Where nothing polished dares pollute her path"* (61)

Nature is feminized because it is seen to possess the same qualities as woman. Woman were and are being seen as domestic, pious, pure, simple, moral and beautiful whereas man are fundamentally different in terms of their characteristics as they are industrial, hardworking, rational, independent, assertive and proud, none of which is easily connected to nature. Therefore, nature is seen as the embodiment of the entire characteristic that a women posses and there are frequent references about that in literature.

The patriarchal society has always abused nature as it has abused woman. Eco-feminism draws parallels between nature and woman and shows how both have been exploited by patriarchal, mercantile systems. The feminist writers and critics have responded to the idea with intensity that reflects a desperate, anguished attempt at assertion against this double exploitation. Often the woman is seen to reach out, in a bid for freedom- the lake, the forests, the prairie.

A River Sutra is an unusually unique book by Gita Mehta.

She uses Narmada as the Sutra or the thread which holds together the main plot and the six-sub plots. Narmada means "endower of bliss". It has remained a perennial source of spirituality and pilgrims have thronged its banks "to seek personal enlightenment." (Gita 7) The narrator is a "vanprasthi", retired to the forest who becomes manager of a rest house near the Narmada River, a body of water considered to be one of the holiest pilgrimage sites in India. But he is not our only narrator. The River thus becomes an intersection for various people on their journeys through life. Their stories reveal aspects of love and death, spirituality and secularism, joy and suffering, nature and purpose of human existence. *A River Sutra* is about the woman's equation with nature, and her act of reaching out to nature in her crisis, conjuncture and despair and how she imbibes the serenity and strength of this unchanged 'immortal' nature. This helps her to find fulfillment through a positive process of being and becoming.

Gita Mehta has meticulously presented Narmada as a young, aesthetic

Where nothing polished dares pollute her path" (Gita 9)

The patriarchal society has always abused nature as it has abused woman. Eco-feminism draws parallels between nature and woman and shows how both have been exploited by patriarchal, mercantile systems. The feminist writers and critics have responded to the idea with intensity that reflects a desperate, anguished attempt at assertion against this double exploitation.

Gita Mehta is one of the well known contributors in Indian English Literature. India English Literature has a long tradition of women writers such as earlier novelists Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kiran desai etc. When compared to these womn novelists Gita Mehta's contribution appears quantitavely less but is quantitatively significant because of her handling of the subject-matter. As a diasporic writer, she dedicates her writings to Indian culture and society. Her first novel *Raj*, is a thorough and colorful historical story that follows the progression of a woman born into Indian nobility under British Raj. Later on she published another novel *A River Sutra* in 1993. The novel centers on India's holiest river, The Narmada, the book is in the form of interconnected stories.

There are six stories in the novel: The Monk Story, The Teachers Story, The Executives Story, The Courtesan's Story, The Musician's Story and The Minstrel's Story.

A River Sutra is about woman's equation with nature and her act of reaching out to nature in her conjuncture. The river is sacred on account of its origin and is often called Shankari that is, daughter of Lord Shankar. The narrator tells the readers, "The River is among our holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the God Shiva" (Ibid 2).

"I can hear the heartbeat pulsing under the ground before she revels herself at last to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank of Amaranth." (Ibid 5)

The river is seen as a beautiful maiden and the nameless narrator remarks: I watch the water sparkling and disappearing like the anklets encircling a woman's foot and thought of the aesthetic watching the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from his own penance. (Mehta 96)

It is interesting to see how all these characteristics of the river later incarnate in Uma, the protagonist of the Minstrel's Story. Megha in her novel examines the nature-woman relationship from a unique point of view, which also constitutes the essential Indianess of the novel. The story is told in mid-to-late 20th century India and is set around the river Narmada. Out of the six stories the last story-The Minstrel's Story- throws light on the geo-feminism theme specifically in present context. The Courtesan's Story, told by the courtesan and her daughter to the narrator is about an unnatural situation of the society where the woman is treated as a pricy entity, a thing of economic utility, mere object and foremost a tool for sensual gratification. The courtesan describes how she is unsuccessful in protecting her daughter from the growing indignity around her. The reference is of an insensitive society dictated by money and power of nexus. Rahul Singh, a dangerous bandit abducted her, he is portrayed as a victim of the society. Eventually, the two victims start loving each other and their only shelter is the forest on the banks of the river Narmada. Unfortunately, Rahul succumbs to his injuries through and ambush with the police. She is well aware of the inevitable and adverse outcome. The girl recluses from everyone, takes refuge in the river in order to avoid a recapture by

police. For her Narmada is the only escape. Surprisingly, the girls mother is not disturbed at the unexpected demise of her daughter. It appears as if it were a perfectly normal thing, rather she seems to be happy that her daughter would be purified of all her sins.

According to the legend, the river Ganga, polluted by millions of people bathing in it, assumes the form of a black cow and comes to Narmada to bath and cleanse itself in its holy water's. It is believed that a dip in this river washes one's sins away. Probably, the girls mother believed that river Narmada had put an end to her daughter's suffering as the Narmada tender heartedly gathers all kinds of creatures in a bosom. To quote:

Turtle and river dolphins and refuge in your water

A lighting herons play upon your tranquil surface.

Fish and crocodiles are gathers in your embrace.

O holy Narmada. (Ibid 255)

In the Musicians Story we find the awareness of the elements of environment through physical sensation, an intuitive cognition. We visualize the pursuit of a woman and the uninhibitedness of nature. The music pedagogue advises his daughter to, "imagine a raga as a river bed. You must think yourself as the water washing over stone, shaping it with a relentless touch of your love." (Mehta 215) With imaginative lushness, Mehta combines Indian story telling with thoroughly modern perceptions into the nature of love- lovebird carnal and sublime, treacherous and redeeming. Amazingly she writes, "Do you know why birds sing at dawn and sunset"? Then replies, "Because of the changing light. Their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is truly magic". "She herself tried to be the daughter to the river of the stranger's (her beloved) raga". (Ibid 211) Later on when she is dropped capriciously, she feels dead from within, and comes back to Narmada to restore inspiration. This time as she is disheartened, she is herself not sure of the river actually possesses such power. Still she hopes!

Her plight, her tumult going within is portrayed realistically in the following lines. To excerpt:

Overhead the small clouds rose like foam above the distant Himalayas before breaking in a white wave as the wing swept than towards the plains and I felt like a pebble thrown into a

wooden ocean, expanding the empty horizon as an alien object moved the water outwards.

The last one, *The Minstrel Story*, is in two parts and are more suggestive in the present context. The first part of the story is about a female characters and a Naga Monk. The Monk saves the girl from a brothel and helps her to start afresh in the lap of mother earth. The second part is about the grown up girl, who is now a minstrel in the naga Monk returns in her life as Professor Shankar. As the story begins, she is merely an exploited child, starved, ill-treated and abused by everyone. She does not even have a name. She bore the stigma of 'misfortune' because her mother had died at the time of her birth. The girl is the portrayal of the typical lot of girl child in a skimpy household in India. She is from a poor labourers family. Her father and three brothers break stones by roadside and thus, somehow make both ends meet. She was permitted to eat after everyone had finished. The supplies were too scanty to last the winter. To quote:

I was never allowed to eat until everyone else had eaten. So I was always hungry. (Ibid 249)

The child was then sold out at a bordello under a false impression that she was being sent to a new mother. Their are number of indications in words of the child to make clear that she was sexually exploited there. The customers called her "Chand" because her skin was as soft as moon light. When the Monk had come to the bordello, one of the three "unclean houses" from which he had to take alms, he had the first glance at the child who was cowering behind a plastic-covered sofa and her face twitched with pain as a man had griped her. The Monk compelled the owner of the brothel to give the child as alms.

From that time onwards they began heading toward Narmada. The girl is taken by the Monk into the dense jungle away from locality and finally across Narmada. He assured her, "your other life died that day". She begins her new life, gets a new name 'Uma'. She begins her new life in harmony of Nature. Like a free bird she sings and flies in the lap of mother earth and learns that even Narmada is her mother. The Monk helps the child to plunge in cold water and surface renewed. After that she becomes "The daughter of Narmada." (Mehta 255) To quote:

"The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become

a daughter of Narmada. "(Ibid 254)

The above lines remind us of Atwood's heroine taking her symbolic plunge in the Lake water at the end of *surfacing* and emerging revitalized. The dip marks a new life for the child, a life which was closely associated to the river. The river caresses her like a mother. During the monsoon the river flowed into the hut, "as if trying to embrace the child". (Ibid 256) the girl grows up into a minstrel of Narmada. She is respected at temple festival's on its bank as a "Singer Saint". In a poeticized way the author proposes the equation between the Minstrel and the river. The readers are enthralled that the song she sings to the river is about her. A comparable aspect between the two is that both are twice-born. For the Narmada it is said:

from Shiva's penance u became water
From water u became a woman. (Ibid 273)

And

The river is

... born twice

Once from penance

Once from love. (Ibid 275)

The protagonist of the novel, Uma also akin to the river, is twice-born. First she got life from the Monk's penance and then from his love. Tari Mia, an old Muslim Mullah brings to the readers attention to quote:

If Narmada was born of Shiva's penance, then surely Uma was born of th Naga Baba's penance. (Ibid 258)

Gita Mehta in a very natural manner views river as a woman and vice-versa. "for years," Tariq Mia blandishes the chief narrator, "u have been admiring the Narmada as if it is a woman." (Mehta 229)

Uma describes Narmada in a distinct manner. To quote :

Fruits in her coiling current look " like flowers in a maidens hair". She adds,

'At midnight...

U will turn into a girl... '(Ibid 278)

The Narmada equates in terms of the images of a pleasing woman. To quote:

Purple waters slip like a garment

From your sloping banks...

Who can bear to leave you?

Mehta claims that one must come back to her, because
"Who can bear to leave a woman,
Her loins bared

Having ones seen the sweetness of her body? (Ibid 276)

Their is turn in the story as Shankar returns to Uma. Tariq Mia had predicted that Naga Baba would ever leave Uma as she is more than a child to him. She was the fruit of his austerity. The Naga Baba comes back after three years and declares, "I love this river." (Ibid 263) Uma has imbibed the attributes of this river. Shankar has come back because he has realised-"I am only a man." (Ibid 280) We witness a simultaneous and contradictory attitude in the language at this point. He has come back for excavation work in Narmada. He also responds to the call of the woman(river). To quote:

Bring your knowledge of mankind
And follow me

I will lead you to the next creation. (Ibid 278)

In the beginning the narrator has brought to our notice, "I can see the river flowing to meet her bride groom in all those variations that delighted the Ascetic. (Mehta 9)

Shankar asks her if she is,"to find a husband like the Narmada found her Lord of Rivers!" (Ibid 280)

Thus, the woman in nature appears as prolongation of each other. We can see Uma as a replica of the great river itself. The novel not only highlights one character but with the help of various characters Gita Mehta expresses the psychology of human mind and approaches the issue of woman and the environment with newness.

Works Cited :

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