
**Oneness of River and Women:
An Ecofeminist
Reading of *A River Sutra***

12

Chetna

A woman in harmony with her spirits is like a river flowing.

- Maya Angelou

Abstract

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* published in 1993 is one of the leading Indian novels to exhibit ecofeminist ethos in all its splendor. Written in the backdrop of acute water crisis of 1990s and the turmoil of Narmada Bachao Andolan, the novel essentializes the mighty river as the feminine agency incarnate. The book is a compendium of varied life experiences woven around the banks of the river Narmada which itself is a living character throbbing with feminine essence in the novel. The fluidity and vitality embodied in the river is the driving force in the novel and manifests itself as a source of strength, guidance and refuge to the characters in the novel especially the female characters. When women are scorched by patriarchy, the river, becomes a shelter and provider of the agency which is denied to women in general. As Vandana Shiva points out

Chetna

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Govt. Girls College Singrauli, M.P. India

Anu Books, India

Gender Roles and Green Concepts: Pathways to Environmental Sustainability

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/Book.AB302-F24.Chapter1>

in her book, *Ecofeminism, Staying Alive* that nature is the embodiment of feminine principles and women share an integral relationship with nature in spirit and essence, the present paper aims at exploring the profound women-nature relationship in the novel, *A River Sutra* as an exposition of cultural ecofeminism and analyze the role the river plays in the lives of these women.

Keywords

Agency, Flow, Strength, Patriarchy.

Nature and women have been traditionally believed to share an intrinsic bond for the latter's qualities of motherhood and nurturing akin to nature, a stand utilized by ecofeminists to further the cause of women and the environment. Val Plumwood explains it as, "A popular contemporary green version attributes women a range of different but related virtues, those of empathy, nurturance, cooperativeness, and connectedness to others and to nature, and usually finds the basis for these also in women's reproductive capacity." (9) Without falling into the pitfalls of biological essentialism's extremes, womanhood does find solidarity in the elements of nature as in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* based on the river Narmada.

The rivers in India have always been revered as the feminine deity of fertility and the harbinger of the flow of life. The mythological references to rivers like Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada, *etc.* are in terms of feminine sources of life (Shiva 38). This reverberating life force of river has been lucidly presented in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* where the holy river Narmada forms the unifying structure of the plot as well as exists as a potent character propelling the storyline. The association of the rivers with feminine energy is effectively utilized and employed by the author where the mighty river of Narmada becomes one with the spirit of the women in the novel. The river Narmada originating in Amarkantak is believed in Hindu mythology to be the daughter of Shiva with the characteristics of a voluptuous woman exuding a medley of

elements such as desire and strength which corroborates with what Feldhaus explains as “cosmo-sexual imagery...that indicates that the relationship between Shiva and the rivers has a sexual element to it” (26). Mehta describes it as: “Did they brood on the Narmada as the proof of Shiva’s great penance, or did they imagine her as a beautiful woman dancing toward the Arabian Sea, arousing the lust of ascetics like themselves while Shiva laughed at the madness of their infatuation?” (90)

In fact, the river has been imaged as a woman throughout the novel with tremendous power to motivate, heal, protect and even seduce representative of entire womanhood, “a kind of ‘everywoman’, being virgin, seductress, bride, courtesan (a dancing girl), and mother...all rolled into one” (Sankaran 435). The present paper aims at analyzing the presentation of the river and the plot of the novel through ecofeminists lens and understand the bond between women and nature, here represented by the river Narmada. Plumwood, an eminent name in the field of ecofeminism states that “One essential feature of all ecological feminist positions is that they give positive value to a connection of women with nature” which is the basic premise of this paper. (8) The paper will emphasize the process of the river rising as a character throughout the novel and driving the other characters especially the female characters to achieve agency and offering refuge and bringing catharsis.

A River Sutra has a very clean-laid plot in a style of frame stories like that of *The Decameron* where a set of six stories are either experienced by or narrated to an old retired bureaucrat who happens to settle down by the banks of the river Narmada. The narrator’s quest for meaning serves to present the theme of the novel. As he embarks on his life as a manager of a secluded rest house by the banks of Narmada with the idea of ‘*vanprastha*’ (the third phase of life according to the traditional Hindu belief meaning ‘towards the forest’ retreating from the world), he is offered some fantastic life situations to deepen his understanding of life and beyond. It is interesting to note that the bureaucrat has retired from the worldly life and chosen a remote place

where the patriarchal dynamics is challenged as the river embodied with feminine essence is the source of agency. Thus, the river acts as a site of alternative agency for womanhood outside the patriarchal setup. Also, the narrator and Tariq Mia, his friend who tells him some of these stories are male characters experiencing the feminine vitality of the river which might give an impression that the writer somewhat espouses patriarchal view point. However, as Gurpreet Kaur points out: “On the surface, it seems Mehta elucidates a deeply patriarchal worldview to the readers...surface text is problematized by a deeper subtext that emerges in these stories to not only rupture the culture/nature binary...” (171) and to destabilize the essentialist perspective. In fact, this write up aims to show how the commonplace patriarchal point of view in the plot is subverted as the river becomes an agent of female emancipation and merges the outside world with the mighty river making all one and emanating from the river, the nature.

Of the six stories of the plot, the latter four are more directly in collusion with the purpose of this paper, so accordingly the subsequent section will deal with them in detail. The primary theme of the novel seems to be the search of essence of life which the author keeps hint dropping is ultimately love. In the first two stories, the narrator is intrigued by the stories of the renunciation of a young and wealthy businessman to become a Jain monk and the tragic end of a failed music teacher, Master Mohan. Both the stories move the narrator to ponder over more intently on the existential question. The third tale, titled ‘The Executive’s Story’ primarily delves with female energy of desire. It describes desire as a feminine power as represented through Rima, the tribal women and the river itself. Also, the healing power of Narmada is foregrounded as the tale unfolds. The tale explores the dilemma of a suave businessmen, Nitin Bose from Calcutta who seemed to have lost his mind and believes himself to be a woman singing:

Bring me my oil and collyrium.

Sister, bring my mirror and the vermilion.

Make haste with my flower garland

My lover waits impatient in the bed. (87)

The narrator finds his diary which explains all the circumstances leading to his current state of mind. He believes that he is under the spell of this tribal woman, Rima with whom he shared a sexual liaison while managing a tea plantation. He had broken off with her when he realized she belonged to a lower social class being a porter's wife. Since then, he believes his soul has been captured between the two halves of a coconut and he could only be absolved by the forest goddess of Vano tribe on the banks of the river Narmada: "...he must worship at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River. Only that river has been given the power to cure him." (89) The river as a healer is conjured up in the case of Nitin Bose.

But more importantly the deep primal connect that women share with the energy of nature is explored in the story and the consequences of spurning it off is shown through the predicament of Nitin Bose. The alternative agency is represented through the voluptuous river and Vano women. The potency of this power is reflected through the seductive laughter and titillating descriptions of Vano women which reminds the narrator of desire represented even by other elements of nature as well as the river as the feminine element capable of arousing desire. "The call of the koel bird, that strange imitation of a woman's cry at the moment of sexual fulfilment...A flock of parakeets, messengers of Kama, God of Love, settled in a green cloud on the mango tree shading my head." (61-63)

The character of Rima stands "as a body of desire that is sexual and unorthodox" which is similar to Mehta's presentation of Narmada. "Desire and water here are then featured as renewal and connection, affect and reinvention, as Nitin Bose needs to be exposed to both the woman's body and the water body to regain his zest and desire for life." (Kaur 176) Thus, primal desire when turned down by Nitin makes him lose his mind as he dishonors the female desire as the narrator's assistant, Mr Chagla explains: "The tribals will beg the goddess to forgive Mr Bose for denying the power of desire." (92) Also, it is noteworthy that throughout the novel, author subtly posits the misogynist perspective of the world on the one hand while presenting

the female power asserting itself in all its grandeur at a secluded spot of Narmada where everyone comes for salvation religious or otherwise. In the case of Nitin Bose, his diary presents his earlier life with derogatory remarks on women as “hot-blooded women tamed” and commodified for the lust of men. However, his life takes a turn when he shoves off the tribal woman. Also, he behaving as a woman in his insane state plays with the gendered boundary. Further, the author juxtaposes Narmada to women in the same image as:

...the water like a woman indolently stretching her limbs as she oiled herself with scented oils...her eyes outlined in collyrium...and imagined the river as a woman painting her palms and the soles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover. (90)

Nitin Bose is helped by the Vano tribals to perform the rituals of penance by immersing mud idols in the river chanting: “Salutations in the morning and at night to thee, O Narmada. Defend me from the serpent’s poison.” (95) and as Mr Chagla explains the serpent is desire and “Its venom is the harm a man does when he is ignoring the power of desire.” (93)

Chitra Sankaran notes that Narmada “offering women a figure of identification outside the law by depicting nature as a force that resist mastery [where] Mehta’s Narmada river and its surrounding land becomes a place to cast off constricting domestic values...and serves as a place of possibility” (442) The feminine principles emphasized in the landscape and the mythic patterns employed in the novel are significant and hard to ignore, making the novel ecofeminist in essence. Thus, the novel achieves the aim of ecofeminism as Gaard and Murphy put it to destabilize the patriarchal binaries of man/woman and culture/nature while establishing the interconnection between women and nature. (4)

The next story in the row is, “The Courtesan’s Tale” which has a more apparent ecofeminist tone in terms of women and nature being oppressed and affected by patriarchal structure of the society (Plumwood 1). An old courtesan from the city of Shahbag reaches the banks of the river in search of her kidnapped daughter. The latter has

been abducted by a goon called Rahul Singh. The two are in love and the couple has been absconding the police. Rahul Singh gets killed by the police and the distraught girl, pregnant with Rahul Singh's child hatches a plan to take revenge from police. However, her plan fails and she is in hiding. The weapons that she had been hiding is discovered by the narrator and she ends up her life by jumping into the river.

The two women characters, the young girl and her mother present two aspects of womanhood and the respective association with nature. On one hand, the courtesan regrets the loss of reverence to nature and present-day squalor in the name of development as she rues:

The city is owned by men who believe every human being has a price, and a full purse is power. Trained as scholars, artists, musicians, dancers, we are only women to them, our true function to heave on a mattress and be recompensed by some tawdry necklace flashing its vulgarity on a crushed pillow. (108)

Her point of view is a more of a passive observation in line with the idea of women and nature as the passive recipients of patriarchy and capitalist development as Shiva writes, "Nature and women are turned into passive objects, to be used and exploited for the controlled and the uncontrollable desires of alienated man." (5) The courtesan's daughter, on the other hand, finds her final rescue from the torments of the world in the folds of the river. Her suicide could be interpreted as her agency in deciding the course of her life and ending it instead of surrendering to police. The river is a site and means of her resistance. The biological essentialism echoed in courtesan's perspective is juxtaposed with the actions of her daughter who tries to weave her own life path albeit in a fatal direction. She jumping into Narmada makes her one with the river and even the courtesan has the contentment that "her daughter had died in the Narmada because she would be purified of all her sins." (122) As Sankaran points out that Narmada becomes an everywoman, offering meaning and catharsis to all. Narmada is the real sutra, the unifying line throughout the novel. (435)

'The Musician's Story' has a lady, again a victim of patriarchy finding solace in the company of the river Narmada. In a detour to the nearby town of Mahadeo, the narrator accredits upon a lady musician on a pilgrimage to Narmada. She is described as particularly ugly in appearance, "...I gasped, astonished that she should be so ugly when I had imagined her so beautiful." (125) which also reflects something of an ugly woman's predicament amidst the society's male gaze. The musician's daughter is persuaded by the narrator to share her story and she tells him about her journey of learning music from her father who was a musical genius. She had been gradually achieving mastery over the art; however, she had been spurned off by suitors for being unattractive and was a source of constant worry for her parents. So, when a young student of musician promises to marry her in return for learning music, they have some hope to get her married. However, the student breaks off his promise and the girl was heart-broken. She was so dejected that she gave up music. Her father had brought her to the river to "meditate on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance, until...[she is cured] of the attachment of what has passed and can become again the ragini to every raga." (145) The river is held here as capable of redeeming the musician's daughter of her attachment back to her practice of music. Also, the world has given up on her for her appearance, so she must overcome the worldly attachment through the pious might of Narmada.

While discussing the musician's daughter's story with his friend Tariq Mia, the old bureaucrat is irked by the former's comment about his limited understanding of the world. The narrator had given up the world believing he had his own share of worldly experience and confident of having a well-informed view of the world. Tariq Mia dismantles his belief saying: "Destiny is playing tricks on you. Don't you realize you were brought here to gain the world, not forsake it?" (147) Perhaps the wisdom of the old mullah could decipher the essence of life in nature, in Narmada which had been eluding the narrator. The banks of Narmada offer an alternative site to the narrator and in turn to the readers against the patriarchal set up. Here the feminine river Narmada representing all the female qualities rises above one and all

asserting the primacy of primal nature and emphasizing itself as the mother source, the unifying link, the sutra. To explain, Tariq Mia further points out: “For years you have been admiring the Narmada if it were a woman. But what has all your adoration taught you?” (147)

The story that is then told by Tariq Mia is the most significant story, “The Song of Narmada”, which neatly ties up all the stories in the essence. On the day of Shivratri festival, on his way begging for alms, the ascetic rescues a girl from a brothel and names her Uma, a name of goddess Parvati. Naga Baba brings the girl to the banks of the river and explains to her that she is to embark on a new life as he meets her new mother: “The night of Shiva, Lord of Death. Your other life died that night... Suddenly, he gripped her arms and lowered her into the water. “The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight, you become a daughter of the Narmada” (163). Here the river rises as a source of re-birth for the rescued girl as the ascetic dips Uma into the water of Narmada and initiates her into her new life making her one with the river. This immersion of Uma into the holy water of Narmada is representative of motherhood to her and the river and child become one. Thus, now Uma belongs to the river Narmada who like mother would care and protect her under the supervision of Naga Baba. The relationship between nature and women becomes most significant when seen with the maternal perspective as Valera points out that “the concept of maternity, both are mothers.” (12)

It is interesting to note that Uma coming under the aegis of Narmada becomes one with her. Tariq Mia profoundly compares the life of Uma with that of Narmada: “But if the Narmada was born from Shiva’s penance, then surely Uma was born of the Naga Baba’s penance.” (167) The ascetic rears her up and teach her to become a singer-saint singing in the praise of the river. Naga Baba, an ascetic of Shiva’s cult taking care of Uma (with a name of Goddess) as a daughter is subtly imaged in the light of Shiva and Narmada. The ascetic, as Tariq Mia recounts, takes care of her until she is mature enough and then leaves her to continue on his path of enlightenment.

As the story proceeds, there is a bustle of activities at the guest house with the arrival of a scholar with his team who were on an excavation project on the river Narmada. This geologist by the name of Professor Shankar, as the story unfolds, the readers and the narrator realize is the same Naga Baba. Dr Mitra explain about Professor Shankar: “After Shankar resigned no one heard from him for absolute ages. Then three years ago he resurfaced with a remarkable boo, *The Narmada Survey*.” (169) Professor Shankar is dismissive of river’s holiness, rather he asserts a physical immortality of the river as “What we are seeing today is the same river that was seen by the people who lived here a hundred thousand years ago.” (170) This permanence of the river asserts her supremacy and strength conclusively as the river has continued to serve as a source of life to one and all. The life of Naga Baba merges with that of worldly Professor Shankar, both having a deep link to Shiva (Shankar being another name for Shiva and Naga Baba being a Shiva’s devotee).

Followed by Professor Shankar alias Naga Baba, a river musician singing in the praise of the river arrives at the guest house. This singer is Uma, the girl whom Naga Baba once rescued and brought to Narmada. It is interesting to note that at every turn the profane and profound keep mixing up in the context of the river which is all encompassing. The song that Uma sing too reflect the profoundness of nature:

You cleanse the earth
Of its impurities.
The devout call you Surasa
The holy soul....
“But Shiva called you
Delight
And laughing
Named you Narmada”...
From Shiva’s penance you became a water

From water you became a woman
So beautiful that gods and ascetics
Their loins hard with desire
Abandoned their contemplations
To pursue you. (176-7)

Tariq Mia explains in the concluding section of the novel, that these stories are like “water flowing through lives to teach us something.” (173) Finally, the narrator too finds the meaning which he had been searching as retreating from the worldly chaos, he finds the essence of life in the river which had been “an unbroken record of human race.” (173) becoming the true sutra or the link running through our lives. The feminine essence of river with all the varied aspects of desire, protection, healing nature and motherly love is reflected in the stories. The river becomes women and women become the river in profound ways showing the deep connect between the river and women. Thus, the novel as an ecofeminist work stands out as a unique work in Indian milieu affirming the different aspects of the feminine through the river and offers alternative agency to the women in the novel outside the binaries.

References

1. Gaard, Greta Claire, and Patrick D. Murphy. *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. U of Illinois, 1998.
2. Kaur, Gurpreet. *Beyond the Binary: Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Indian Women's Writing in English*. 2017. U of Warwick, PhD dissertation. WRAP, <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/106913>.
3. Mehta, Gita. *A River Sutra*. Penguin Books, 1993.
4. Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
5. Sankaran, Chitra. Women, rivers and serpents: the primordial link in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47 (3): 2012, 429-446.

6. Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Kali for women, 1988.
7. Valera, Luca. "Francoise d'Eaubonne and ecofeminism: Rediscovering the link between women and nature." *Women Nature? Beyond Dualism in Gender, Body, Environment*. Edited by Douglas A. Vaokoch and Sam Mickeu. Taylor& Francis, 2017, pp.10-23.