



Anatomization of Feminine Force: An Eco-feminist Investigation of Geeta Mehta's A River Sutra

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Abstract. In India the image of river corresponds to that of a deity, who is conceived as dynamic, generative, proliferating. India is geographically a fluvial land; the civilization has also started on the banks of river. Due to the contamination taking place in Narmada River, it obliterates the civilization process and contributes towards the cultural hollowness and difficult sustenance. This paper intends to explore Geeta Mehta's "A River Sutra", denial of the representation of river as passive, frail so on, through the patriarchal lens. Rather, the accentuation of the feminine principles as life-sustaining has been anatomized. Alongside, Indian culture, religion, tradition, spirituality and society have been contextualized. Her narrative becomes quite intriguing taking into account lucidity, creativity and innovative way of storytelling. In addition the nature/culture dichotomy has been projected through the stream of environmental consciousness.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, River, Indian culture, Myth, Meta-narratives.

1 Introduction

Geeta Mehta is an Indian writer having extensively explored the Eastern and the Western ethos in her work in a satirical manner. *A River Sutra* got published in the year 1993 while Narmada Bachao Andolan was at its peak. But she has emphasized on her literary aspect of writing this novel rather than swayed away by the historical and political background associated with the same. She has adopted the frame narrative. There are six stories weaved into a unifying one through a single thread or sutra. Here River Narmada serves as a suite narrative arc putting tales together, which is suggestive of ethical principles drawn from the river's allusive references in the stories. In this context, the popular Indian Eco-feminist Vandana Shiva's contention of feminine consciousness pertaining to ecology sounds quite befitting, "Third World women are bringing the concern with living and survival back to centre stage in human history in recovering the chances for the survival of all life, they are laying the foundations for the recovery of the feminine principle in nature and society, and through it the recovery of the earth as sustainer and provider" (Shiva 214).

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2 Analysis

A Meta narrative *A River Sutra* chronicles six successive stories. Those are 'The Monk's story', 'The Teacher's Story', 'The Executive's Story', 'The Courtesan's Story', 'The Musician's Story' and 'The Minstrel's Story' concluding with 'The Song of the Narmada'. The pattern relates to that of Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales'. Having no name, a widowed bureaucrat renouncing his earthly attachments, embraces the bearings of administering a government rest house located at the river bank of Narmada. He reckons this phase of his life as 'vanaprastha' as per the third phase of Vedic way of life, retirees choosing a life at forest, a life of contemplation. The narrator has beautifully told the story at the flight of forest. The assisted living facility is located close to a hill of the Vindhya Range. Another side is inhabited by mango grooves and the Narmada too flows quite close to it. In his words, "A great aid to my meditations is the beauty of our location...fertile fields stretching from miles to miles into southern horizon until they meet the gray shadows of the Satpura Hills...bamboo thickets and trees overgrown...suspending the bungalow in jungle so dense..." (Mehta 4). In addition the narration includes mythological aspects that the river Narmada is born out of Lord Shiva's sweat. Her appearance on the earth is described as a beautiful and appealing virgin, the most delightful one, so she is named accordingly. She is related both to the indigenous Nagas of that region as well as the pilgrims, as holy. She is attributed for exoneration for suicide attempts, curing snakebite and insanity.

Next comes the Minstrel's story having two segments, firstly Naga baba saving some random girl and giving a new life amidst natural plane and secondly, the girl gradually becoming a bard. In a lyrical and symbolic way, the songs by her meant for the rivers is a reverberation of both her and the river as born twice. The objectification and debasement of women is apparent here. She has been tagged as a 'misfortune' as her mother dies while delivering her. She expresses, "I was never allowed to eat until everyone else had eaten, so I was always hungry. And I was beaten by my father" (Mehta 249-250). She has been sold by her father to a brothel. During Shivratri, as Naga Baba was forced to collect benefaction from an filthy household, he chose the brothel, and there he found out that little girl. So he begged for that girl but was declined by that woman. Rather as per that woman's suggestion that 'misfortune' or the girl would be of no use, so he could take her after some twelve to thirteen years. But Naga Baba could rescue her and took her to the river Narmada for cleansing and purification. In his words, "The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become a daughter of the Narmada"(Mehta 254) and then she received a name called Uma. Though initially the girl was feeble and alone, but subsequently she could identify herself with the river.

Then Naga Baba goes back to the life of Professor Shankar. Due to red-tapism, he left heading the Archeological department and tendered resignation from his service. He ended up writing a book *The Narmada Survey*. He declares, "I love this river... I'm afraid I only care for the river's immortality, not its holiness... What we are seeing today is the same river that was seen by the people who lived here a hundred thousand years ago. To me such a sustained record of human presence in the

same place- that is immortality” (Mehta 263-264). This is analogous of the connection between Uma and the Narmada. Mehta asserts that everyone having different vantage point of the Narmada, might be valid in its own way. Professor Shankar opines that the sanctity of the river is, “Mere mythology! A waste of time! If anything is sacred about this river, it is the individual experiences of the human beings who have lived here” (Mehta 267). Also he puts forth that the river dates back to the Stone Age having witnessed the oldest human civilization. An element of eco-spirituality cannot be denied, reflected in the river minstrel’s reverberations. It further explicates that the Narmada provides a token of remembrance of her association with the ancient Indian tradition and culture of worshipping nature. The songs are about the elevated stature of the Narmada, due to her properties of cleansing and purification of contamination; the sages think of different names, “You grace the earth/ The devout call you Kripa/You cleanse the earth/ Of its impurities. The devout call you Surasa/The holy soul/ You leap through the earth/Like a dancing deer. The devout call you Rewa” (Mehta 273).

The feminal postulation of the Narmada can be perceived by equalizing her voyage to Uma. The river minstrel invokes to the river, “But Shiva called you Delight/ named you Narmada/From Shiva’s penance you became water. From water you became a woman” (Mehta 273). After taking the dip Uma is reborn, so naturally she becomes the daughter of the Narmada. She further sings, “Then he changed you into a river/to cool the lusts of holy men/and called you Narmada, Soother of Desires” (Mehta 275); and she soothes and quenches the spiritual thirst of the pilgrims. The invocation, “You were present at the creation/By Shiva’s command you alone will remain/At the Destruction” (Mehta 277), is highly suggestive of the eternal grace of Uma and the perennial nature of the river. Both Uma and the river share similar attributes. In a way Uma becomes the earthly embodiment of Narmada and Shankar becomes that of Lord Shiva. And there is a perfect harmony witnessed in nature and woman. Also the earthen lamps are also symbolic of fulfillment. Both woman and nature can be treated as an extension to each other. She turns into a replication of the river itself, when the restoration of her being, becoming and fulfillment takes place. Mehta is very keen in presenting Narmada as a youthful and enticing woman. The representation of the river as a biotic entity having human sentiments and warmth, “the river’s heartbeat pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at last to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank at Amarkantak”. (Mehta 5) The narrator has drawn a comparison between the stream and a woman, “the stream took on the form of a 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 another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire” (Mehta 8).

As per the belief of the Eco-feminists, biological differences cause discrimination; women are often portrayed as mere ‘beautiful objects’. This doctrine becomes the basis of objectifying woman confined in a room, found under the veil in some culture, incessantly facing exploitation and seduction. At times accused of failing to cater to the desirable parameters of beauty, so ultimately undergoes exploitation. At this conjecture Warren writes, “the boundary conditions specify that

an eco-feminist ethic must be an anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-naturist, and opposed to any 'ism' that presupposes or advances a logic of domination".(Cuomo 5) In the next story, Mehta has dealt with the musician's story in the next series. It encapsulates the idea of exploitation basing on the physical beauty. Here the mother is presented as embarrassed and insecure when it comes to endorse her naïve daughter against the societal norms. Both of them are distanced, though the duo shares the mother-daughter relationship. So here she says, "Unfortunately my mother seldom spoke to me. My ugliness upset her. When other children stared at me, sniggering at my ugliness, my mother's eyes filled with tears... Shamed by mother's tears, I hid in the bathroom, examining myself in the mirror to see if my face was losing any of its coarseness". (Mehta 210)

Though universe is the creation of god, yet society is man-made. So in God's creation there is absence of discrimination where as in the social structure discrimination prevails, an established binary opposition propagates the superior and inferior role, the one and the other. These oppositions correspond to man/woman, superior/inferior, and oppressor/ oppressed in this context. The cultural association of beauty becomes instrumental in the internalization of hatred in one's own appearing due to failing to match the parameters. The girl is forced to learn music unwillingly for the sake of getting appreciated, but as usual a girl's effort goes unnoticed, "He ignored my tears and forced me to continue practicing until the cushions of my fingertip developed calluses"(Mehta 210). Marriage becomes the only resort for protecting girls. Ironically, the mother absorbs that "a woman without genius could be protected only by a husband in a harsh world designed for men" (Mehta 212). Such belief is nothing but the subtle imposition of patriarchy compelling women to be dependent, either on father, brother or a husband. Her emancipation, economic independence or individual choice is belittled and she feels apologetic about her education too, " Just think what my study did to me, an adolescent girl who knew the stain of her ugliness would prevent any man from desiring her, and yet learning only how to express longing" (Mehta 216). To the extent she has been instructed by her father to be in tune with the river while learning music.

"Imagine a raga as a riverbed. The grace notes are the water of the river. It is written in the Ragavivodha that a raga without grace notes is like a night without moonlight, a river without water, a creeper without flowers, a woman without a garment... You must think of yourself as water washing over stone, shaping it with the relentless touch of your love" (Mehta 215).

Due to the manipulation with regard to the notion of beauty, it has lost the true essence of real beauty which can be realised in natural surroundings.

The girl's struggle is quite apparent for getting approval in the family, "I struggled to please my father inside the music room, and then outside the room consoled my mother for my ugliness" (Mehta 213). This damn unappealing daughter of a gifted musician father, after being abandoned and dumped by her lover, decides to swear off music, she has become lifeless from within. In this given situation, she chooses to come to Narmada. She has just been reduced to a commodity for her father as well as the man she loves. She has been forced by both, to embrace and master music due to her father wish and the man is restless for his own enhancement.

Ultimately she receives null. Her father's suggestion to contemplate on the Narmada river bank, is indicative of the patriarchal imposition. But she is assertive of her state of total disinterested in music which could never be reversed. Mehta has painted the discernment of similitude between the deliberations of a woman and the fluidity of the Narmada. She is hinting at an exploitation free society. As per Marti Kheel, "Nature, which has been imagined as female, has been depicted as the "other", the raw material out of which culture and masculine self-identity are formed."(Kheel 244)

The Courtesan's narrative shows how women in their circle are perceived as a commodity in a consumerist market for pleasing the male's desire. This narration has been done by two different persons, both the courtesan and her daughter. The courtesan regrets her failure to rescue her daughter from the dungeon around her as well as the ruthless society. Her lamentation as Mehta puts:

"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...oblivious to the frigidness of our salaams....my mother died, and I lost my protection from such men." (Mehta 167-168)

Here the daughter is being abducted by a goon, Rahul Singh. Ultimately she has to marry him, such atrocity and social injustice has to be borne only due to her secondary status in the society. At this juncture Mehta has highlighted on a very crucial aspect that is the courtesan's psyche and the musician's wife's concern with regard to the virtue and virginity of their daughters, a commonality can be drawn. She narrates, "With her beauty and her unblemished reputation, she could have married a respectable man. Who will believe in my child's virtue now? Who will accept her as a wife, a girl captured and kept by criminals for two long years?" (Mehta 173). Here too Narmada provides her daughter solace after Rahul is being killed. Her identity of a goon's wife and a courtesan's daughter has actually tarnished her reputation, in order to avoid further shamming by the police; she finds the last resort at the bank of the Narmada.

The Narmada can be compared with the maternal entity as she gives shelter to all kind of living beings, "Turtles and river dolphins find refuge in your waters/Alighting herons play upon your tranquil surface/ Fish and crocodiles are gathered in your embrace/ O holy Narmada" (Mehta 255). In fact the mother is also happy upon her dead daughter's purified soul gets indulged in the Narmada. Mehta has already introduced the attributes of the Narmada from the beginning of the novel, as a liberating and decontaminating force, "The River is among our holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva. During a tour of the area I had been further intrigued to discover the criminal offense of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself the waters of the Narmada" (Mehta 2).

The rendering by the Executive is gleaned from a diary. The log record informs about the polluted state of Calcutta, "Outside our office Calcutta crumbled under the weight of neglect, exploitation, poisonous humidity, traffic jams, power failures, and roads plowed up like rice fields to make an underground railway... the devastations of nature that daily drew that desperate to a great metropolis itself

desperately surviving as if a war had just ended” (Mehta 110). He holds the position of an executive in an urban tea company. His colleagues believe in drinking and indulgence in sex.

The estate tells a ‘mythological tale’, ‘legends’ inhabited by bewildering race of ‘half human’ and ‘half serpent’. That place is devoted for ‘pleasure’ and ‘learning’ garrisoned by hooded serpents. He has experienced being under a spell of the serpent-like woman named Rima’ she is an aboriginal/tribal woman, after enjoying her sexual favor he literally deserted her. As he is unable to withstand loving a ‘coolie’s wife’, so there is a requirement to undergo some tribal rituals before the goddess of Narmada to get rid of the spirit. Rima and the Narmada is the representative of the nature. They are adorned with the ability to accelerate atonement to the victims. In addition the narrator has described them as ‘beautiful, ‘desirable’ and so on.

The narrative of the monk is about the renouncement of a young monk named Ashok in his thirties, though he could be the only successor of his father’s large-scale diamond company. The Jain ideology is based on non-violence. To follow ahimsa, they mostly chose professions like banking or merchandise. The narrator’s wife is considered having a gentle demeanor who totally lacks imagination as well as appetite for pleasure. Post child birth, her only occupation lies in the maternal responsibilities. Mahavir’s teaching comprises longing for liberation in association with the river, which further facilitates release.

The entire novel speaks of the Narmada as a spectator to all the adversities and desertification around her, in the world human lives in. It has incorporated varieties and far-fetched ideas like, Jainism to the indigenous myths, chronicle to books and articles, from music to dance, monastic to archeologists almost all aspects are reliant on the Narmada for their upliftment or purgation showcasing most part of mystic Indian culture. The beauty of Indian myths lies in its smooth and intricate weave. Though as per the Sanskrit meaning the Narmada is a *fille de joie*, yet she has innumerable holy ghats on her bank.

3 Conclusion

To conclude, Indian philosophy with regard to eco-feminism embellishes both the edification of culture and wilderness of nature. At the end of the text, the protagonist is far from any sort of detachment, also he has attained a level of gratification with regard to choosing ‘Vanaprastha’. The victimized lots have merged with the river. The writer has tried to reflect on a vital point that the contagion of social disgrace like prostitution, commodifying and objectifying her to cash crop and gradually annihilate her feminine attributes and subsistence. This novel can be treated as cataloguing the temporal and the spatial facets. Mehta has successfully tried to indemnify the Narmada in a distinct manner by substantiating the idea that the Narmada is not merely a river to the native people, rather she becomes sanctimonious and a reliable resource for life support.

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