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Cultural Ecological Attitudes in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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Abstract

One of the sparkling stars in the galaxy of Indian writers, Gita Mehta is the brightest. Her novels are written with Indian perspectives and they are explorations of the tension generated by the east-west encounters. Her novel *A River Sutra* is a colourful fictional account of India that mirrors Indian history and culture. It connects Indian mythology with various depictions of love in its many aspects. It told through a pen-pusher and his encounter with six pilgrims on the banks of the Narmada. In Western Feminist studies, the woman is always portrayed with a quest for freedom from the urban exploitative society to nature. It is appealing to determine that this concept receives a new dimension in a different cultural context. In this novel, Mehta has shifted her focus from the interactions between India and the west to exploring the diversity of cultures within India. Gita Mehta uses the Narmada as the thread, which holds together the main story and the six sub-stories. The present paper discusses in detail the theory of eco-criticism and it aims at highlighting an understanding of various

terms like green studies and nature studies, as well as describes in fair detail, the different subfields of eco-criticism, namely, Cultural ecology, Eco-feminism and Gyno-Ecology.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Cultural Ecology, Ecofeminism, Gyno-Ecology, Green Studies

Every human being has to face different experiences involving his mental, physical, emotional and social activities during his sojourn on earth. He has to go through these experiences in different stages of his growth from his state of infancy to his state of adulthood. During his growth, culture, society, values, morals, ethics and genetics determine his behaviour. Environment, the society and its tradition and the expectation of civilized behaviour and attitudes in the society in which man is born and brought up are mainly responsible for his strange behaviour in and attitude to life.

Moreover attitudes are born out of emotions, which the human beings experience and feel. Emotions determine attitudes of the human beings and attitudes reflect in their emotional behaviour and responses. Thus both emotions and attitudes decide their complex and varied actions and in turn they become responsible for their responses. There are men and women in life who consider every inconvenience as a nuisance. For such people, even waiting for a train is a torture. They should be very positive in such situations, and they can convert even waiting as a pastime.

In fact, of all creations of nature, human being alone lives in the most artificial of all environments. Human being is the only one who has emancipated himself in his life-conditions of all kinds of all the living beings. He meets with traces of his own development, progress, changes and transformations everywhere. Moreover he organises his life without consideration of the needs and demands of his environment without a real image of himself and of the surrounding world. In addition to this, Environment affects and even largely determines all things ranging from food, fashion, technology to race, class, gender, sexuality, mentality, nationality, law, religion, economics etc. concurrently it is considered as a global phenomenon.

However, these concerns are envisioned to exemplify how environmental problems and ecological awareness have always been a part of human life, and establish expression in philosophical as well as literary works. These issues today are a result of the realization that has reached the point of no return in our abuse of the environment in the meantime it is time everyone reconsidered his behaviour and beliefs. In the global ecological crises and life-threatening effects stimulated literary thinkers to formulate an eco-oriented approach called as eco-criticism. It came off as a new spine to the arena of literary criticism.

Conversely Eco-criticism is an attempt to understand human and non-human interactions and inter-relationships. Further, it is an attempt to reintegrate the human and the non-human, to review the lost links between humanity and the world out. As Donald Hughes' comment about it is quite noteworthy:

Human ecology, then, is a rational study of how mankind interrelates with the home of the human species, the earth; with its soil and mineral resources; with its water, both fresh and salt; with its air, climates and weather; with its many living things, animals and planets, from the simplest to the most complex; and with the energy received ultimately from the sun. (Hughes 3)

Furthermore Eco-criticism is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. It is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature by analogy. These are visibly interdisciplinary studies at the same time unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. The realm of eco-criticism is very broad because it is not limited to any literary genre.

In recent years, eco-criticism has become one of the most visible and productive new directions of literary and cultural studies. It was deeply designed by the theoretical fields of cultural studies, post structuralism and postmodernism. One of the most encouraging directions of eco-criticism is the approach of Cultural Ecology. It is basically concerned with the relationship between culture and nature. Within the wider charter of Cultural Ecology, various recent contributions on the relationship between literature, culture and nature have been stimulated by a broadly cultural-ecological approach that is by the assumption that the interrelationship between culture and nature is the vital focus and central aspect of the study of language, culture and texts.

Nevertheless hailing from a chauvinistic background, Gita Mehta proposes to explore and expose India with all its richness in classical music, poetry and religion especially to the western readers. With the publication of *A River Sutra*, Mehta has arisen as an Indian English Woman novelist. Though she makes an excellent use of Indian myths, folk lore, rituals and superstitious beliefs in this novel, she also emphasises on the diversity of cultures and religions with in India. Usually, Gyno-Ecology is parallel to woman and nature. Mehta aspires to equate woman and nature and tries to show how women reach out to nature in their crisis and despair through this novel.

A River Sutra is a lyrical series of interlocking stories that transport the contemporary India. The setting of the novel is especially on the banks of river Narmada. Moreover the chief narrator is a retired bureaucrat who tries to escape the world by becoming a manager of a Government Rest House on the banks of River Narmada. Perchance his destiny has brought him there to understand all about the world. Mehta portrays the simple story telling technique as well as the narrators of the stories converge on the banks of the Narmada and partake of peace and mental tranquility by telling their experiences and by residing on the banks of this river. In general, Sutra is the theme of love that runs through all the stories, threading them loosely together. Perhaps she uses Narmada as the thread or string which holds together the main story and the six sub-stories. River Narmada is the sutra which threads together the various people who live on its shores or who come to worship at its water.

Initially, the first tale is that of a luxurious Jain businessman Ashok, whose enormity of wealth leads to a surplus of passion and experience at the age of twenty six. Shortly, he covets a monk's tranquility and is determined to gain it by withdrawing from the wealthy world of his father. This abandonment involves a grand ceremony of rituals in front of forty thousand people, a display that was purported to imitate or even outsmart the procession that preceded Mahavira's renunciation. Thoroughly, the narrator is disturbed by the memory of the monk whose refusal merely becomes a meaningless and unfulfilled desire as the power that he seeks is absent.

Secondly, the next story is the tragedy of a talent destroyed. Master Mohan, the music teacher as well as the caretaker of Imrat. He has no vision but is gifted with such a wonderful voice. Master Mohan takes charge of him thinking that he had been made guardian of something rare. But disaster stubbles the boy when Imrat gets an invitation to render a private audition in front of a great sahib. As the boy's song keeps everyone in dream, the neurotic sahib cuts Imrat's throat with the intention of a man stealing an object of worship so no one but himself can enjoy it. Master Mohan commits suicide because of guilty.

In contrast to the second, the third story is in a romantic tone. It is an account of Nitin Bose, who was enchanted by a woman during his stay in the hills of Kamarupa. In future, when he learnt that she was the wife of a coolie, the enchantment broke and Nitin was filled with revulsion at the thought that he had found comfort for so long in such a lowly woman. When he tried to get away from her, the woman trapped his soul in the split halves of the coconut shells, which led to his abnormal behaviour. As the only remedy was to worship the tribal goddess, he comes to the narrator's house and performs the ceremonies of the tribes and at last leaves the rest house looking completely cured of his imagined illness.

Next story is the resemblance of sadness. It is the miserable tale of a courtesan and her daughter who lived in a Haveli. It shows how fate intruded her beautiful life when her daughter was kidnapped by the most fearsome and most wanted bandit Rahul Singh. Later on, the separated mother and daughter rejoin in the rest house of the narrator only to willingly sacrifice the life of the girl by drowning in Narmada. Moreover the following tale designates a young musician who is on a pilgrimage to the Narmada along with her father to erase her love for a mortal and learn once more to please the gods with her music. The ugly looking girl is betrothed to a young man who later decays to marry her. Out of grief and shame, the girl stopped playing music and so she is brought to the banks of Narmada, to meditate and cure herself of the attachment with her past.

Lastly, the narrator's friend Tariq Mia introduces the story of Naga Baba, a martial ascetic. Naga Baba had rescued a child from a brothel, immersed her in the holy Narmada to purify her, named her as Uma and it means as peace in the night and taught her to read and write. Later the girl became a singer saint. They survived on the banks of Narmada for three years after which Naga Baba left her proceeding with the next stage of enlightenment. In the concluding chapter "The Song of Narmada" Naga Baba returns as Professor Shankar, an authority on the Narmada and comes there to a camp at forty kilometres from the rest house

and bearings an archeological survey. In the meantime a river musician derives to the rest house and delights the narrator by singing numerous songs in praise of river Narmada.

The most unexpected turn comes with the exposure that Professor Shankar, certainly, is Naga Baba, and the river minstrel is Uma, the girl he fostered. The narrator is shocked and is unable to be certain of that the energetic archeologist was once a Naga saint. As Uma and Professor Shankar move out of the rest house, the narrator is left alone on the terrace looking at the waters of Narmada. Apart from this, the two extremities of love, the happiness that it can confer and the pain it induces from the loss of such love are carefully entwined to let the readers know that there is no common, definite answer to the questions related to human heart which is the most complicated.

Nevertheless River Narmada is a character by itself in the novel as well as it is the story force in every tale. Additionally, it is ever-present in the background and is believed to possess both medicinal and cleansing powers. All the characters in the novel derive to her shores for various kinds of fulfillment in their lives and not only humans but all breeds of life take shelter in her protective hands:

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. (255)

River Narmada is among the holiest pilgrimage sites worshipped as the daughter of God Shiva. It is said that Shiva was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream takes the form of a beautiful woman, innocently tempting even ascetic to pursue her, inflaming lust appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose limbed with lassitude of desire. Her inventive variation so amused Shiva that He named her Narmada, the Delightful One, blessing her with the words “You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible”. (P-8)

Further the source of the river is an underground spring that surfaces four hundred kilometers to the east around the holy tank at Amarkantak, where the puritans sit in meditation chanting mantras on Lord Shiva because the river is known for its immortality. Though it is called a degrading river as it grinds down the rocks deeply, it has never changed its course. The final chapter is rather dedicated to river Narmada. The river calls for mankind to offer her assistance: “Bring your knowledge of mankind / And follow me. / I will lead you to the next Creation” (278). Gita Mehta tries to explore the nature and woman relationship from a special dimension. The last three stories namely courtesan’s story. The Musician’s story and the Minstrel’s story show Mehta’s attempt to make her women characters either co-exist with nature or find shelter in nature that is in River Narmada. She makes them understand that River Narmada is the final refuge if everything fails in the world.

Nonetheless in the courtesan’s story, a mere glimpse of the Narmada’s waters is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births. This story depicts how the

body of the courtesan's daughter merges with river Narmada, realizing the nature of the river. In the musicians story, an ugly daughter of the musician gives an account of the origin of first musical instrument, veena and of ragas. Musicians believe that one morning after Lord Shiva had made love to the Goddess all night and saw the Goddess still asleep and was moved to such tenderness by the sight he created an instrument to immortalize his wife's immortal beauty. The music of veena is the expression of Shiva's love.

Principally Mehta very obviously presents the Narmada as a young, beautiful and attractive woman who arouses even the lust of ascetics. She tries to bring out the same ideas through the character Uma in Minstrel's story. In this story, Naga Baba has renounced the world and wanders on the country side, bathes in the ashes of cremated and begs for sustenance. After the ritual dip in the river, she is given a new name 'Uma'. She believes that the Narmada is her home and mother. Uma keeps close track of the river and learns more and more songs about the river. Later she becomes the minstrel of the Narmada and is accepted and respected at festivals on the banks of the River Narmada as a singer – saint.

Entirely Mehta tries to equate the birth of the Narmada and the rebirth of Uma. Uma is also like the river born as well as born from the puritan's penance and then from his love. It creates an atmosphere where Uma and Professor Shankar become the earthly manifestation of the Narmada and Lord Shiva. As the river runs to meet her bridegroom the ocean, here it indicates Shankar's return to the river and to Uma and suggests the same. Similarly Uma is also in the tempestuous current of life, tortured and crushed, finally moves toward her bridegroom professor Shankar. Here nature and woman unite perfectly.

Therefore the contrast between city life and life amidst nature is vividly portrayed in the novel. With the woman-nature connections being the backbone of ecofeminism, a critic is sure to notice this perspective established by Mehta with sources drawn from Hindu mythology. In this novel she tries to bring mythological time, historical time, contemporary time and narrative time all together in the flow of the waters. Thus, in the courtesan's story the River Narmada is regarded as the place of purgation and refuge. The ugly daughter in the musician's story approaches the Narmada as the last hope to revive her spirit. As the river gets united with ocean, Professor Shankar and Uma are reunited in the Minsterl's story.

To put it in a nutshell, Mehta occupies a unique position as an ecological writer who elucidates uniquely Indian experience in a clear and intelligent voice. She relates a rich and ongoing history its nuance, complexity, and contradiction opening doors and windows into Indian life in ways few other writers do. As Malvalio rightly says in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them," (Act 2, sc. 5, p.5). Gita Mehta is a picture-perfect instance for this quote. The role of textual and cultural aspects is specifically significant in this view for the development of new, global ecology of knowledge that is needed for the forthcoming arena.

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