Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra*: An Ecocritical Study

*Dr. Anjali Tripathy*

**Abstract**

This article attempts an ecocritical study of Gita Mehta’s novel *A River Sutra* (1993) with its varied ramifications. My focus in this article would be the novel’s contribution to environmental anxieties, its positive delineation of woman-nature connection, challenging man-culture equivalence to develop a new nature-man equation along with examining the Narmada River as a part of cultural memory which acts as a thread to all the concerns mentioned before.

**Key Words:** Gita Mehta, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, Women’s novels

While going through Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* (1993), I was impressed by the book’s beautiful delineation of nature-human connection. Obviously, being a person literate in literary theory, my mind immediately associated the book with ecocriticism. It is well known that ecocriticism registered itself as a part of literary theory with the publication of two seminal works written in the 1990s, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cherryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. Glotfelty, the acknowledged founding father of the concept, defines it as “an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xviii). A search for secondary materials to study Mehta’s novel made me acquainted with the plethora of critical articles and books on ecocriticism, which comprise of a multiplicity of approaches and subjects to environmental literature—nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, eco-theory, etc.

This article purports to study Gita Mehta’s novel *A River Sutra* in the light of ecocritical theories and
practices. The setting of the novel is on the banks of the River Narmada amidst endless traffic of pilgrims, archaeologists, priests and traders. It encompasses a series of bio-sketches recounted by a bureaucrat who attempts to escape the world by becoming a manager of a Government Rest-House on the banks of the River Narmada. Mehta uses the Narmada as the thread, which juxtaposes the main story with the six sub-stories—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. I attempt to analyse the book’s ecological concern with its varied ramifications which underlies all these stories.

In the beginning I seek to uncover the distinctively gendered nature of the narrative. The eco-feminists among the ecocritics argue that there are important connections between the domination and oppression of women and domination and exploitation of nature by masculinist methods and attitudes.\(^2\) Noel Sturgeon writes about the connection of ecocriticism and feminism thus:

Ecofeminism is a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms; more precisely, it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment. (Ecofeminist Natures 132)

Mehta, too, draws a parallel between the abuse of nature and woman. In “The Executive’s Story,” she highlights the life of tea plantation workers and the violence capitalist industry inflicts on the natural landscape with its exploitation of the labourer’s body. The tea garden, reminiscent of the British colonialism, has been a symbol of perpetuation of exploitation of India—her nature and woman. A replica of the British sahib, the Indian baboos, too, continue their maltreatment of nature and women. Exploitation is apparent in case of Nitin Bose’s nightly love for Rima as the sight of Rima’s real squat form at once makes him conscious of her class and his recall to the city breaks the spell of that love (130). He is unsettled that her husband is a “cooler,” a class degradation that offends his sophisticated and urbane Calcutta alter-ego.

The narrator of the section “The Courtesan’s Story,” a former courtesan, draws attention to the environmental degradation by describing the transformed ambience of Shahbag thus:

Oh, friends, how Shahbag has changed in my lifetime. Where there used to be gardens now we have factories. Our gracious old buildings have been torn down to be replaced by concrete boxes named after politicians. The woods that once ringed the city have been cut down for shantytowns of labour colonies. Even the boulevards around our haveli have been overrun so that our view is now only of a bazaar, and we must keep the windows to the west closed because of the smell from the open gutter. (167)

Along with the degradation of city life, she imparts a vivid description of the exploitation of women in Shahbag:

The city is owned by men who believe that 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 is to heave on a mattress and be recompensed by some tawdry necklace flashing its vulgarity on a crushed pillow. (167-168)
Thus, the abuse of natural landscape with the emergence of modern city runs parallel to the abuse of women.

But, Mehta’s novel mainly focuses on the nurturing and sustaining power of nature-woman connection. She equates woman with nature and tries to show how women, who stand for the sustaining principle of nature, can reach out to it in times of crisis and despair. In “The Minstrel’s Story,” an ascetic Naga Baba rescues a girl child from a brothel by asking her for alms. She is brought up amidst nature. She watches the Naga Baba collecting grass around the tree to make a bed for her and digging bulbs and tubers from the ground to roast over an open fire to feed her. She is taught by the ascetic to drink fresh milk directly from the teats of wandering goats, to collect pats of cow dung to be left in the sun to dry, to look for water snakes, learning where they swim the water is pure enough to drink. She grows up to become the minstrel of the Narmada and is accepted and esteemed at festivals on the banks of the River Narmada as a singer-saint. Her progress from an exploited girl to a singer-saint reveals how a sweet communion with nature can become a path for ecological consciousness in a person.

Cultural ecofeminism, too, draws attention to the healing effect and positive connotation of woman-nature association. Developed in the 1970s, cultural ecofeminism, according to Karen J. Warren, “reclaims women-nature connections as liberating and empowering expressions of women’s capabilities to care for nature” (qtd. in Kaur 190). Indian physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva’s work comes closest to cultural ecofeminism in the Indian context. Shiva asserts that “while gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development” (Staying Alive 3). She argues for the recovery of the feminine principle—Prakriti—to counter the destructive effects of the Western model of development, which she calls “maldevelopment.” Shiva advocates “to recover the feminine principle as the basis for development which conserves and is ecological” and she equates feminism with ecology, and ecology with the revival of Prakriti, which, she calls, is the source of all life (6).

Many scholars and writers drawing on eco-feminist thoughts have enhanced our understanding of creative articulations of environmental abuse, but insufficient attention has been given to the ways literature degenders eco-degradation. Mehta’s novel cites many instances of environmental degradation. In addition to the previously quoted passage on the transformed ambience of Shahbag, there is description of Calcutta crumbling 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 the desperate to a great metropolis itself desperately surviving as if a war had just ended” (109). Although the novel sheds light on nature-woman relation, the author is careful in degendering ecological distress by portraying its perpetrators, and its ameliorators as involving human beings in general. Garrard (2012) argues that this generalisation and dematerialisation (in literature), has significant ramifications in present day culture, constituting a ‘world risk society’ of indefinable, pervasive material threats. Ecocriticism, thus, need not persist to be parasitic upon the natural sciences, but has its own
distinctive and constructive contribution to environmental concerns.

It is significant that A River Sutra disrupts the nature/culture dualism that aligns woman to nature and man to culture unquestionably. Mehta both reinforces and complicates dualisms, drawing and then erasing the clear lines between nature/culture, female/male, and body/mind, as well as connection between female and nature. A River Sutra abounds with allusions to proximity of nature with human life, both male and female. The traditional association of Spring with desire and longing has been voiced by the tribal women: “Be careful not to walk alone, sisters. The mango trees are in bloom” (93). Spring has been personified as Kama, the god of desire, “with his ruthless hands and his beautiful body clothed only in lotus bud” (94). The call of the koil bird, has been likened to a strange imitation of a woman’s cry at the moment of sexual fulfillment (93). The very act of being in the embrace of a woman is compared to a flowering creeper gripping a tree (124).

The association of man with culture is challenged and a new nature-man equation emerges in “The Monk’s Story” and “The Executive’s Story” which illustrate men seeking solace in nature and turning to it in times of anguish and crisis. In “The Monk’s Story,” Ashok, a man born with a silver spoon in his mouth, resolves to leave a lavish life and his gradual disinterestedness in his possession is accelerated by his father’s hypocrisy. His father’s huge charitable deeds mismatch with his callousness towards the predicament of the miners, their inhuman treatment and poverty. He becomes a Jain monk and decides to tread on the path of humanity along the bank of the Narmada. He abandons the luxury of an affluent city life in pursuit of the human heart and its secret—the capacity to love (48). It seems that Ashok finds, the company of nature can fill human heart with pure love to counter the hypocrisy of the material world.

The internal struggle of a man to escape from the immoralities of city life deeply tainted with alcoholism, betting and sexual perversion is the theme of “The Executive’s Story.” It features the story of Nitin Bose, a young man who relishes his retreat from the Calcutta business world as manager of a tea plantation, especially his nightly love of the mysterious tribal Rima who arrives like a dream after he is asleep and leaves before he awakes. His massive ebony bed with serpents carved on the head-board signifies worship of senses. The employment of serpent in literature as a symbol of desire and lust dates back to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. The story states that paradise was lost because the serpent induced Eve to consume the fruit of knowledge. Pierced by temptation and desire, Nitin Bose feels that Rima’s teeth penetrating his skin is like the sudden striking of a snake and afterwards he dreams of holding a creature half serpent in his arms (125). After returning to city life, he seems to be possessed by a female soul. This gothic tale of possession by a female soul remains until his ritual exorcism in the Narmada. Nitin Bose is cured of his ailment after worshipping the nature and woman in the form of goddess Narmada.

What is noteworthy in both the stories is that both Ashok and Nitin Bose seek refuge in nature and turns to the Narmada for finding resolutions to their life’s problems. Vandana Shiva rightly views, contemporary western views of nature are fraught with the dichotomy or duality between man and woman, and person and nature. In Indian cosmology, by contrast, person and
nature (Purusha-Prakriti) are a duality in unity. They are inseparable complements of one another in nature, in woman, in man. Every form of creation bears the sign of this dialectical unity, of diversity within a unifying principle, and this dialectical harmony between the male and female principles and between nature and man, becomes the basis of ecological thought and action in India. (39)

While much of the ecofeminist theory and women-led activism do not allow such a harmony to emerge, Mehta takes liberty to dislocate the dualism and posits man in an equal relationship with nature, while overlapping the area between the two binaries.

As stated earlier, threaded through the narrative are allusions to the Narmada, the real protagonist of the novel. The River deserves a distinct investigation as the entire drama of the novel is enacted on its banks and throughout the narration it has been pictured as a persistent symbol of immortality, love, instinct as well as rationality. Connecting the River Narmada to ecocriticism demands a reference to the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). The currently proposed Narmada River valley project envisages the construction of 30 major dams along the Narmada and its tributaries, as well as an additional 135 medium-sized and 3000 minor dams. According to unofficial estimates upto 15 million people will be affected by the project when completed—either by displacement from their homes and lands, or though serious damage to their livelihoods (Mallick 276). The NBA, a social movement consisting of tribal people, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against the Sardar Sarovar Dam being built across the Narmada River in Gujarat led by Medha Patkar, played a major role in drawing attention to the problems associated with large dams, and in giving a voice to the oustees. It has received extensive support from environmental and social movements in India and across the world. The struggle over the Narmada provides a poignant instance of how local people are caught between the threat of destruction of a way of life and the promises of development.

Though a representative of nature, when we look at the Narmada what strikes us most is the culture which has sprung around her banks. In the course of the novel, a lot of people come to the banks of the river and contemplate life in different ways. It is also a source of mythology. Believed to be the daughter of Lord Shiva, the Narmada protects one from snake’s poison. Another myth says that the river purifies all the sins. People also supposed that the goddess cures madness, liberating those who are possessed, suggesting it purges the mind from impure thoughts and earthly temptation. Mythology surrounding the river is rooted in our cultural memory. Connecting cultural memory and environment in this way suggests an alternate way for eco-critics to study A River Sutra, which does not merely function as a warning, but also as an illustration of the role of responsibility, language and vision in the relationships humans have with nature.

Notes:
2. The term ecofeminism as a branch of ecocriticism was officially heralded with Francoise d’Eaubonne’s book *Feminism or Death* (1974). The works by feminists Susan Griffin (1978) and Mary Daly (1978), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Ynestra King (1981), Ariel Kay Salleh (1984), Karen Warren (1987, 1990), Val Plumwood (1993) and others also emphasize that ecology is a feminist issue.

3. Environmental movements all over the world like the Chipko movement in India, movement against dumping of hazardous wastes in the US, and Green Belt movement in Kenya, are all labeled as “ecofeminist” movements where women lead the environmental causes. In the Indian context, women like Medha Patkar, (Late) Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K Janu have led environmental causes and movements.

**References:**


Dr. Anjali Tripathy, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology, Bhubaneswar.
The term manual scavenging itself gives away the vile and demeaning nature this work involves. This is a kind of work which brings about the worst of feelings inside the stomach of most of us; try imagining this “work” being all there is that you can ever do. Well, this is the way life is for hundreds of thousands of our fellow countrymen. Day in and day out, they toil inside the depths of human excreta; without any safety equipment, without any protective gear, without any hope. Why do they do it, you ask? How is it even a job in this day and age?

They do it because you and I refuse to change. This is still a job, a way of life for some, because we as a country refuse to embrace scientific advancement and try defending such poor choices as the old and traditional ways of doing things. Some of us even resort to blaming our local politicians and civic authorities for this sad state of affairs. Though they are not entirely wrong, Government and Civic bodies are to be blamed for falling short to perform their duty, but haven’t we all?

For those who are still unaware of such a social evil taking place even in 21st century; manual scavenging refers to the practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling in any manner, human excreta from dry latrines and sewers. More often than not, men and women involved in this use the most basic of tools such as buckets, brooms, baskets, and sometimes, even bare hands.

This dehumanizing practice is linked to India’s age-old caste system wherein certain castes are expected to perform this job. And this historical and social structure has become the very shackle which has tightened its noose around millions of Indians. Manual scavengers are amongst the poorest and most disadvantaged communities in India. While manual scavenging for some may have ended as a form of employment, the stigma and discrimination associated with it lingers on. This makes it even more difficult for former or liberated manual scavengers to secure alternate livelihoods. All this has helped in making the ominous fear of these people returning to manual scavenging to support their families become a dark and bitter reality.

Correctly identifying manual scavengers remains a key challenge along with the aversion to change. Despite progress, manual scavenging...