GYNO-ECOLOGICAL HARMONY IN GITA MEHTA’S
‘A RIVER SUTRA’

Dr. Suji Brindha

Abstract

In Western Feminist studies the women is always portrayed with a quest for freedom from the urban exploitative society to nature i.e. lake, the forest etc. It is appealing to discover that this concept receives a new dimension in a different cultural context – Indian. Gita Mehta’s ‘A River Sutra’ is a lyrical series of interlocking stories that transport the reader to a contemporary India. The setting of the novel is on the banks of river Narmada amid constant traffic of pilgrims, archaeologists, policemen, priests and traders. It consists of a series of bio-sketches narrated by a tureaucrat who tries to escape the world by becoming a manager of a Government Rest – House on the banks of river Narmada. Gita Mehta uses the Narmada as the thread, which holds together the main story and the six sub-stories. The river is known as the holiest river in India, threads together the diverse people who live on its shores or who come to worship her. The Narmada absolves a man or women of all his or her sins and makes him or her pure, by merely her divine sight. It is also viewed as a woman who is beautiful in the prime of her youth. The present paper aims at highlighting the Gyno-Ecological harmony that is found in Gita Mehta’s ‘A River Sutra’.

Hailing from a patriotic background Gita Mehta intends to explore and expose India with all its richness in classical music, poetry and religion especially to the western readers. With the publication of her third novel ‘A River Sutra’ (1993) Gita Mehta has emerged as an Indian English Woman novelist. She makes an excellent use of Indian myths, folk lore, rituals and superstitious beliefs in this novel. She also focuses on the diversity of cultures and religions with in India. To ascertain this fact she presents stories about Hindu ascetic, Jain Monk, courtesans, minstrels, diamond merchants, tea executives, Muslim teachers, tribal folk beliefs.

Since the 1960’s there has been a movement that centers around beliefs that the feminine nature is linked to the Earth. This movement believes the earth is our Mother. Eco feminists believe Mother Earth was designed by the creatress, the Goddess. She gives us our home in this physical reality. Eco feminism is a belief system that incorporates the spiritual and physical realities of our being.

This paper attempts to highlight the Gyno-ecological harmony found in Gita Mehta’s ‘A River Sutra’. Gyno-Ecology is analogous to woman and nature. Gita Mehta, in this novel, aspires to equate woman and nature and tries to show how women reach out to nature in their crisis and despair. When coming close to nature...
the woman imbibes the serenity and strength of this unchanged ‘immortal’ Nature.

‘A River Sutra’ is a lyrical series of interlocking stories that transport the reader to a contemporary India. The setting of the novel is on the banks of river Narmada amid constant traffic of pilgrims, archaeologist, policemen, priests and traders. 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. Perhaps his destiny has brought him there to understand all about the world. Gita Mehta employs the simple story telling technique. The narrators of the stories converge on the banks of the Narmada and partake of peace and mental serenity by telling their experience and by residing on the banks of this canonical river. ‘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 sub-stories. River Narmada is the ‘Sutra’ which threads together the diverse people who live on its shores or who come to worship at its water.

Gita Mehta tries to explore the nature – woman relationship from a special dimension. The last three stories namely courtesan’s story (Chapter X). The Musician’s story (Chapter XIII) and the Minstrel’s story (Chapter XV) evince Mehta’s attempt to make her women characters either co-exist with nature or find shelter in nature ie., in River Narmada. She makes them realize that River Narmada is the final refuge if everything fails in the world.

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)

The courtesan’s story is narrated partly by the courtesan and partly by her daughter. The courtesan arrives at the Government Rest House and requests lodging and claims that she is looking for her daughter. She describes how she fails to protect her daughter from the growing indignity around her. Finally teh girl is abducted by a dangerous bandit Rahul Singh, who is a victim of this society, and keeps her daughter with him for two long years in a cave among coarse criminals. The rest of the story is narrated by her daughter. One fine day this young lady and Rahul Singh secretly marry and find shelter in the forests on the banks of River Narmada. They know well that one day or the other he’ll be captured. On one such raids Rahul Singh is killed by the police. But then the police are in search of this young lady and after some time both of them- the mother and the daughter move towards the river Narmada as the only escape. That young lady ends her life drowning herself in the River Narmada.
This is very easily accepted by her mother. She is contented because her daughter dies in the Narmada which can purify all her sins. ‘Even the chief narrator discovers that attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself or herself in the waters of Narmada”. (P-3). A mere glimpse of the Narmada’s waters is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births. (P-151).

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 (Chap XIII) 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. (P-196)

The seven notes of the scale – sa, re, ga, ma, pa, tha, ni seem to be the imitation of the animals’ and birds’ voice. These are taught by the genius to his ugly daughter. She is jilted by a young student of her father after which she stops singing and all her spirit is dead. She says to the chief protagonist that she has come to the Narmada with the hope that she’ll get restored to her inspiration. Here again the River Narmada is considered to be final refuge to restore the dead spirit. Moreover, we find the ragas are in harmony with nature.

Gita Mehta very clearly 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 an ascetic Naga Baba has renounced the world and wanders on the country side, bathes in the ashes of cremated and begs for sustenance. As this ascetic has to take alms on the night of Shiva, he has found a child who has been sexually abused and he intimidates them to get the child as alms and rescues the child from the brothel. After saving the child he takes her to the River Narmada and immerses her to cleanse her from all the impurities and gets a new life in the lap of nature.

After the ritual dip in the river the begins a new life near the banks of the Narmada. Then 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.

In the mean time Naga Baba re-enters the world, by making the soul travel through eighty four thousand births, and comes back to the River Narmada as professor Shankar – an archeologist to learn more about the river, not for its mythical and religious inclination but for its immortality.

Gita Mehta tries to equate the birth of the Narmada and the rebirth of Uma. Uma is also like the river born – born form the ascetic’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 flows to meet her bridegroom the ocean, here Shankar’s return to the river and to Uma, suggests the same. Similarly Uma is also in the turbulent current of life, tortured and crushed, finally moves toward her bridegroom professor Shankar. Here nature and woman merge in perfect harmony.

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. Thus Gyno-Ecological harmony is very conspicuous in Gita Mehta’s ‘A River Sutra’.

References