



# EXPLORATION OF GYNO-ECOLOGICAL HARMONY. AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF GITA MEHTA'S NOVEL "A RIVER SUTRA"

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**Abstract:** In the literature, environmental issues are covered in greater detail. Feminist research integrates ecology and makes the connection between the deterioration of nature and the subjugation of women. In the topic of ecofeminism, feminist ideas and opinions are affirmed from a feminine perspective. It also calls into question the egalitarian perspective of human nature and the male-dominated society. The current paper's goal is to examine the ecofeminist elements in Gita Mehta's A Rivers Sutra. Ecofeminism frequently demonstrates the intimate connection between women's enslavement and the destruction of nature. In one sense, it is evident that humans rule nature, and in a similar vein, men dominate women. However, ecofeminism advocates for treating all women with dignity and equality in society. The research paper's goal is to examine how women and nature are related to politics, culture, the economy, and literature.

**Keywords:** - Gita Mehta, A River Sutra, feminism, ecofeminism, gender, ecology etc.

**Introduction:** Authors such as Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, and Gita Mehta have chosen to center their books' principal themes on the challenges and hardships that women confront in today's world, which is dominated by men. Renowned novelist Gita Mehta has gained recognition as a writer with profound understanding of the female psyche. Mehta focuses on eco-feminism in her second book, A River Sutra. The French author Françoise d'Eaubonne is credited with coining the phrase "eco-feminism" in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. The hands of Indian women novelists give the idea of eco-feminism a fresh, diverse cultural context. It revolves around the woman's relationship with nature and her act of reaching out to it throughout her darkest moments. The woman absorbs the strength and tranquillity of this unchanging, "immortal" nature as she gets close to it.

Mehta primarily examines the nature-woman relationship in A River Sutra inside a unique framework that also embodies the novel's fundamental Indianness. In the book, the river Narmada serves as both the backdrop and the main character depicted as a youthful, gorgeous woman in her tale. The river is shown as an organic entity with feelings similar to those of humans.

Too enigmatic, at times even a passive hearer of the stories to be referred to be a protagonist, the narrator comes across as an interlocutor. The stories emerge from the main narrator's mouthpiece and merge into other frames and inserted narratives. To break up the monotony of retelling the story, one of the stories is even told through diary entries. Storytellers gather by the banks of the Narmada, the mythological and

canonical river, to share their experiences and preserve mental peace. A River Sutra contains a meta-narrative that tells six separate stories in order, each with a different title, such as "The Monk's Story," "The Teacher's Story," or "The Executive's Story." "The Story of the Courtesan," "The Story of the Musician," and "The Minstrel's Story" and ends with 'The Song of the Narmada'.

The word "sutra," which appears in the title, stands for the sacred thread that unites all of humanity. The Narmada River, which appears vividly in fiction, is a location where people go to purify themselves and atone for their misdeeds. Geetha Mehta disproves the patriarchal idea in A River Sutra, that the river is weak, inactive, and fragmented by telling some captivating stories that come together to unite all the life-giving feminine qualities of the Narmada.

To support the aim of this paper, it is worthwhile to quote the well-known Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, who claims that "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).

The intimate relationship that has been discovered between women and nature as they coexist both within and outside the home, ecofeminism consistently finds a solution to the issue of women and the environment. Because the women work both on the farm and in the house, they are aware of the issues that ecology faces in both places. The emergence of ecofeminism serves as a powerful catalyst for addressing issues pertaining to women and the environment. The gender issue not only supports women's rights but also nurtures the natural world.

The unidentified narrator of the novel, Weary of his "worldly obligations," accepts the job of managing a government rest home on the Narmada River's bank. This phase of his life, he regards as "vanaprastha," the third "ashrama" (stage) of the Vedic ashram system, in which the retired retreat to ponder in the forest. Mango trees line one side of the narrator's cabin at the rest home, his forest getaway located halfway up a hill in the Vindhya Range, with the Narmada River flowing seven hundred feet below. "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..." (4)

According to the legend described in the book, the river Narmada, also known as the Delightful one, was created by the god Shiva when she first manifested on Earth as a beautiful, seductive, and mutable virgin. She is revered by the local indigenous Nagas as well as pilgrims. Her qualities include healing from snakebite and insanity, as well as forgiveness for attempted suicide.

In The Monk's Story, Ashok, a young monk who is almost thirty years old, is described as having given up on the world despite being the heir to his father's sizable diamond business. The Jain doctrine is based on "nonviolence." To avoid ahimsa, they are primarily bankers or merchants. "If we were farmers, we might unknowingly kill creatures under our plows. In Industry the earth is drilled for oil, iron, coal" (24). He remembers his wife as a "gentle creature" who is consumed with being a mother and lacks both imagination and taste for pleasure after the birth of their children. The teachings of Mahavir equate the human yearning for freedom to a "dammed river waiting to be released." Ashok wanted to assist everyone who had suffered because he realized that others' suffering may be eased with assistance. Most of the time, he came to the realization that his father was to blame for other people's pain and suffering. Ashok dedicates his entire life to serving people, making the promotion of nonviolence his top priority. Alternatively put, we could say that he returns to nature, which is the ecocriticism that a female writer embodies in her fiction.

In "The Teacher's Story" one can identify bonding of friendship between unidentified narrator and Tariq Mia. The narrator and the elderly Muslim mullah Tariq Mia become extremely close friends, and the mullah tells him two stories. Mohan, a good instructor, was never given the attention he deserved from his friends and family for his singing. He eventually trains Imrat, a blind youngster, to sing, and as a result, he becomes well-known and respected as a capable instructor. This joy doesn't last long, as Imrat was killed in front of Mohan one day. Mohan is so devastated by Imrat's passing that he turns to Tariq Mia for solace prior to taking his own life.

The Executive's Story is heard from Nitin Bose's diary which begins with the description of pollution in 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" (110). He was an urbanite tea company executive and his young colleagues believe in "Drink, shoot, and fuck" (112). The Kamarupa Hills estate is home to a secret race of people that are "half human, half serpent," and it has a rich history of "mythological tales" and "legends of a vast underground civilization." The estate is guarded by hooded serpents and is dedicated to "pleasure and learning." He is taken over by Rima, an indigenous tribal woman with snake-like features, whose seductive attempts he initially accepted but later turned down out of distaste since he is unable to "love a coolie's wife." It now falls to him to carry out an old ritual in front of the Narmada goddess in order to get rid of her spirit. The two women, Rima and the Narmada, are symbolic of nature and have a similar ability to help victims make atonement and also they are 'beautiful', 'desirable', 'oil-scented', 'loosened long black hair', 'eyes outlined in collyrium', and palms and feet painted with 'vermilion' (139). The tribals of Vano village worship the goddess of desire, they believe that "without desire there is no life.... The goddess is just the principle of life. She is every illusion that is inspiring love... She is what a mother is feeling for a child. A man for a woman. A starving man for food. Human beings for God. And Mr. Bose did not show her respect so he is being punished" (142). Despite feeling and comprehending the importance of a woman as a source of life, love and knowledge he disrespects and denies it, and thus Nitin makes an idol and worships both the power of desire and womanhood pervading in nature.

In "The Story of the Courtesan", The courtesan bemoans Shahbagh's pollution and destruction of women's conditions, saying: How Shahbagh 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 the shanty-towns of labor 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. 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. (167-168). Similar to The Handmaid's Tale, The Courtesan's Tale describes how the women in their tribe are viewed as consumable products, only to be used as an object and source of pleasure. The courtesan and her daughter are the two narrators who tell this tale to the narrator (us). The courtesan describes how she failed to shield her daughter from the increasing dehumanization she experienced or the deteriorating conditions of a society that is controlled by a powerful, moneyed elite. the strength of Indian is its unity instead of being multicultural society and Mehta is trying to (re)establish the glorious historicity of India by the lines like, "The Nawab (of Shahbagh) was a Muslim but he honored the river's holiness", in the words of Nawab, " Bathing in the waters of the Jamuna purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the Saraswati in the three, in the waters of the Ganges in one, but the Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters"(163). The condition of courtesans was comparatively better "Renowned not just for their beauty but for learning, they were in great demand to educate the heirs to India's mightiest kingdoms" (164). Vatsayana's classic Kama Sutra describes that she must be the mistress of sixty-four arts and the essence of their art was to teach noblemen good manners. The talent

of courtesans' has gradually been ignored and discouraged but still they are "certainly more accomplished than any other woman in India" (165). Rahul Singh, the bandit, kidnaps the courtesan's seventeen-year-old daughter. Singh turns out to be a victim of social injustice, and the two of them—the "goat" and the "panther"—get married.

The mentality of a courtesan is similar to that of a musician's wife, who is more focused on maintaining their chastity and maintaining their social standing than their daughter's wellbeing. "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?" (173). After the murder of Rahul Singh, scared to imagine the life of "girl known to be courtesan and a bandit's wife" (187), the girl finds the Narmada her last home, and she surrenders herself to the river in order to avoid the terrible ignominy of recapture by the police.

The Narmada cradles a variety of animals in her breast: "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). Also, the mother was "happy her daughter had died in the Narmada because she would be purified of all her sins" (190). The tale opens with a description of the Narmada's legendary significance for soul purification and emancipation: "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" (2) and the tale ends with courtesan's daughter turning to river Narmada (nature) as the only escape to avoid her despair and crisis.

The subject of Mehta's subsequent tale, *The Musician*, is the exploitation of physical attractiveness. Musician's wife has become an anti-matriarch because she is so ashamed and insecure that she stands with her naive daughter against society and 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" (210). The binary oppositions what man has created to rule over the other, to consider someone as inferior plays a vital role in this tale. Beauty is highly valued in this tale. In an attempt to obtain some acceptance and individuality, the girl pushes herself to study the music against her will, yet all forms of female creativity are consistently abandoned. Despite her tears, her father disregarded them and made the girl practice until her fingertip cushions were callused. Marriage is considered as a means of defending girls. Regretfully, the mother thinks that in a cruel society made for males, "a woman without genius could be protected only by a husband" (212). This clarifies how the legislation is applied, which is either unclear or contingent on how patriarchy is interpreted. Her parents do not value her education, financial independence, or freedom of choice, and she herself regrets her educational path. She is aware that the stain of her ugly appearance would prevent any man from desiring her. Even inside her family she struggles for acceptance, "I struggled to please my father inside the music room, and then outside the room consoled my mother for my ugliness" (213). After being abandoned and betrayed by the guy she loves, the fiercely attractive daughter of a brilliant musician father decides to give up music forever because she feels "dead inside" and travels to the Narmada. Her father advises her to meditate on the banks of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance, until she gets cured of her past and "can become again the ragini to every raga"(225). She is objectified by both the young man and her father; one needs to transfer his music, and the other is impatient to enhance his own. Both have given her nothing in return. Finally, she clings to the Narmada River in the aftermath of her betrayal, hoping that her inspiration will return.

The *Minstrel's* tale is divided into two sections. In the first, Naga Baba gives the nameless girl a new start in the lap of nature after saving her. In the latter section, the girl develops into a river-minstrel. The song she sings to the river is, in a poetic and metaphorical way, also curious about her, as both the river and she are "twice-born". This narrative demonstrates the animalization and monetization of women fairly well. Because her mother passed away while giving birth, her father refers to her as a "misfortune." He sold her to the



brothel keeper claiming that she was now her new mother. But the woman never treated her as a daughter, Instead "she just kept me (Uma) in that house for those men (customers)" (250). In the brothel she is called by the name 'Chand', meaning the moonlight, "The customers chose the name, they said my skin is as soft as moonlight" (250). On the 'night of Shiva', Naga Baba had to beg alms from an 'unclean' house before returning to the jungle. Thus, he goes to the brothel where he sees "A child was cowering behind a plastic-covered sofa, her face twisted with pain as a man gripped her chin in one hand. With his other hand the man was lifting the child's small body to bring her lips closer to his own" (245). Ironically, the brothel keeper believes the monk will use the child for sex, so he had to threaten the employer to acquire the youngster as alms. The child is mistreated, abused, and exploited; she is referred to as a misfortune. While giving the child to Naga Baba, the woman says "But I paid five hundred rupees for her. It was a great charity I did her father. When I bought her there was no flesh on her at all. See how well I feed her, and still there is not enough of her to satisfy a man...If you still want to keep her so badly, come back in twelve or thirteen years. She won't be any good to me by then...And do not curse me later when you find what trouble she brings. She doesn't even have a name. Her own father calls her misfortune" (246). She was saved on the night of Shiva by Naga Baba, who took hold of her arms, lowered her into the water, and spoke the words, "The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight You become a daughter of the Narmada" (254), and bestowed upon her a new name, Uma, which means the "peace of night." It seems like the formerly weak, afraid, and orphaned youngster gradually becomes somewhat similar to the river.

The Naga Baba left her to pursue the next phase of his enlightenment. Tariq Mia says, "If the Narmada was born from Shiva's penance, then surely Uma was born of the Naga Baba's penance" (258). He is apprehensive that Naga Baba would ever leave Uma, "I didn't think the Naga Baba would ever leave Uma. She was more than a child to him. She was the fruit of his austerity... Tell me, what higher enlightenment could he acquire by leaving her?" (258). Naga Baba rejoins society in the capacity of Professor Shankar. He was the head of the Archaeological Department before quitting government service to write the amazing book "The Narmada Survey" and take up the role of chairman of the Indian Preservation Trust because he was tired with the red tape. He returns not with any mythical or religious notion, but simply with the declaration, "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" (263-264).

The comparison between Uma and the Narmada is made by the professor's affection for the river and respect for her eternal life. Professor Shankar is of the opinion that the sacredness of river Narmada 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" (267). He mentions about his archaeological research of the area, "Our datings of the rock samples prove they are from the Stone Age. So they must be among the oldest evidence of human life in India. Lower down the same cliff we are finding implements from successive ages-Neolithic, Iron, Bronze." The purpose of his stay is "This river is an unbroken record of the human race... Too many lives converge on these banks... they were like water flowing through lives to teach us something" (268).

The eco-spirituality of the Narmada, which is provided by the river minstrel's chanting, reminds us of the origins of old Indian customs that revere all aspects of the natural world. She pays homage to the Narmada by singing of her grace and her cleansing power over the river's impurities, and how these qualities force the sages to refer to her by many 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" (273). By comparing her voyage to Uma, one can deduce the feminine principle of the Narmada. Naga Baba as Shiva had taken Uma as alms on the night of Shiva for his penance and dipped her into the Narmada, calling her the daughter of the Narmada and now she is grown a young, beautiful woman.

The river minstrel addresses the Narmada by saying, "But Shiva called you Delight/ Named you Narmada/From Shiva's penance you became water. From water you became a woman" (273). She further said, "Then he changed you into a river/To cool the lusts of holy men/And called you Narmada, Soother of Desires" (275); The mature Uma entertains the pilgrims with her water melodies as a river minstrel. The lines "You were present at the creation/By Shiva's command you alone will remain/At the Destruction" (277), draws attention to Uma's agelessness and the river's eternal life. At this point, Professor Shankar states, "I am only a man" (281), expressing his love and want for her. In addition to painting a picture of the bride colored in love and longing, the youthful, thin river minstrel also portrays her as an attractive woman in the line "purple waters slip like a garment/ From your sloping banks" (276). The nameless narrator says, "I watched the water sparkling and disappearing...like the anklets encircling a woman's foot and thought of the Ascetic watching the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from his own penance" (96). The river appears to be a beautiful maiden in the prime of her youth. An analogy with the dancing river with her feet in anklets is like the anklets encircling a woman's foot and thought of the Ascetic watching the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from his own penance" (96). The dancing river with anklets in her foot has an analogy with the river minstrel singing with her instrument on the left shoulder. The Narmada says, "Bring your knowledge of mankind/And follow me/I will lead you to the next Creation" (278), indicates the sexual consummation of Uma and Professor Shankar as Mehta suggest in the beginning of the novel, "I can see the river flowing to meet her bridegroom in all those variations that delighted the Ascetic" (9). It's interesting to observe how Uma, the main character of the Minstrel's tale, embodies all these concepts that are characteristic of the river in a way that transcends them and creates an environment in which she and Shankar take on the earthly forms of the Narmada and the god Shiva, and nature and woman unite in perfect gyno ecological harmony. Fulfilment is also implied by the flickering clay lamps that are transported toward the ocean by the current. As a result, it seems as though nature and women are extensions of one another. Once she's back in the flow of being, becoming, and fulfilment, she starts to take on the characteristics of the vast river herself. Mehta has taken particular care to present the Narmada as a young, beautiful and desirable woman.

### Conclusion:

The idea of ecofeminism is deftly incorporated into the story of "A River sutra," a novel that provides readers with a deep examination of the relationship between gender equality and the environment. In addition to exploring the complex interactions between people and their natural environment, this engrossing literary masterpiece emphasizes the critical role that women play in environmental protection. Ecofeminism is a complex ideology that combines feminist ideals with ecological issues. It asserts that there is an innate connection between women's subordination and environmental exploitation and deterioration. This idea is expertly realized in "A River Sutra," highlighting the special and peaceful relationships that exist between women and the natural world. The book weaves together a variety of tales in which strong female characters protect the environment, the land, and the water. They are the earth's healers, the defenders of the forests, and the watchmen over the rivers. Their close relationship with nature serves as a source of knowledge, fortitude, and resistance to oppression by patriarchy and environmental destruction. The rivers themselves take on symbolic meaning in "A River Sutra," signifying the intertwining of the feminine and the ecological. In addition to being essential sources of life and nourishment, rivers—often idealized as feminine entities—also serve as mirrors for the difficulties that women encounter in society. The narrative shows how the treatment of rivers is similar to the treatment of women, and how the fight for gender equality is similar to the restoration of rivers.

India's ecofeminist concept celebrates both the natural world's wilderness and its civilization. By the conclusion, all of society's victims have merged with the river, and the protagonist is no longer aloof and content with his choice of "vanaprasthi." Mehta exposes the ways in which social ills such as prostitution, commodification, and objectification exploit women in order to profit from their femininity and undermine their ability to sustain themselves. An organizing principle with both temporal and spatial dimensions informs the conception of the novel. Geeta Mehta does a wonderful job of attempting to preserve the Narmada by

promoting the idea that, to the native people, the river is more than just a river—it is a sacred location and a vital source of life.

By depicting the Narmada River as a real, breathing being with agency and consciousness, the story deftly personifies the river. This personification draws similarities between the exploitation of the environment and the enslavement of women, in line with ecofeminist views that see nature as a feminine force. This is how Mehta negotiates the connections between nature, femininity, and social institutions displaying a sophisticated knowledge of the interdependence between environmental and gender issues.

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