

RESEARCH ARTICLE

RETURN TO NATURE: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY THROUGH
GITA MEHTA'S "A RIVER SUTRA"

Dr. Subas Chandra Rout

Biju Pattnaik College of Science and Education, BBSR

Abstract

The current state of the world is inflicted by the dreadful infectious ailments like SARS, MERS, ZIKA, Ebola and COVID-19. Such health hazards seem to be obvious as the contemporary humanity, being materially swallowed up, has made the earth 'a grocery store of wastes' and the carbon economy rewrites the fate of the universe. The problem of the environment springs from the insatiable desire and unconquerable mind of human beings making derangement and deterioration of ecosystem. Their aggressive capitalism and rapacious commercialism sabotages both biotic and a biotic. Corollary to this, vehicular emissions, industry-discharge biocide, 'depletion of green cover', increasing toxicity, nuclear hazards, and population explosion etc. rupture many times to the planet. The upshot of this, the present world is increasingly lost to the holocaust of global warming, appalling climate change, hole in the ozone layer, melting of glaciers, potential danger of landslides, transmittable viruses and shortage of life-supporting clean air. Besides, consumerism constructs a great divide between man and nature that makes the earth inhospitable for life of any kind. Pollution-free ecosystem has been the

greatest challenge in twenty-first century as air-borne transmissions and pollutants spread their network and threaten to the existence of life. Such ecological threat operates from the flaw in man's anthropocentric vision. But Gita Mehta makes a holistic approach to biocentricism. In her unique creation *A River Sutra*, she presents the sensory vision to locate the importance of nature through aestheticism and asceticism. Instead of revealing the compulsion to conquer and exploit over nature for 'greed economy', Mehta narrates the mode of living harmoniously in the soft, tender lap of nature.

Keywords: capitalism, consumerism, biocentrism, anthropocentrism, biomes

Presently, everyone is in search of life-sustaining air as the emergence of pandemic corona virus has been the dreadful threat to the survival of mankind. In spite of these entire terrific crises, it is a matter of irony that man feels proud for his modern culture which is defined by its quantum of pollution and waste. This sense of oppression to nature damages the planet's basic life support systems. In such context,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Timothy W. Luke's opinion assumes significance:

Nature is turning to 'Denature'. Much of the earth is a 'built environment', a 'planned habitat', or 'managed range' as pollution modifies atmospheric chemistry, urbanization restructures weather events, architecture encloses whole biomes in sprawling megacities, and biotechnology reengineers the base codes of existing biomass (Luke,1997:195).

But man has to realize that he lives in nature, 'nature is his body' and he has to maintain a proper relationship with her, otherwise it would lead to a catastrophic destruction. The yearning for a life in harmony and amicability with nature finds expression in pastoral which is a real empathetic engagement with the biophysical world. On the other hand, Mehta does not advocate the humans directly to save the universe from total destruction, rather indirectly gives the message that 'human beings are alive because the earth is alive'. Her detailed and innumerable description of natural world especially flora and fauna connected to the river Narmada proves her inner sense of caring and betterment of a healthy environment. "The sky overhead was blue, without a cloud in sight. A thick undergrowth of ferns had sprung up in the jungle...avoiding the fallen creepers-blue convolvulus, white jasmine, orange-pink

lantana-floating in the water...and I paused to watch a peacock fanning its tail as it performed in mating dance to some peahen, invisible in the distance" (112-113). The inherent value of aesthetic experience qualifies Mehta's biocentricism.

Through the wandering of her central character- the retired bureaucrat- in pervasive peace and tranquil atmosphere in the jungle surrounding within the perimeter and immediate vicinity of the Narmada, Mehta presents the experiences of a nature lover. In the beautification of nature, the narrator expresses, "THE SMELL of vegetation rose from the earth as I followed the mud path through the trees back to the bungalow. The jungle was seething with activity. Parakeets and cuckoos, wood pigeons and mynahs shrieked and cawed as they built their nests before the heat of summer seared the forest" (167). The bureaucrat's encounter with several animals and birds suggests the ecological diversity of the region. The aesthetic experience of the wilderness seems to establish Mehta's caring about nature.

While the contemporary ecologists claim about our active participation in 'greed economy' and turning nature into a 'carbon sink', in the mean time Mehta distances her characters from that culture. There is no capitalistic mindset in them; rather they love nature. The bureaucrat

RESEARCH ARTICLE

denounces luxury and loves for returning to nature. In such context, he says:

On entering the jungle of my morning walk, I loiter under the trees... To dispel my morbid thoughts I admire the red blossoms shaken from the flame trees by clambering monkeys. Or I pause between the branches rooted in the soil around an immense banyan tree like pillars in an ancient temple to watch birds guarding their nests from the squirrels streaking through the flat leaves... On the far bank of the river the morning sun is striking the canals that irrigate the fields, and I can see farmers moving behind their buffaloes through the flourishing crops interlaced by silver ribbons of water (28-29).

Such spectacular account explains Gita Mehta's awareness of pastoral ecology that gives the idea of nature as stable. It endures "the counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of society" (Garrard, 2012:63). Through the bureaucrat, Mehta foregrounds the biometric motto which is far away from anthropocentric vision of life. The quality of aesthetic experience of the locale provides the value of nature. On the other hand, aestheticization of that region with visual images announces the writer's uniqueness to keep nature free from carbon economy. The question of late-capitalist

mindset that overwhelms the entire world has not touched her, nor has she been fumbled by anthropocentric arrogance.

The text unfolds the colorful portrayal of natural exquisiteness of the region which advocates the ideology that living with nature is a state of extreme pleasure. It occurs with the bureaucrat when he rejects the metropolitan life and comes to the region to enjoy the living. Corollary to this, the bureaucrat expresses, "There was indeed a mood of longing in the jungle. Small flowers foamed over the leaves of the mango trees, the wind carried the scent of lemon blossoms and sandalwood to my nostrils" (61). Some may argue that this description as scenic or picturesque but it is the touchstone of exquisite esthetic tastes. In the ensuing situation, "The emphasis of pastoral has generally been on the impact of the environment on the human rather than the other way around" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015:16). It promotes one's love and integrity for nature. If everyone fosters such tendency, nature will not be ruptured and mankind will not suffer what it has been today on account of global pandemic.

Gita Mehta does not separate us from nature through the mega machinic grids for industrial processing nor present 'an economic model based on the idea of limitless growth'. On the contrary, she tries to reshape humans' attitude to return to nature. The writer does not exhibit that

RESEARCH ARTICLE

landscape as ‘toxic riskscape’ for consumerism and capitalism, rather designs the region as a space of purity and serenity impregnated with attitude of reverence and humility. Such is understood when the bureaucrat recounts:

Behind me I could hear the rushing of the waterfalls. I pushed the papers away and walked to the end of my small lawn to look down at the Narmada River. At noon the sun is so strong its harsh light gives the river the appearance of beaten metal, but at this hour the morning light catches every nuance of the water’s movement. Below me the wind was tossing the rippling waves up so that they sparkled in the light, before disappearing into the shadows below. I watched the water sparkling and disappearing, sparkling and disappearing (62-63)...

The text needs to be examined in the present context of climate change and global warming when the industrial emission damages the planet’s basic life- support systems. Instead of demonstrating the background of mechanistic modernism and materialistic culture, Mehta portrays the landscape of flora and fauna. In search of peace, a reader can find out, “Of gardens more beautiful than those of gods themselves with ponds of crystalline water alive with leaping fish, silver among the

water lilies and trees bending under the weight of flowering vines. A world devoted to pleasure and learning, its serenity guarded by hooded serpents with great gems flashing from their hoods”(77-78). It seems that the artist tries to reestablish man’s relation with nature. Such description articulates eco-friendly tendency of the writer. “Yet it also, just as emphatically, envisions this ideal as a beautiful and just relation between human beings and the natural world” (Borlik, 2012: 177).

The healing power of nature is overtly depicted to solace the narrator’s desolate mentality. The idea of glorification and beautification of nature shapes the platform to make it safe from the toxic waste dump. Aesthetically such sentiment nourishes to grief-stricken mind. In case of the bureaucrat, he realizes this and says,” I watched the water slowly redden, catching reflections from the rose colors of dawn, and imagined the river as a woman painting her palms and the soles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover”(90). The appearance of the river turns into coloured beauties as the morning sun shines on her breast. Moreover, the artist becomes elated and thrilled at the tonalities of the Narmada, “Dawn lightened the sky and I was able to see the Narmada leaping headlong through the distant marble rocks, the spraying waterfalls refracting the first rays of sun into arcs of colour as if the river were a woman adorning herself with jewels”

RESEARCH ARTICLE

(ibid). In such context, Timothy Clark views, “Aesthetic atmospheres are inseparable from the fact that the human body, as a part of nature, participates in the showing and letting-be-felt of things in their multiplicity and varied tonalities” (Clark, 2014:82).

Adoption of nature-description provides a potential boost to ecological sense. The artist contemplates the natural scenes and sights silently, “I sat in the darkness repeating the invocation until the first rays of daylight pierced the monsoon mists shrouding the fields across the river. A strong wind was pushing banks of clouds toward our hills. I watched them changing shapes and colours in the sunlight as they raced toward the eastern horizon like herds of animals or the battlements of medieval cities, some yellow, some the color of smoke, some white with the pink blush of conch shells” (112). Such soft, tender delicacies aim at reducing mental stress and lead to live in peace and harmony with nature.

The text provides information of the river, the geographical settings of the regions, their climatic condition and their biodiversity. The writer beautifully narrates the environmental elements to unfold stories before the readers. To admit it explicitly, such stories in *A River Sutra*, string together the views of Jainism, Hinduism and Islam to remember the sacred nature of the Narmada.

It begins with the introduction of an aged bureaucrat who voluntarily renounces the world of comfort and luxury. Instead of living in ‘a built environment’ and being ‘a planned habitat’, he comes to live in natural environment in the lap of the Narmada.

The first story is about an affluent Jain businessman Ashok who rejects the enormity of wealth at the age of twenty six and leads to a monk’s life. Renunciation is the negation of capitalistic mindset. It is important to note that the materialistic attitude literary consumes the earth. The second story is about Master Mohan, the music teacher who takes care of Imrat, a boy gifted with a wonderful voice. He does not prefer to run after money and sacrifices his own life for Imrat. Money makes one selfish and self-centered attitude is not good for environment. The third story tells the tale of Nitin Bose who chooses to live in the hills of Kamarupa and later becomes enchanted by a woman. “What this means is that nature is imaged as a woman whose basic tasks include reproduction and nurture” (Nayar, 2015:250). Next is the heartrending story of a courtesan and her daughter who lived in a haveli. Exploitation in life is a reference to nature. Then, the reader reads the story of a young musician who is on a pilgrimage to the Narmada to mediate and cure herself from the attachment with her past. Involvement in worldly life full of desires is painful and the expansion of such desires starts consuming the earth for fulfillment. In

RESEARCH ARTICLE

this anthropocentric worldview, humans commit ecocide. The last one is the tale of Naga Baba, an ascetic. Tariq Mia, the bureaucrat's friend narrates everything about Naga Baba who later returns as Professor Shankar to study upon 'body-mind' battle. Thus, the cumulative effect of the narrative tries to bestow the shimmering beauty of nature to afford a safe haven.

Mehta sets the background of the text in a quiet and serene locale in the Vindhya Range which is not yet packed down by the destructive foot of the modern man. Apparently there seems no life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in the region. Besides, the characters created by her are detached from human materialism. There is the rare mention of the hustle and bustle of life in mega cities. Instead of fossil fuel-industrialism and competitive commerce, the text delves into pastoral integrity, "Under the great trees glistening with dew - teak, peepul, silk cotton, mango, banyan -the mud path is still deserted, crossed only by bounding monkeys, leaping black buck, meandering wild boar as if the animals are glorying in their brief possession of the jungle" (3-4). As a biocentrist, Mehta connects her vision with animals and plants to form a silent universe free from rustle and bustle of commercialism.

There is naturalness and transcendence in this pastoral landscape,

thereby drawing the ascetics to her shores for different kinds of fulfillment in their lives as they believe in the healing and cleansing powers of the Narmada. Moreover, the minstrel sings, "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. / Bards and ascetics sing your wonders,/ Gamblers, cheats, and dancers praise you,/We all find refuge in your embrace/ O holy Narmada" (181). Such descriptions reveal Mehta's notion of nature as a sacred space "what environmental theorists call the "sanctuary" or the "cathedral" concept, according to which sacred space is more distinctly marked off from the profane" (Buell, 1995: 213).

It seems significant to note that stern challenges to nature arise due to population boom and widespread deforestation. Aggressive capitalism and toxic waste put great risk to environment. The writer through the Courtesan reacts, "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 shantytowns of labor colonies"(108). Such anthropogenic puts a challenge to humanity as the humans change the basic physical processes of the earth. Similarly, the city life in Calcutta, the artist feels restless as it is

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“crumbled under the weight of neglect, exploitation, poisonous humidity, traffic jams, power failures and the roads plowed up...the devastations of nature that daily drew the desperate to a great metropolis itself desperately surviving as if a war had just ended” (71). The recognition of the realities of these plights is due to the estrangement from nature. Such distorting biocide is antagonism of sustainable living.

Mehta resists humans' aspirations to conquer and subdue the earth. For her, man is not above and apart from the natural world. Her philosophy is “based on a profound respect for nature and the interdependence of all life” (100). Therefore, the narrator admits, “The beauty of the Narmada makes it a perfect retreat for anyone like me wishing to withdraw from the world” (146). Through this, everyone has to understand that nature is our constant friend. As humanity is experiencing an unprecedented moment now, it is articulated to maintain a balanced and harmonious relationship with environment. We can return and regenerate the earth. In this presumption, Paula Gunn Allen states, “An Indian, at the deepest level of being, assumes that the earth is alive in the same sense that human beings are alive” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996:257). It is Indian awareness that becomes reflected in Mehta's creative output with profound insight and powerful vision. The implication of such

insight is necessary in the present challenging times.

References:

Mehta, Gita. *A River Sutra*, the Penguin Group, PENGUIN BOOKS, Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 7th Floor, Infinity Tower C, DLF Cyber City, Gurgaon 122002, Haryana, India, 2018. Print.

Borlik, Todd A. *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. 2015. Indian Reprint.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, London: Princeton University Press. 1995. Print..

Clark, Timothy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge CB28BS, United Kingdom. 2014. Print.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon. 2012. Print.

Glatfelter, Cheryl & Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary*

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ecology, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.

Guha, Ramachandra. *Environmentalism: A Global History*, A Penguin Random House India Pvt.Ltd.New. 2014. Print.

Huggan,Graham&HelenTiffin.*Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Routledge,2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon Oxon.2010.Print.

Luke, Timothy W. *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and*

Culture Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.Print.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*, Published by Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd, Licensees of Pearson Education in South Asia. 2015. Print.

Wrestling, Louise. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, Cambridge University Press, 32 Avenues of the Americas, New York, NY10013 -2473, USA.2014.Print.