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RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Eco-Spiritual Ecofeminist Interrogation of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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ABSTRACT

Sacred geography, spiritual ecofeminism, and postcolonial cultural ecology serve as central themes in Gita Mehta's popular novel, *A River Sutra*. This article investigates how the sacred Narmada River is treated not only as a geographical epicentre but also as a narrative catalyst by the author, incorporating earth-based spiritualities that can critique both androcentric and anthropocentric paradigms. By adopting a close-reading interpretative methodology, the study identifies six overlapping sub-narratives populated by ascetics, musicians, bureaucrats, and marginalised women. It shows how the river and the landscape in context become a site for spiritual synthesis, emotional healing, and cross-cultural harmony. Scaffolded by the theoretical frameworks of spiritual ecofeminism (Starhawk, Rosemarie Tong, M. Geiger) and cultural ecofeminism (Carolyn Merchant, Judith Plant, Marti Kheel), the study highlights how systemic exploitation and the spiritual resilience of women and nature coexist. Set in this intersectional space, the study demonstrates an indigenized, eco-cosmological framework grounded in environmental ethics that can lead the Anthropocene towards socio-ecological restoration and self-realisation.

Keywords: Spiritual Ecofeminism, Cultural Ecofeminism, Sacred Geography, Eco-Spirituality, Feminine Principle

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FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Spiritual Ecofeminists drew strength from a variety of earth-based spiritualities; these thinkers tended to gravitate toward ancient goddess worship of nature, and they also encourage the interconnection of body, mind and nature. They also advocate that both women and nature are sacred, which must be worshipped and protected. In her novel *A River Sutra,* Mehta has woven the lives of different people, regardless of their differences, and connected them with nature through earth-based spiritualities, which is seen as the main claim of Spiritual Ecofeminism. Major natural calamities worldwide have compelled us to rethink our approach to environmental concerns. Technology and science have distanced humans from nature, thus neglecting the root causes of environmental destruction. Further, the "interconnection with nature and the expanded view of self, which are the features of earth-based spirituality, which helps oneself to get closer to nature and our human capacities of loyalty, love, rage, humour, lust, intuition, intellect and compassion are as much a part of nature as the lizards and the redwood forests" (Starhawk 2011). The more we understand that we are part of nature, the more we will understand our oneness with all that exists: the components of nature, human beings, the natural cycle and processes, animals and plants. Gita Mehta has woven this idea of harmonising oneself with nature throughout the novel.

Earth-Based Spiritualities and Ecological Re-Enchantment

The river Narmada and the surrounding forest have influenced the lives of people on its banks and those far from the river. The characters in the novel come to the banks of the river Narmada to seek solutions to their problems. Mehta, in the novel *A River Sutra,* not only explores mythological and spiritual significance but also highlights concern for nature, where everyone should come together to protect Mother Earth. In her book *Feminist Thought, Tong* implies that "Spiritual ecofeminism is not linked to one specific religion, but is centred around values of caring, compassion, and non-violence" (Tong 2013). Similarly, Mehta has not dealt with any particular religion; rather, she weaves diversity into a whole and brings the characters closer to nature.

The Narmada as Sacred Geography and Narrative Nexus

Mehta has presented various myths about one of India's holiest rivers, the Narmada, along with several instances of spiritual beliefs and rituals associated with it, which seem to bind and attract people of different cultures into one and harmonise themselves with nature. M Geiger points out that "Spiritual ecofeminists are not

concerned with any particular religion; rather, they call for everyone to celebrate and bond ourselves with nature" (M Geiger 2002). Similarly, in the novel, Mehta has touched the lives of people of different faiths and beliefs, who come from various ethnic groups and have their own religious lifestyles. She has united them into one, in which they all share the same idea and belief about nature. This diversity is achieved by presenting seemingly unconnected stories, such as those about Hindu and Jain ascetics; courtesans and minstrels; diamond merchants and tea executives; Muslim clerics and music teachers; and tribal folk tales.

Methodology

The theoretical grounding of this study is situated at the intersection of Spiritual Ecofeminism and Cultural Ecofeminism, drawing on environmental philosophy, postcolonial hydro-criticism, and indigenous eco-cosmology. Spiritual Ecofeminism emphasises spirituality as a key factor for personal and social change. It stresses the necessity of spirituality for historical, ethical, epistemological, methodological, conceptual and theoretical reasons. In connection with this idea, Mehta, in her novel, has focused on the depth of spirituality that people in India, irrespective of their religion or faith, have always felt. It depicts the life and culture on the banks of India's holiest river, the Narmada. The novel ponders on the Indians' belief in the myth that a single sight of this holy river would free humanity from the burden of the cycle of life and death. There is a strong belief that the river cures all kinds of mental illness and that every sin is purified by bathing in the river. It is this belief and the sense of spirituality associated with this holy river that have led people of different faiths to come to the same spot for worship. Griger (2002) explains that this unification shows the rejection of anthropocentric or androcentric concepts of the universe and suggests the eco-centric image of the world as a circle- the symbol of eternal return and a holistic concept of unity and love as a strength which will solve the ecological crisis.

Matilal opines that "spirituality can go as far as ensuring internationalism– a concept that could bring not only different castes, different nations but the whole world together" (Matilal 2017). Life must be a never-ceasing flow of spirit. If we live a life of love and harmony, internationalism is not merely something to be attained but is within our grasp. The novel *A River Sutra* carries this idea of spirituality throughout, stressing the importance of coming together and sympathising with nature. She has used myths and rituals to reinforce the concept of spirituality, through which the characters in the novel harmonise with nature and view it as sacred and caring.

Theoretical Focus	**Key Theorists / Influences**	**Core Conceptual Mechanics**	**Application in A River Sutra**
Eco-Spiritual Synthesis & Non-Dualism	Starhawk (2003, 2011), Rosemarie Tong (2013), M. Geiger (2002)	• Rejection of anthropocentrism and androcentrism • Sacralization of nature through earth-based spiritualities • Universal ethics centered on care, compassion, and non-violence beyond rigid religious boundaries	• The sacred Narmada River functions as an eco-centric circle and converging point • Unifies diverse religious, ethnic, and social groups (Hindus, Muslims, Jains, tribal communities) into cross-cultural harmony
Interconnected Triad (Body–Mind–Nature)	Meenakshi Mukherjee (1993), Bimal Krishna Matilal (2000, 2017)	• Dissolution of Cartesian dualism separating the self from the environment • Experiential self-realization via detachment from material desires (*Vanaprastha*) • Psychological and bodily restoration through eco-centric alignment	• The narrator, Jain monk, and traumatized musician withdraw to the riverbanks to transcend ego-bound desires • Immersion in riverine rhythms restores mental and physical equilibrium
Parallelism & Shared	Carolyn Merchant	• Dualistic oppression reducing women and	• Parallels between environmental

Exploitation (Women & Nature)	(1980), Marti Kheel (2007), Judith Plant (1980), Vandana Shiva (1988)	nature to passive "Other" or resources for extraction • Re-enchantment of nature using goddess archetypes and feminine principles • Interconnection of biological/spiritual growth, care, and restoration	degradation (industrialization of Shahbagh) and patriarchal subjugation of women (Courtesan, Musician's daughter) • Rebirth and liberation of characters (Uma) through merging with the living, kinetic feminine river

Mehta has employed the act of pilgrimage in many of her characters, as it is one of the key means of recuperation and of freeing oneself from the tensions of the materialistic world, and through this one becomes closer to nature. Riverbanks, forests, and mountainous areas are considered important pilgrimage places. Through this spiritual journey, the characters draw closer to nature, irrespective of their social, cultural and economic backgrounds. The Jains are no exception and are among the pilgrims who visit the Narmada River. The narrator shares his experience of meeting two naked Jain monks who had even given up speaking as a part of their asceticism. One day, on his way to meet Tariq Mia, the narrator shares his experience with the Jain monk who had renounced the world at a very young age. The young monk narrates his past to the bureaucrat, describing how he had spent a luxurious life in the West, with wealth and girls around him. However, this life of pleasure had stopped providing him the satisfaction he sought because one desire was pursuing the other without letting him settle and be satisfied even for a fraction of a second. This is evident when the Jain monk narrates that my life of unremitting pleasure gradually ceased to satisfy me, leaving me exhausted from the last indulgence while anticipating the next. At the age of twenty-six, I had already grown fatigued by the world, knowing that even in the moment of gratification, the seed of a new desire was being sown. (29)

Then, gradually, he comes out of the luxurious life and starts leading the life of an obedient son and householder, following a set daily routine. He was not fulfilled in this life, where he did not find any peace, and thus ended his materialistic life. He then

took a spiritual path to the river Narmada by becoming a monk, which gave him the tranquillity and satisfaction he had always longed for. Thus, he ends his materialistic life and chooses the spiritual path, which leads him to the river Narmada; this incident proves the Narmada to be a site for the unification of diverse religious people, and this unification culminates in cultural and religious harmony among them. In the novel, the river Narmada is considered one of the significant spiritual sites, and every character from different religions and social backgrounds is connected to it at some point in their lives. The protagonist, the unnamed narrator, often watches the temple of Mahadev from a distance, which is situated on the banks of the river Narmada. The narrator notices people from different walks of life have come with all devotion to worship the river. The narrator says,

At sunset, hundreds of pilgrims are seen descending the stone steps leading from Mahadev's temples to the river's edge. They float the clay lamps in the water as a sign of devotion: "With twilight, the water at Mahadev starts flickering with tiny flames as if catching fire from the hundreds of clay lamps being floated downstream for the evening devotions". There are "crowds" of pilgrims at Amarkantak's temples, "swarming" for the morning worship. (4-5) This shows that the riverbank is always full of people worshipping and visiting it all day long until late evening. People not only from the Hindu religion but also from other religions are seen worshipping the river. This shows how relating nature to spiritual significance draws people from all over the world, and that this spirituality prompts human beings to renew their ideas of nature. The guards of the Narmada rest house are from the Vano Tribal race, who also reside here, enjoying their lives with nature, where they worship nature as a goddess and believe that nature possesses the power to heal their physical as well as mental problems. Chagval says, "The reputation for fierceness as descendants of the tribal races that held the Aryan invasion of India at bay for centuries, and with a strong belief in the Narmada River that it annuls the effects of snakebite" (6). They believe that even the venom of the poisonous snake is ineffective before the power of this river. They confer on the river the gift of curing madness and liberating those who are possessed. This belief has led them to stay near and worship this river, which is regarded as the incarnation of the deity. Even pilgrims who have no relation to any tribe and have never met one of those are aware that the Narmada River annuls the effect of snakebite, highlighting the river's widespread spirituality, as clearly stated in the invocation to the river Narmada.

Spiritual Ecofeminism

The belief that the Narmada River cures a person if he is possessed has brought the tea executive Mr Nitin Bose to the Narmada. Chagval, in his conversation with the narrator, says that "They say there is a shrine to a goddess in these jungles. A tribal goddess, who cures the madness of those who are possessed" (105). He had answered that his name was Rima Bose, which surprised the police because "he is most certainly a man" and that he is possessed (101-102). This was the reason for Nitin's arrival at the Narmada River. He is in danger of losing his mind forever if he is not cured of this madness, and his life itself has become a nightmare for him. He has no other means than to come to Narmada to save his life. The tribal Vano people, who were of a different caste from Nitin Bose, were the ones who helped him come out of his madness by instructing him on the rituals to be performed on the banks of the river Narmada. The narrator learns that Nitin Bose had headed to the shrine with the Vano people; he asks with alarm, "How has Bose gone with them? He is not a tribal and Mr Chagla, who is the overall helper of the narrator, answers that "the power of the goddess has touched him, so he is not an outsider anymore" (141). This instance in the novel also clearly states how different people with different cultural backgrounds are united, or how the power of myth has created cultural harmony among the peoples of diverse cultures, and that the place of their unification or cultural harmony is none other than the spiritual, sacred, holy Narmada river. "The tribal are supposed to beg for Mr Bose; the tribal will beg the goddess to forgive Mr Bose" (141). They are no different from before; neither do they care about their culture or social status. They are the same in this very spiritual task, and the reason is the myth regarding the spirituality of this holy river, the Narmada. The narrator hears them chanting the invocation to the Narmada along with Nitin Bose.

There are several instances in the novel that demonstrate that myth and spiritual belief play a vital role in leading people towards cultural harmony and thereby bonding them with nature. Here, the spot for cultural harmony is the banks of the river Narmada, where people from all walks of life and diverse cultural and religious backgrounds come to worship Narmada to achieve different goals. The unnamed narrator has been living on the banks of the Narmada for several years, and he feels happy with his task as the caretaker of the Narmada guest house. He had spent his youth as a bureaucrat, a deputy secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture; he had always realised that "desire to withdraw from the world grew more urgent as I aged, but he also knew that he was not at all equipped to wander into the jungle and become a forest hermit, surviving on fruit and roots" (1). So, he had finally, after the death of his

wife and since he had no children, applied for and got the job as the manager of the Narmada rest house "situated halfway up the hill of the Vindhya Range and is living a peaceful life for several years" (3). Although the government still pays him, he no longer considers himself a bureaucrat because he has forsaken the material world and retired to the forest.

The banks of the river Narmada and the forest land became his retreat after he had no responsibilities left. He was alone and felt an urgency to retire from worldly affairs, and since he had spent some years on this riverbank, the river has now become the place of his reflections. He spends his time walking along the banks of the river, talking to his friend, the old Muslim cleric, whom he considers the wisest of his friends, and taking care of the rest house and the people who stay in the Guest house. Nature has become a second home for him, where he learns and understands the strands of life through encounters with people, and these experiences with people and nature enlighten him.

The musician's story discloses the tragic story of the young boy Imrat whom the Sahib murdered. Master Mohan, to fulfil Imrat's desire to sing at Amir Rumi's tomb, comes to the tomb and hands over Imrat's record to Tariq Mia. He also stayed there with Tariq Mia for several months, "Oh, he lived here with me for several months" (91) and he finds spiritual satisfaction on the banks of river Narmada which he had never felt with his family. Thus, the river provides him peace of mind and soothes the deep wounds caused by the loss of his beloved student Imrat.

The unnamed girl-musician, the daughter of a musical genius, also comes to the river Narmada to relieve herself of the memory of past events in which she was rejected by a boy who had promised to marry her. This came as a great shock to the girl, and on her father's advice, she comes to the bank of the Narmada to meditate to free herself from the unpleasant memories of the past events and to get back to normal life. She says that her father wants her to "meditate on the waters of Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance, until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed" (225). Through this journey, she regains her peace of mind.

The Minstrel story is shown as another instance in which a girl child rescued from a brothel by Naga Baba forms a new bond with the river. The Naga Baba, believing in the Narmada's power to purify any sin of a lifetime and having strong faith in baptism, brings her to the Narmada to baptise her, thus relieving the child of all the unpleasant experiences she might have undergone in the brothel. He performs the ritual of baptism by dipping her into the holy waters of Narmada, giving her a new

name 'Uma' an identity, and letting her enter a pious and respected life away from the life of brothel. She has now a physical mother 'Narmada' worshipped as one of the holiest and who "claims all girls as hers" (254). Thus, she becomes a minstrel, gains a new life and identity through her spiritual connection with nature. The above incidents show how people facing different problems seek the lap of nature. They also find solutions, relief and peace when they unite themselves with the river Narmada.

The last chapter is fully devoted to the minstrel's song in praise of the Narmada and her glory, noting that the river Narmada, like many other Indian rivers, has been a medium for salvation. In this chapter, Mehta has shown how nature should be worshipped and considered sacred. Indian rivers have sustained India's ideologies and philosophy. They are the immediate solution to a vast number of unexplained phenomena and have always been a part of epics and numerous myths that abound in India. Faith rules the people of India; it is faith in nature that has moved them for centuries. All the major rivers are embodiments of some God or goddess. They are a link between man's faith and religion. Numerous people are written in their grandeur, and the uniqueness of India is sustained with chants and poems of such rivers. The chants of the Narmada, for example, exemplify and explain how nature serves everyone.

You cleanse the earth of its impurities
The devout call you Surasa, the holy soul.
But Shiva called you Delight
And laughing
Named you Narmada. (273)

Demeyere states that "there is an urgent need to change our patterns of behaviour to face the environmental problems of today's world. The solution to such problems is not easy. However, it is possible by understanding nature through spiritual means which can help cope with the problem" (Demeyere 2010). Similarly, it is seen that most of the characters' problems are solved through their bonding with the river. Matilal writes that "a higher harmony of life is necessary; a spiritual synthesis alone can avoid the conflict. It can ensure people in the world" (Matilal 2000). The crux of what he says is about the glorious achievement of a spiritual synthesis.

In the same way, Desai, in her novel, has emphasised the force of spirituality that binds people in one knot and binds them to nature. No history has proof that any philosophy, belief, or thought could bring such diverse people together, and it is only the spiritual synthesis that could do such a miracle. In this way, the bank of the holiest

river Narmada becomes the conversing point of all the characters in the novel possessing diversities. It has healed their lives and has helped them to overcome their problems. The several myths and spiritual beliefs associated with the holiness of the river Narmada have led all the characters in this novel to bond with nature. In the company of nature, they solve their problems and lead themselves toward an ideal life.

The Interconnected Triad: Body, Mind, and Nature

The novel *A River Sutra* contains six stories which are interconnected with each other. The stories are 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. Apart from the notions of cultural harmony and spirituality, Mehta has also reflected on the interconnection of mind, body, and nature, which is an important concept of Spiritual Ecofeminism. Starhawk, a prominent spiritual ecofeminist, points out that "The interconnection of mind, body and nature will enlighten man on the deeper insights of life" (Starhawk 2003). The novel also represents this interconnection of body, mind and nature through the characters of the stories. It is through this interconnection they attain the level of self-realization. This interconnection also helps them to understand life and existence.

***Vanaprastha* and Detachment**

The protagonist of the novel is a nameless narrator, who is a retired bureaucrat. He spends his life in Bombay, and then he applies for the post of Manager at the Narmada Guest House, which is situated on the banks of the Narmada River. The narrator says, "Bureaucrats belong too much to the world, and I have fulfilled my worldly obligations. I am now a Vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to the forest to reflect" (1). The narrator chooses the post of manager because it is away from the materialistic life of the city. Having fulfilled his worldly obligations, he decides to lead the life of a Vanaprasthi. The narrator, during his stay near the banks of the river, learns more about the beliefs and faiths surrounding the river Narmada. He also encounters people from different walks of life, such as Jain monks, musicians, and river minstrels, through whom he learns about life, death, love, and desire, and day by day both his mind and body become closer to nature.

The Jain monk is another important character in the novel who reflects the interconnection of mind, body and nature. The monk narrates his story of renunciation, in which he leaves behind his worldly life confined to materialism, which has not given the real satisfaction and peace he has longed for throughout his life.

This renunciation of worldly affairs enables the monk to interconnect his body, self, and nature, through which he understands the real meaning of life and existence. Discussing the concept of renunciation, Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that "the idea of getting divine bliss through detachments and of achieving the highest goal of self-realisation is so fundamental to Indian thinking that it has cut across the boundaries of language and regional culture and has become a motif that can be traced in Indo- Anglian novels profitably" (Meenakshi Mukherjee 1993). Thus, the monk attains this interconnection when he detaches himself from the material confinements.

In the musician's story, the story of a young girl is disclosed where she learns music from her father. Her father instructs her in such a way that he connects music and its components with nature, and he also teaches her that to attain the soul of music, one should keep their mind and body connected with nature, which thereby helps one understand music at its core. In this way, the girl understands music by connecting her mind, body, and nature as she learns the ragas. One day the girl apparently loses her control over her body and mind when she was rejected by the boy who promised to marry her. Thus, she comes to the banks of the river Narmada to meditate and once again gains control physically and mentally. This connection of her mind and body once again with nature helps her to overcome the problems of the past. She once again becomes a 'ragini of every raga.' Through this detachment from the physical world, she is finally able to connect her mind, body, and nature, through which she also understands that internal beauty is the purest form of beauty, apart from external appearances. So, my father has brought me here. He says that I must meditate on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance, until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed and can become the ragini of raga. (229)

The minstrel's story is yet another interesting tale that also represents the interconnection of mind, body, and nature through which one attains a new understanding of life. Naga Baba saves a girl child from the clutches of the brothel and takes her with him. He teaches her to read and write and instructs her the lessons and songs of nature and river. Naga Baba finally makes her the daughter of the Narmada and names her Uma. "Uma- peace in the night. You will begin a new life there. I will teach you to read and write. And I will give you a new name… Uma" (220). Thus, making her mind, body and nature interconnected, Uma gains a new identity, meaning and destiny in life.

The novel has also shown that the characters can easily interconnect their mind and body with nature when they are closer to nature. Similarly, most of the characters seem to draw closer to the river Narmada to stabilise their minds and bodies and feel more connected. Thus, the novel *A River Sutra* shows that the interconnections among body, mind, and nature help man come out of the harsh realities of life and overcome their struggles, thereby helping them understand life and attain self-realisation.

The Riverine Archetype: Kinetic Femininity, Nurturance, and Resilience

The unnamed narrator in the novel narrates on seeing the river: "the stream took on the form of a woman, beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire" (8). Through this description of the river Narmada, the narrator equates women with nature and portrays them as sharing qualities such as beauty, desire, chastity, and love.

In her novel, Mehta has tried to equate women with the river by highlighting the similarities between women and the river Narmada. In the minstrel story, Naga Baba rescues a girl from a brothel and finally makes her pure by making her the daughter of the river Narmada. She is also named Uma, who becomes a river minstrel. Uma is a character in the novel who represents beauty, holiness and chastity. Pandey rightly says, "The river in India directly imprints one's mind with the image of goddess; sacred, kinetic, dynamic, fertile and life sustaining" (Pandey 2019). In the same way, Uma's characteristic is paralleled by the river Narmada, which is also considered holy, pure, and sacred.

Mehta has taken particular care to present the Narmada as a young, beautiful, and desirable woman, and she is often addressed as "she", possessing the qualities of a woman. The river is presented as an organic being full of human emotions, "the river's heartbeat pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at last to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank at Amarkantak's" (5). Pandey views Narmada as a woman and states "The Narmada witnesses the lives of humans through the reflections of love and its power, desire, and its cost. She is both the setting and the character in the novel" (Pandey 2019). The feminine principle of the Narmada can be drawn by equating her journey to the character of Uma. The river minstrel says to the Narmada, "But Shiva called you Delight/ Named you Narmada/From Shiva's penance you became water/ From water you became a woman" (273). She further chants, "Then he changed you into a river/To cool the lusts

of holy men/And called you Narmada, Soother of Desires" (275). In the same way, the grown Uma is a river minstrel who satisfies the pilgrims with her river music. The lines "You were present at the creation/By Shiva's command you alone will remain/At the Destruction" (277) underscore Uma's agelessness and the river's immortality.

Gita Mehta tries to parallel the birth of the River Narmada and the rebirth of Uma. Uma is also like the river born - born from the ascetic's penance and then from his love. It creates an atmosphere in which Uma and Professor Shankar become the earthly manifestations 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, and finally moves toward her bridegroom, Professor Shankar. Here nature and woman merge in perfect harmony.

Mehta, drawing out the similarities between women and nature, also deals with the oppression they share. Mehta's musician's story deals with the exploitation of women under the patriarchal society. In the story, the girl is oppressed and treated as inferior due to her physical appearance. Her relatives and friends often look down on her; she is also insulted and cheated by the man who promises to marry her. Robin states that, "God created the universe without any discrimination, but man has structured the society with the establishment of binary oppositions to assert his superior role in society" (Robin 2019). In this way, the girl is oppressed by the patriarchal society, where she faces discrimination and is devoid of respect, love and attention. Marti Kheel perceptively suggests that "nature, which has been imagined as female, has been depicted as the "other", the raw material out of which culture and masculine self-identity are formed" (Marti Kheel 2007). The courtesan story also serves as a perfect example of the injustice done to nature and women. The story shows the exploitation of women, where women were made to do menial jobs under men. They are used as objects for sexual gratification and pleasure. Correspondingly, the beautiful gardens in Shahbagh have been turned into factories that pollute the place. The courtesan laments over the annihilation of women's condition and pollution of Shahbagh; she bewails, "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. (167) Mehta, through the Courtesan's story and the Musician's story, represents the women characters who are shown as full of emotions of love. However, at last they are oppressed by the patriarchal society where they are devoid of equality and are considered inferior. In

the same way, the novel also shows instances in which modernity degrades the beauty of nature, which is filled with life and emotions.

Carolyn Merchant, in her book *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and Scientific Revolution,* states that "A vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and goddess is a source of inspiration and empowerment" (Carolyn Merchant 1980). In this way, the novel seeks to parallel and equate both women and nature through their shared qualities of love, holiness, lust, desire, beauty, and oppression. Dr Clarissa Pinkola, in her book *Women Who Run with Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype, draws* parallels between women and nature and associates nature and women with spirituality, purity, simplicity, beauty, and grace.

As a cultural ecofeminist who relates women to nature, as both share qualities such as nurturing, protection, and love, Mehta, in her novel, portrays the Narmada River as a feminine nurturer and protector, like a mother who embraces her child. The river here stands as a mother who welcomes her children, embodying maternal qualities. The novel also aspires to equate women with nature and shows how women reach out to nature during disasters. The river, as the novel's central setting, is constantly compared to a woman's qualities.

The relationship between women and nature has prevailed for ages, as evidenced by prehistoric times. Judith Plant, in her essay entitled *Woman and Nature*, says: Before the world was mechanised and industrialised, the metaphor that explained self, society and the cosmos was the image of the organism. This is not surprising since most people related to the earth in their daily lives, being peasants and living a subsistence existence. The earth was seen as female. The earth was seen to be alive, sensitive; it was considered unethical to do violence towards her. (Judith Plant 1980)

Gita Mehta, in her novel, tries to bring back the idea that nature was seen as female, sacred, and to be worshipped. She also brings the idea that women have intimate connections with nature. This relationship is expressed in the last three stories: the courtesan's, the musician's, and the minstrels'. Anita Tangellamudi states that "Mehta's attempts to make her women characters either co-exist with nature with their feminine qualities or find shelter in nature, i.e., in River Narmada" (Anita Tangellamudi 2015). This shows that women and nature share a special bond.

The courtesan story, which is partly narrated by the daughter and partly by her mother, is a perfect example that shows how women share a special bond with nature, finding both solace and escape from the patriarchal society that is slowly growing in

indignity. It is the same nature that embraced her and provided shelter when she was secretly married, and it is the same nature that provided her with a way to escape at the time of crisis. The courtesan is left choiceless without her husband. Moreover, finally, she drowns herself in the river. The narrator says, "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" (124). The Narmada becomes the destination for the Courtesan and her daughter after their long separation, providing solace and tranquillity during their time of crisis. In nature, the Courtesan and her daughter regain their strength and peace. Suji Brindha rightly observes that "the daughter's final act of merging herself in nature though is replete with spiritual connotations, is also a process of reconciling her trust in the nature and her ability to plan and assert control over her life" (Suji Brindha 2008). It also brings to the fore her apparent embeddedness in nature. This story depicts how the courtesan's daughter's body merges with the river Narmada, thereby realising the river's nature.

The Musician's story is also shown as a beautiful example that portrays the interconnectedness between women and nature and how nature soothes and heals women's pain. In this story, music, seen as part of nature, heals the girl and unites her with it. Her father teaches her the seven notes of the scale – sa, re, ga, ma, pa, tha, ni - which imitate the voices of animals and birds. She masters and enjoys music by understanding it more deeply, relating it to nature. She also learns the true meaning behind beauty by understanding music and nature deeply. She learns that ragas are in harmony with nature. She imagines herself as a riverbed, with the grace notes of music as water, thereby becoming one with nature.

Men are fools… they think only humans respond to beauty. However, a feeding deer will drop its food to listen to music, and a king cobra will sway its hood in pleasure…Do you hear that peacock's cry? It is the first note of the scale. *Sa*…Can you hear that calf calling its mother? It is the note *re*… If you sing *ga* three times, very quickly, it is the bleating of a goat…*Ma*, the cry of the heron…*Pa*, the song of the nightingale… *Dha*-the neighing of a horse…*ni*-when the elephant trumpets. "I could hear him imitating the animals… until the nature of the notes became second nature to me. (205) One day she gets rejected by a young student of her father due to her physical appearance, after which she stops singing, and all her spirit is dead. She tells the chief protagonist that she has come to the Narmada in the hope of being restored to her inspiration. Here again, the River Narmada is the final refuge to restore the dead spirit.

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 the countryside, bathes in the ashes of the cremated, and begs for sustenance. As this ascetic must 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 gives 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 songs about the river. Later, she becomes the minstrel of the Narmada and is accepted and respected at festivals on its banks as a singer–saint.

The river minstrel's chanting offers an eco-spirituality of the Narmada, reminding us of the roots of ancient Indian traditions that have a strong connection to nature. Kate Mehuron, in her book *Free Spirits: Feminist Philosophies on Culture,* claims that "Often steaming from an anti-science, anti-technology standpoint, cultural ecofeminism celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centred on goddess worship, the moon, rivers and animals" (Kate Mehuron 1995). In the same way, Uma sings about the grace of the Narmada and her role in cleaning the pollution caused on the river, and how these properties oblige the sages to call her with different names; she pays tribute to the Narmada as,

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)

In the courtesan's story, the River Narmada is viewed 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 unites with the ocean, the character Uma unites with nature and gains an identity in the minstrel story. Thus, harmony between women and nature is very conspicuous in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*. The Narmada is also said to be the mother of all girls. As such Uma, the river minstrel, who appears at the end of the novel, has been 'baptized' by the Naga Baba in the waters of the

Narmada. She is given a new name and an identity by being dipped in the river, thus purifying her from the previous life in which she must live in a brothel, and providing an eternal motherhood, 'The Narmada'. Preti rightly observes that "both women and nature have been made to appear extensions of each other and when women come closer to nature, she is restored in the process of being, becoming and fulfilment in which she becomes a representative of the great river itself" (Preti 2013). Thus. The novel clearly shows an intimate connection between women and nature through the characters Uma, a Courtesan girl, and the musician's daughter.

Conclusion

The spiritual ecofeminist reading of the novel highlights the cultural harmony in which everyone is equal in the eyes of nature. It also focusses on the returning to pre-historic spiritual practices of worshipping and understanding nature. It also stresses out that everyone irrespective of diversities should understand and protect nature. The cultural ecofeminist reading of the novel shows the perception that women and nature are mutually interconnected and share common qualities. Through these interconnections, the novel seeks to elevate and liberate women and nature by cherishing them for their qualities as life-givers, nurturers, and healers.

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