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Eco-Spiritual Confluences: Intersections of Hydro-philosophy, and Environmental Consciousness Gita Mehta's A River Sutra

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Abstract

The Environmental Humanities, or EH, is an emerging interdisciplinary field that bridges the gap between ecological science, philosophy, literature, history, and cultural studies. It voices out the ecological degradation and to address the pressing environmental challenges of the 21st century. This research explores the role of environmental humanities in reshaping our understanding of human-nature relationships, with a focus on literature, ethics, and indigenous knowledge systems. By analyzing key literary texts, historical narratives, and cultural perspectives, this study examines how storytelling, artistic expression, and environmental ethics contribute to ecological awareness and sustainable thinking. Furthermore, the paper discusses the impact of environmental humanities in policy-making, activism, and education, highlighting its role in fostering a more holistic approach to addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental justice. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this research underscores the importance of integrating humanities-driven perspectives into environmental discourse, advocating for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to sustainability. In conclusion, this paper will examine the interplay of ecological and spiritual themes in Gita Mehta's A River Sutra, exploring how the text navigates the intersections of sacred ecology, hydro-philosophy, and environmental consciousness. By analyzing the novel through the framework of environmental humanities, this study aims to uncover the deeper implications of riverine cosmology, cultural narratives, and ecological ethics in shaping human relationships with the natural world.

Keywords: Ecological Degradation, Eco-Philosophy, Environmental Justice, Environmental Ethics.

Introduction

In Indian literary and traditional context, nature is seen as a sacred and active force, rivers especially hold a revered place, symbolizing purity, life, transformation, and divinity.

"We will recover our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe as composed of subjects to be communed with, not as objects to be exploited." (Berry 18) In this novel Gita Mehta explores the themes of spirituality, renunciation, identity, mythology, transcendence through an episodic narrative centered around the Narmada River. It also traverses multiple spiritual, cultural, and emotional landscapes, using the river not only as a geographical space but also as a symbol of continuity, transformation, and inner

pilgrimage. Through the interconnected narratives, the narrator brings together diverse characters whose lives are shaped, healed, or revealed by their connection to the river, making the novel a literary confluence where ecological sensitivity, spiritual longing, and cultural memory merge with environmental consciousness. This paper aims to examine how *A River Sutra* represents a confluence of eco-spiritual thought by highlighting intersections of sacred ecology, hydro-philosophy, and environmental awareness. In doing so, it positions Mehta's work within the broader continuum of Indian literary thought that reveres nature as both sacred and essential to human and cosmic harmony. It also shows how Mehta's work fits into Indian literature that sees nature as holy and important for both people and the universe to stay balanced.

Eco-Spirituality and Interplay of Myth and Reality

Gita Mehta's *The River Sutra* blends mythology, folklore, and spiritual belief to construct a profound vision of eco-spirituality, where the Narmada River becomes a sacred force interweaving human stories with cosmic rhythms. Each story reveals how traditional beliefs about nature and divinity shape ecological consciousness in the modern world. The story of the monk shows the rejection of worldly desires and favor of spiritual connection, symbolized by the Narmada river. The river is not merely a physical space, but a spiritual refuge, echoing Hindu beliefs towards nature. On an ecological insight the forest, river and solitude are not just a setting, but are an active force on his journey of transformation suggesting a worldview of his spiritual evolution.

Nithin's psychological breakdown introduces the tension between modern rationalism and tribal cosmologies. The indigenous woman he met is surrounded by folklore and magic linked with the ecological reverence around forest, rivers and nature. However, Nithin's healing shows that nature is linked with the human psyche, which helps in the recovery process.

In the courtesan's tale, the river is seen not just as a river, but as something holy and living capable of forgiveness, healing and cleaning sins. The old courtesan experiences a trauma because of her daughter's marriage with the criminal Rahul Singh who died in a police encounter. Pregnant with his child, she was devastated. She did not like to return to her past life and therefore jumped off a cliff, believing that the Narmada will accept her in its arms. Instead of grieving in anger, she sees her daughter's death as a kind of rebirth which shows a deep spiritual respect for nature, where the river becomes a part of life, death and soul's journey.

In the musician's story, music becomes a spiritual force, much like the Narmada River. The musician's daughter is not physically beautiful, but she finds inner beauty and meaning through the music she shares with the young student. Heartbroken, the girl vows to never play music again. Her father has brought her to the Narmada River so that she can "understand that I am the bride of music, not a musician." But she is hopeless- "it is an impossible penance that he (my father) demands of me, to express desire in my music when I am dead inside". This shows that though nature holds healing power, humans must be spiritually ready to receive it. Her despair reflects how deeply emotional wounds can block the soul's ability to reconnect with both art and ecology.

In the final story, the Narmada River is portrayed as a symbol of healing, feminine power, and ecological wisdom. Uma, rescued from exploitation, becomes a minstrel who sings the river's legends, embodying both the river's voice and resilience. The Naga Baba, revealed as a Professor, blends science and faith to protect both Uma and the river's sanctity, exposing how myth can be misused but also redeemed. Spiritually, the river connects nature, myth, and human redemption offering a path to enlightenment and ecological harmony.

Ecological Conferences and Ethics Coexistence

The Monk's story reveals the journey of Ashok as a Jain monk defined by non-violence, self-denial, and harmony with all living beings, the core principles of ecological ethics. His suffering

becomes evident for universal desires, echoing the uncertainty of life and the need for spiritual coexistence. The Narmada River represents detachment from material world, offering a spiritual ecology where renunciation is not escape but a return to elemental truth. The Teacher's Story explores the emotional and moral responsibility of Master Mohan toward his blind student, Imrat. Their bond, founded on music and love, is disrupted by societal greed and personal betrayal, resulting in tragedy.

The Executive's Story presents a man, Nitin Bose, who is suffering from psychological breakdown, catalyzed by an affair with a tribal woman, resulting in the violence of disconnecting from local tradition and nature's rhythms. Nitin's redemption begins when he joins the spiritual practice of the villagers. This exhibits a relationship with humans and nature for a mutual coexistence. When the Courtesan came to know the tragic end of her daughter, she accepted the fate and believed to wash away all the sins as a spiritual cleaning. The river becomes a moral and existential refuge, where human transgressions meet divine forgiveness, and the cycle of life and rebirth is accepted.

The Musician's Story shows a failure of ethical and emotional coexistence. The broken promise of the disciple, the neglect of gratitude, and love, daughter's emotional death leads her father to bring her to the Narmada, hoping that the river's sacred presence will restore her spirit, here the river once again serves as a space where broken relationships confront the deeper ethics of artistic and human integrity. Uma's transformation from a potential victim of exploitation to a river minstrel who sings the tales of the Narmada manifests that the river Narmada is no longer just a setting but a living character, nurturing her growth. Her song becomes an act of ecological devotion, cultural preservation, and spiritual invocation.

Hydro-Philosophy: Narmada River as a Metaphor for Human Experience

The Monk's Tale The first tale recounts the story of Ashok, a wealthy diamond merchant's son who renounces the material world and adopts the path of Jain asceticism. His spiritual discipline aligns with the river's symbolism of purification. The Narmada river reflects spiritual renunciation and inner stillness. Like the river flowing undisturbed by the chaos on its banks in parallel, it also reflects Ashok's life of being untouched by worldly temptation. His story reveals the helplessness of the human heart, suggesting that spiritual renunciation by a deeper immersion into the metaphysical current of existence.

Master Mohan's tale of his love and mentorship of the blind boy, Imrat, transforms the river into a symbol of devotion and tragic beauty. When Imrat is murdered, Master Mohan is emotionally entangled and ultimately commits suicide. The metaphorical representation of master Mohan's love for music and Imrat's voice is as deep and resonant as the river, but like a river's currents, their lives are swept away by tragic fate.

Nitin Bose, a tea estate manager, visits the tea plantations and submerges himself in mythical folktales and eventually loses his sanity after an encounter with a mysterious woman, Rima, who turns out to be a tribal woman. His guilt and descent into madness are only healed when he performs rituals on the Narmada River. The river merely acts as a mythic cleanser, a bridge between logic and legend, mind and soul. It allows Nitin to reconnect with ancient Indian beliefs and modern life which helped him to recover his superstitious beliefs.

This tale captures female agency, maternal suffering, devotion, and the social stigma of sex work in ancient India. An aging courtesan searches for her kidnapped daughter, finds out that she has eventually fallen in love, gets pregnant, and after Rahul's death, she jumps into the river, choosing death over returning to a life of shame. The Narmada river acts as both womb and tomb here. It is a sacred mother, ready to accept the fallen and cleanse them of their sins.

A great musician/ raga player visits the Narmada river with his daughter. She is an ugly looking girl who looks dejected in life. It narrates the story of a shallow relationship of the daughter who was abandoned by her lover after he learns the art of music from her father. She gives up music, crushed by betrayal. The river represents the silenced song, the broken rhythm and also a space for reflection and slow healing.

In the final tale, the river is the keeper of stories, the sacred sound, and the ultimate redeemer. A girl named Uma is rescued from prostitution by a Naga Baba (later revealed to be a professor). She becomes a wandering minstrel, singing sacred songs of the Narmada River. The Narmada is not just a river but a divine archive of pain, devotion, myth, and rebirth. It is a surrendered love, without expectations, rooted in sacred duty.

Conclusion

In *River Sutra*, Gita Mehta twins together six different stories that reflect deep emotional and spiritual journeys, all of them centered around the sacred Narmada River.

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