



NATURE AND WOMEN: ECOFEMINIST READING OF “THE COURTESAN’S STORY” IN GITA MEHTA’S *A RIVER SUTRA*

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ABSTRACT

In the days to come, humanity is going to experience global environmental crisis. The decisions and behaviours of ecologically alienated individuals have led to environmental degradation in today’s world. Human beings lost connection with nature and grew insensitive. Can the lost association with nature be re-discovered? The answer is in the affirmative. Since humanity and nature are inseparable, understanding that human well-being is possible only when we live in harmony with the natural world is vital for this. When ecologically affective and respectful consciousness or ecological consciousness is infused in everyone, it can improve the environmental behaviour of the individuals to meet the challenges posed by a global environmental crisis.

A lot of ecofeminists took up the mantle of environmental protection because they saw how its degradation was so closely linked to their own. For ecofeminists, there seems to be a connection between unoppressed women and unabused nature. The paper attempts to study how ecological feminism permeates through “The Courtesan’s Story” in Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra*.

Although the present culture has formed a conceptual association between women and nature, the need of the hour is to adopt a new attitude towards nature - one that interconnects nature with humans and not just nature with women. Let an ethic of care for nature be developed in one and all.

Key Words: Degradation, Ecofeminism, Ecology, Exploitation, Gender, Nature

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Ecology is often described as the study of the relationships between living organisms and their physical environment (Hussen 20). Man is a part of it and not independent of it. He is dependent upon it for his survival. He is a product of a long evolutionary process in which as Donald Hughes says “ecological balance played a decisive role” (Jolsnaben 1).

Such ecological balance is being destroyed all over the world. As a result, since the 1990s

concerns about the environment have predominated the thinking of all the conscientious individuals. Almost all the disciplines of study have been trying to voice concern about environmental degradation and hope to, in their own small way redeem the world and preserve our only planet, the earth as destruction of the planet will lead to destruction of human life.

Literature too is not unaffected by this issue. In the paper entitled “Overtones of

Ecofeminism in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*, Sumitha Roy says: "In its role as pragmatic, didactic and aesthetic discipline, literature seems to have taken a lead in fostering and sustaining this mission." Subsequently the "relation between literature and physical environment" came to be known as ecocriticism (Dobie 239).

A branch of ecocriticism which has gradually gained its place is its feminist standpoint which began to be known as ecofeminism. In 1974, the term "Ecofeminism" was conceived by d'Eaubonne as a connection of the Ecology and Women (Morgan 4).

The socio-historical association between woman and nature is ecofeminism's starting point. According to Judith Plant in the essay entitled "Women and Nature" women have long been associated with nature. In society too, women's role has always been closer to nature. The natural work of a woman centred around human physical requirements: eating, sex, cleaning, the care of children and sick people etc. They have taken care of day-to-day life so that men are able to go into the outer world to use and exploit nature.

As woman and nature connect became closer, this association began to be firmly established in the conceptual framework of our culture and ecofeminists say it is the same conceptual framework that causes the abuse of nature and the oppression of women. They further say as a result, it's impossible to achieve feminist goals without addressing ecology likewise, it's impossible to achieve ecological goals without addressing feminism. Hence, any ecological theory must embrace feminist Principles.

According to ecofeminists, women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society (Reuther 204).

In this context, the writer attempts to explore "The Courtesan's Story" in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*, from its ecofeminist's perspective. In the

story one can examine the distinctively gendered nature of the narrative. There is a subtle but persistent sutra that affirms the feminine principle in an interesting and significant manner. A link between contemporary landscape and the feminine principle is well substantiated in the story.

The Courtesan's story is told to the narrator in part by the Courtesan and in part by her daughter. The Courtesan on the lookout for her daughter arrives at the Government Rest House and requests lodging. She describes to the narrator how she failed to protect her daughter from the growing indignity around her. The Courtesan's daughter is abducted by a treacherous bandit, Rahul Singh, a wounded soul. He keeps her daughter with him for two long years in a cave among coarse criminals.

The daughter narrates her part of the story. She gradually falls in love with her abductor, Rahul Singh and gets married to him. In one of the raids, conducted by the police, Rahul Singh is killed. Later in the story, the young lady ends her life drowning herself in the River Narmada.

In Western feminist studies, the women usually seek freedom from the urban exploitative society in nature i.e. lake, the forest etc. In a similar manner, the Courtesan's daughter too ultimately finds her goal in nature. The concept of seeking freedom from the urban exploitative society finds a new dimension in a different cultural context – Indian - in the Courtesan's story.

ECOFEMINIST EXPLORATION OF THE COURTESAN'S STORY

The Courtesan tells the narrator that once Shabag which means the Garden of the Emperor was a place where fields of flowers grew on the banks of river Narmada and beyond. In those days, the gardens stretched the entire city and wide boulevards bordered the gardens. She nostalgically reminisces "In those days if you went for a boat ride you could see people promenading in gardens that stretched the entire length of the city or lying by the flower beds that led to the water's edge" (Mehta 163).

To quote Judith Plant in the essay entitled "Woman and Nature", "Before the world was mechanised an industrialised, the metaphor that explained self, society and the cosmos was the

image of the organism. This is not surprising since most people were connected with 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. "

Courtesan further adds, Haveli, where courtesan lived was a grand place of honour. Courtesans were respected and treated with dignity. They were renowned for their beauty and learning. They were the mistresses of sixty four arts. They were the tutors to the heirs of the mightiest kingdoms. They were not touched without their consent. Courtesan's grandmother herself a courtesan was treated to:

lake palaces under a star- filled sky. Of gossamer nets hanging over beds strewn with jasmine blossoms. Pearls scattered on the sheets. Arched doorways opening onto balconies below which water lapped softly against the stone foundations (167).

The treatment meted out to women when the nature was protected and nurtured and the treatment meted out to them after the despoiling of the environment is well brought out in the story alluding at the relationship between women and nature. One can clearly discern the respect meted out to women in the times of yore. Women and men were equally valued. These societies were "not warlike. They were not societies where women were subordinate to men. And they did not see our Earth as an object for exploitation and domination" (Eisler 23). Ecofeminists urge one to realize the interconnectedness of all life processes and all life forms. This can also mean integrating the dualisms (male and female) and respecting them. When the dualisms are not integrated in ones consciousness, it leads to violence in the society.

Woefully rueing over how the Shabag has changed in her lifetime, the Courtesan says:

Where there used to be gardens now we have factories. Our gracious 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 labour 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 (Mehta 167).

She says "The city [now]is owned by men who believe every human being has a price , and a full purse is power." For them "we are only women ... they throw cigarette cases, watches, dirty bank notes at or feet as we dance" (167-168).

To the ecofeminists, there is an intrinsic relationship between the way in which we treat the natural world and the way in which we treat women since the destruction of the natural systems invariably lead to oppression of women. Therefore one cannot ensure the liberation of women without re-valuing the natural world. Since the destruction of the natural world has gone hand in hand with the oppression of women, it is only through the liberation of women one can honour, protect and affirm the life-giving qualities of our world. The connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are clearly understood in Gaard's work as to why "the environment is a feminist issue", as well as "why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns" (Gaard 4).

Glotfelty's words apply aptly here. If humans want to survive in this biosphere they should learn to "co-exist, co-operate and flourish in the biosphere" (Glotfelty and Fromm107).Thus ecofeminism is seriously concerned with environmental racism and what Vandana Shiva, a prominent ecofeminist in India has termed "maldevelopment"— which industrialized nations and their corporations have created in the third world (Shiva 5).

According to Glotfelty, "The answer lies in recognizing that current environmental problems are largely of our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture" (Glotfelty and Fromm xxi).

Ecofeminist theory lays emphasis on the relations between development and gender. It says in the prevailing development model existing in the world violence against nature and against women is built in. According to ecofeminists, men in the name of development, use women and nature for their gain causing harm to both. This kind of development separates man from nature, thus exacerbating the

exploitation and violence against both women and nature. This eventually leads to environmental crisis and degradation of women.

Ecofeminists say that this environmental crisis affects the women more than men therefore it tries to raise the consciousness of women to the decay of the earth in order to protect it from degradation. Since women are closer to nature, they can be the ecological saviours. Ruether states in 1975 in one of the first ecofeminist books, "New Woman/New Earth":

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society (Ruether 204).

Slowly women began to see this association not as a weakness, but as a strength for it became clear that violation of women and the violation of the earth is a part of the same male drama (King 106-121).

The Narmada which becomes the destination for the Courtesan and her daughter after their long separation provides solace and tranquility during their time of crisis. In nature, the Courtesan and her daughter regain their strength albeit differently.

Narrating her part of the story, the daughter tells the narrator, the coarse jungle where Rahul Singh lived is a desolate place with no human dwellings. Yet he is a man so generous, loving and caring. It looks like nature in whose lap he thrived, shaped every aspect of his persona, turning him into a savage yet so gentle; iron hard yet so tender ; fearful yet so admirable man. Living in nature, Rahul Singh imbibes the spiritual qualities like love, compassion, gentleness etc. Nature becomes his spiritual teacher and guide. The sheltered old school Courtesan, mistress of all arts and learning gradually falls in love with him. It looks like the spiritual virtues in him shaped by nature leaves her spell-bound. One unearths that it was Rahul Singh's endearing relationship with nature which instilled

spiritual virtues in him. Nature knows no gender. It gives an open invitation to everyone to care.

After the narration of the story, to the narrator's disbelief, far away, the daughter embraces her mother and disappears in the cliffs above the river. The older woman stares in to the rapid currents flowing below the cliffs. He comes to know through Mr. Chagla that the older lady is happy that her daughter "had died in the Narmada because she would be purified of all her sins" (Mehta 190). The daughter commits suicide in the Narmada. This is very easily accepted by her mother. "Even Mehta, the chief narrator discovers that attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself or herself in the waters of Narmada" (2).

This story depicts how the body of the Courtesan's daughter merges with river Narmada, realizing the nature of the river. The Narmada absolves a man or women of all his or her sins and makes him or her pure, merely by her divine sight. A mere glimpse of the Narmada's waters is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births (Mehta 151). Nature as a physical and geographical entity predominantly dominates the lives of all the characters in "A River Sutra".

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. It also brings to the fore her seeming embeddedness in nature. For a few ecofeminists, it is a personal experience of having a communion with nature which reflects a strong association of women and nature. A woman, according to some ecofeminists is predisposed to being closer to nature and ecologically conscious.

CONCLUSION

Thus Ecofeminism permeates the entire Courtesan's Story. Let ecofeminism not glorify returning to pre-historic religions, celebrating ancient rituals. Let it not be content associating women with nature for this may lead to devaluation of women in society. Let ecofeminists try to infuse an ethic of love and care for nature in everyone. What must be avoided is associating the needed characteristics only with the female. As Biehl puts it,

the claim "that 'nurturing' characteristics that the present society presumably despises are in fact badly needed now if we are to overcome our ecological crisis". As Mayer quotes Judith Plant in her essay entitled "The Power and Promise of Ecofeminism Reconsidered", "we women will not be held responsible for cleaning up the patriarchal mess by ourselves because we are told we are more able. No, not this time." Let the message of ecofeminism be "we all [i.e., women and men] must cultivate the human characteristics of gentleness and caring."

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