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Women, rivers, and serpents: Reifying the primordial link in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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Chitra Sankaran

National University of Singapore, Singapore

Abstract

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* has been variously regarded as a philosophical treatise on the nature of love; as a description of the various sub-cultures within India, or sometimes even as mere entertainment – a light read. Few reviews or studies have ventured to examine the distinctively gendered nature of the narrative. This article attempts to uncover the subtle but persistent “sutra” that affirms the feminine principle throughout. The tales, beaded together in the frame narrative, connect rivers, serpents, the cult of the goddess, and the feminine principle in interesting and significant ways. It is noteworthy that this is accomplished despite the all-male coterie of characters who stud the frame narrative. The link between contemporary landscape, mythic patterns, and the feminine principle that is evidenced in the text, *A River Sutra*, brings to light its feminist context, one that has hitherto been overlooked.

Keywords

Ecofeminist, Gita Mehta, goddess, littoral, river, serpent, women

It is perhaps inevitable that Gita Mehta, the well-known author of the collection of essays, *Karma Cola* (1979),¹ should once again turn to a delineation of Indian spiritualism in her novel, *A River Sutra*, published in 1993. Her previous work and debut novel *Raj* (1989) had already opened the door for exploring this esoteric India, its history and culture. *A River Sutra* seems a natural continuation of that earlier exploration and is constructed of disparate tales of passion, enchantment, love, and loss held together by a frame narrative in the tradition of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1987/1353) or Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1342). The choice of form is in itself significant in that the earliest known frame narrative can be traced to India. The *Panchatantra* that dates back to earlier than third-century BCE is universally accepted as the precursor of *The Arabian Nights*

Corresponding author:

Chitra Sankaran, National University of Singapore, Blk AS5, 7 Arts Link, National University of Singapore, Singapore 117570, Singapore.

Email: ellcs@nus.edu.sg

and other well-known frame narratives. The Penguin Classics edition of Vishnu Sharma's *The Panchatantra* discusses in detail the "triumphal progress" of this text over the globe (1993: xvi-xviii).

The contemporary novel, *A River Sutra*, presented within a frame narrative, has evoked varied responses. In effect, Indira Karamcheti's cursory dismissal of it in *The Women's Review of Books* as "too slight, too airy an entertainment, a reinforcement of what is held to be already known rather than an enlargement of mind and spirit with the challenge of the new" (Karamcheti, 1994: 20) reveals the tension in the text between the surface story and its inner significance. The review, interestingly, signals the novel's tacit engagement with myths and legends without going further to explore the ways in which these shape the narrative. More intuitively, the review by Francine Prose identifies the layering of the stories that leave the reader with

the sense that things are richer and more meaningful than they seem, that life is both clear and mysterious, that the beauty and the horror of this world is both irreducible and inexplicable. (Prose, 1993:6)

However, all these reviews, even Wells', which alerts the reader to the more complex undercurrents beneath the well-plotted stories, overlook a distinctive feature of the narrative: namely its *gendered* aspect, which emerges as one of its prominent features. This study attempts a closer reading that reveals gender dimensions that not only root certain narrative patterns that emerge in the book to contemporary feminist thought at several levels, but which also affirm the feminine in persuasive and consistent ways. Furthermore, it also attempts to tease out, with the help of certain ecofeminist insights, the elusive but crucial connections that can be traced and established between nature and gender in the text.

A River Sutra centres on an unnamed senior bureaucrat, the manager of a guest house along the Narmada.² It is in the vicinity of this guest house that the bureaucrat meets the various characters who inhabit the narrative, marking the river itself as a flowing theme, with every narrative rising from, and ebbing into, the Narmada. The term "*sutra*", which in Sanskrit and Pali, means "a thread or line that holds things together" and is derived from the verbal root "*siv*", meaning "to sew".³ The text thus sews together tales along the river Narmada making it *A River Sutra*.

Of a contemplative turn of mind that has persuaded him to downgrade his career goals, the bureaucrat is predictably the audience for the six tales that bead the narrative. Interestingly too, the frame narrative is interspersed with comments by the bureaucrat and his friends, all of whom are males. Thus we hear the views of Tariq Mia, the mullah from the neighbouring village; Dr Mitra, the doctor from the town of Rudra; Mr Chagla, the bureaucrat's faithful assistant; and even the local constable, Sashi. It is worth noting that in the frame narrative itself, a female voice is entirely absent. On the face of it, the world that this opens up to the reader is an exclusively male one. Furthermore, the stories that form the components of the "*sutra*" or "*thread*" of the frame narrative, though divided equally between three male and three female narrators, present a world that appears partial, even sympathetic to the male perspective. This deceptive frontage, however, should not be taken at face value as invariably the surface text is problematized by

the subtext. Moreover, while being aware of the pitfalls of committing “intentional fallacy”,⁴ the disjunction that exists between the male characters of the frame narrative and the female writer who generates these characters and stories should be kept in mind.

The first of the stories is narrated by Ashok, a Jain youth, the son of a fabulously wealthy diamond merchant who has renounced his life of luxury for a life of extreme poverty as a Jain mendicant. His narrative falls squarely within the genre of a *vita*, which is Latin for ‘life’ and refers to a brief biography, often that of a saint, within the broader category of hagiography. However, unlike typical hagiographies, which are predominantly narratives of praise, emphasizing the progress of the spirit and prizing cerebral male values such as austerity and discipline, here, the first person narration by the monk registers an ambivalence to his renunciation. In fact, the statement that opens his narrative, “I have loved just one thing in my life” (Mehta, 1993: 14),⁵ upsets the template of the *vita*, foregrounding emotion over celebration. To complicate matters, minutes before the final rites of renunciation, he confesses:

I am paralyzed by fear. This is the last time I will embrace my children, or laugh with my brother. The last time I will enjoy the privacy of my bathroom...

I abandon all hope of retreat. The ceremonies of renunciation have progressed too far. (37)

The tone of the passage conveys not merely resignation but a sense of panic which runs counter to the generally moralizing and panegyric quality of the language found in traditional hagiographies. Also, the revelatory statements about his inner doubts at the crucial point of renunciation hint that if there had been a way to alter his decision without embarrassment, he would have been tempted to consider it. Though these descriptions emphasize his humanity, they also work to undermine the absolute “heroism” that surrounds the saint. This opens up the path for another important theme to emerge, one that the bureaucrat has habitually disdained – what Tariq Mia terms “The human heart, little brother. Its secrets” (48). This is the idea that matters relating to human emotion are fairly profound and should not be dismissed out of hand.

An equally “noble” figure in the story that follows, told by the mullah, is the music teacher – Master Mohan. His generosity to the blind child prodigy, Imrat, is contrasted to the greed of his wife who coerces the boy into giving a private performance in return for five thousand rupees, which leads to his untimely death. The surface narrative attributes blame to the “greedy” wife. But the subtext that begs to be interpellated from a feminist viewpoint, deliberately smudges these stereotypes of bad wife/good husband. Even as the wife is painted as crass and insensitive, the reasons for this – that her father arranged this marriage; that her brothers robbed her of her inheritance; that her husband has not been a provider; that his entire life, from the point when he failed to make it into the charts as a child singer, has been on a downward spiral pivoting around this “terrible failure” – are all introduced into the narrative. These contributing factors serve as indictments of patriarchy’s social usage of women, constructing a persuasive counter-narrative – that of a strong, ambitious woman tied to a defeated and failed man. Her ranting words, “What sins did I commit in my last life that I should be yoked to this apology for a man” (54) would certainly find resonance amongst many women, not necessarily crass or greedy, both feminist and conformist, who know the pain of being forced into unequal

unions, where patriarchal strictures proscribe the criticism of an ineffectual husband but readily blame the (frustrated) wife.

The executive's tale reverberates with the pain and shame that ensues when a man acquires "effeminate" qualities. Arriving in the town of Rudra, Nitin Bose, this hitherto beer-swigging, manly character, calls himself Rima and asks for his eye make-up. It is believed that he was brought to this state by the spell cast by an exotic, "other-worldly" woman while he was buried in a faraway tea estate located in what was once believed to be Naga (serpent) land that significantly stands in the boundary between the Aryan land of reason and the Dravidian zone of myth, magic, and otherworldly secrets. If Nitin Bose had in some ways exhibited aberrant *biological* characteristics, his "transvestism" would have come as less of a shock to this group of males. But this psychological dissonance when outwardly he appears an eminently presentable male, discomfits them. This strange tale of enchantment and tribal cures once again challenges gender boundaries at many levels: those that privilege the rational male against the irrational/faith driven female, the austere and cerebral male against the passionate and voluptuous female.

Such tropes, in fact, fill the pantheon of Hindu mythological tales, where cerebral sages and austere male gods in deep meditation are disturbed by passionate and ardent *apsaras* or celestial dancers who disturb their concentration. Interestingly, one such story is repeated by the bureaucrat in various forms in the frame narrative itself:

[Shiva] the Ascetic sneered as he was pierced by the five flower-tipped arrows unleashed by Kama [...] the Enchanter, the Inflamer, the Parcher, the Paroxysm of Desire, the Carrier of Death.

Then Maya, the Illusion of the Worlds, had appeared – the only woman capable of arousing the lust of the Destroyer of Worlds [Shiva]. Enraged at the destruction of his meditation, the Ascetic had opened his third eye, the Lotus of Command, and reduced Kama to ashes, even as he himself was being consumed by Desire. (96-7)

The above extract that narrates the defeat of the greatest of ascetics, Lord Shiva himself, the pre-eminent *logos* in the Hindu discursive field, by Kama, the Hindu equivalent of cupid, is significant in the challenge it poses to traditionally valued "male traits" such as austerity, discipline, celibacy, and so on. In this story *mythos* seems to have overcome *logos* and austerity and penance are defeated by passion and imagination. As Bruce Lincoln asserts (Lincoln, 1999: 3-18), truth discovered through *logos* seeks to be objective and universal. *Mythos*, on the other hand, approaches the world through intuition. The theme reiterated through the stories that position "the secrets of the human heart" at their centre thus seems to emphasize a different set of values than those propounded by the bureaucrat and his male coterie.

The courtesan's tale underscores this emphasis. Her story, set in the ancient kingdom of Shahbag, talks of her proud lineage of beautiful and accomplished courtesans; of Nawabs' palaces that later disappeared into the filth and vulgarity of modern factories. She is on her way to recover her beautiful and accomplished daughter who has been abducted by the bandit, Rahul Singh. However, she soon returns to the lodge followed by the daughter. The girl recounts how, after her abduction, her initial hatred for her captor gradually turned to love as she understood his sincere attachment to her. But he was shot

dead by the police and her puny efforts to avenge his death come to nothing. She jumps into the Narmada, while her weary old mother leaves for Shahbag. Significantly, the narrative seems intent on showing us the dangers of judging by appearances, a trait that the bureaucrat consistently exhibits. Hence, after hearing her story, he is abashed by his initial discourtesy to the old woman. "I averted my eyes ashamed at my reluctance to assist the old woman" (172), he avers. Furthermore, the pervasive idea of courtesans as pleasure women revelling in delectations of the flesh is speedily dispelled when the woman talks about their elusive art:

To teach a prince the subtle grading of color or the microtones of melody, to educate a young man's palate so he becomes an epicure, to introduce him to the alchemy of scents – this was the most demanding part of our education. (165-6)

At the other end of the spectrum, equally incredibly, it is from the rough bandit, Rahul Singh, that the most refined of courtesans learns about the delicacy of love. Thus gender stereotypes of the crude bandit and the sensitive courtesan are overset and entrenched hierarchies shaken. But more importantly, the words of the daughter help to thread the theme of the human heart through the narrative:

He used to stand outside the cave in the dark, watching me as if trying to prove there was a greater art than all my arts, the ability to love someone as he loved me. (184)

Once again, love, the secrets of the heart, and their attendant emotions, traditionally assigned to the "female" domain, seem to take subtle precedence over austerity and discipline.

The penultimate narrative is a musician's tale of love and betrayal. The "ugly" daughter of a celebrated singer gets betrothed to a pupil of her father's through her parents' arm-twisting. However, the young man, once he has mastered his musical skills under this great musician moves on to marry another, beautiful girl. The thwarted daughter comes to the banks of the Narmada. She quietly confides in the bureaucrat:

From that moment I have not touched my instrument nor entered my father's music room. The very sound of music is hateful to my ears. (225)

The woman is portrayed as a victim, a puppet in the hands of her august father, betrayed by her talented, good-looking but fickle suitor. Her not inconsiderable musical talent, it seems, can never surpass patriarchal injunctions that judge a woman solely by her physical attributes and her marital status. But the underlying lessons that challenge the implacability of the binaries – austerity and eroticism – continue. The musician asserts at one point:

[i]t was the hour to play the Bhairav, the raga of Shiva, [...] And now I disturbed its mighty solitude with the sacrifice of Parvati wooing Shiva from his asceticism, pleading that he love her. (223)

The passage suggests that great music is only possible with the harmonious mingling of the binaries of the feminine and the masculine. The simplicity of the message in the surface text is once again belied by the alternative focus of the subtext.

The final romance about a Naga Baba⁶ who rescues a young girl from prostitution is told by Tariq Mia. That this esoteric Hindu tale is told by a Muslim scholar stresses the theme of the plenitude of life – that it cannot be contained within rigid structures, whether these are driven by religious ideologies or secular logic. The Naga Baba, we are told,

went down to the stream to bathe[;] [w]ith the water still dripping from his body, he sat beside a funeral pyre where a body had just been cremated. [...] He took handfuls of the charred wood from the pyre [...] crumbled it between his fingers, throwing out fragments of bone and flesh before rubbing the ash over his hair and body. (240)

This description presents the austere male mendicant as being at home with bodily “abjections”. His act of smearing his body with the charred remains of human flesh is, in this sense, significant. The alignment of the *male* with nature, mortality, and death is doubly radical when it is revealed that this Naga Baba is the renowned archaeologist, V.V. Shankar, in his post-mystic incarnation. The discourse of modernity – in this instance, that of archaeological science, does not seem so far removed from the mystic and the abject.

The above readings do not discount the male orientation in the stories; indeed, in all of them women appear in stereotypical roles. At one end of the spectrum they are hapless victims or betrayed lovers and, at the other end, greedy, avaricious bullies or bewitching enchantresses bringing an honourable man to his downfall. Predictably, therefore, all the good women appear as passive victims of fate and hardly ever as active agents of their destiny. Even in the odd instance when they attempt to take their fate into their own hands (as in the case of the abducted courtesan who desires to avenge her “husband’s” death by shooting the police officers, and hoards arms for this purpose) these women are defeated by circumstances and embrace death. On the surface, then, the feminist theorists’ nightmare world of the traditional fairy tales that work to locate women in passive spaces (see Zipes, 2012 and Joosen, 2011), with the only “active women” with agency (such as stepmothers and witches) being portrayed as “evil”, appears to be replicated here. This is a persuasive reading of *A River Sutra* on one level, but the discriminating reader will realize that the subtexts, identified above, craftily weave their way through these stories, paving the path for a feminist reading to emerge.

We realize that beneath the ostensibly apathetic images of women, there is a surge of affirmation for the feminine in the natural link established between the tales and an epicene and mythic landscape, described as timeless and yet being as contemporaneous as myth. For instance, Shahbag is contemporary enough for factories to have overtaken ancient monarchies; the Calcutta that Nitin Bhowse inhabits has air-conditioned cars and subways and dates the Pakistan–Bangladesh war to “twenty years earlier” and “the partition of India fifty years earlier” (110), thus placing the narrative in the late twentieth century. Yet, if you fly out of this eminently contemporary Calcutta and make “the eight hour drive from the small airport to the tea garden” (114) where Nitin Bhowse is bound, it seems that you have not merely moved out of an urban to a rural set-up but have seemingly moved out of a modern world to a mythic landscape where legends of “[a] world devoted to pleasure and learning, its serenity guarded by hooded serpents with great gems flashing from their hoods” (120) and “of magic performed during the eclipse of the

moon when a man's soul could be captured inside the two halves of a coconut" (127) facetly mingle with reality and modern life. Geographically too, the landscape is both non-specific at one level, with many of the villages and towns being imaginary, and yet also very specific in that they are all tied to the river Narmada. Indeed, perhaps the most significant geographical point of confluence is the Narmada River itself, which stands at the centre of it all. In one reading, the book and all the narratives it contains could be perceived as lyrical odes to the Narmada River.

We are first introduced to the Narmada River by the bureaucrat "sahib" when he observes that it flows "seven hundred feet below" the guest house that he manages, "spanning a mile from bank to bank" (3). However, it is not the real river that excites the bureaucrat's imagination or indeed the reader's. In Hindu mythology, Narmada was born of the perspiration of Lord Shiva and

took on the form of a woman – the most dangerous of her kind: a 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)

Shiva gave her "in marriage to the ocean, Lord of Rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors" (9) and whose "heartbeat pulsing under the ground" the bureaucrat imagines he can hear (5). Thus, Narmada is personified as a kind of "everywoman", being virgin, seductress, bride, courtesan (a dancing girl), and mother (the protector of the pilgrims who come to her banks to worship her) all rolled into one. It is deeply significant that it is around this archetypal, mythic "woman" that the entire narrative of *A River Sutra* is woven. Also, significantly, she emerges simultaneously as both subject and object. She is the primary subject of the narrative but she is also the ultimate objectified Other – "mythicized" by the worshippers, "deified" by the tribals and "feminized" by the bureaucrat who imagines the river "flowing to meet her bridegroom in all those variations that delighted the Ascetic [Lord Shiva]" (9). Every female character, whose story is narrated in the volume, then becomes just another aspect, another reflection of the Narmada herself since she encompasses everywoman's experience and understands all their sorrows and dilemmas as the gracious mother goddess.

As mother goddess, the Narmada is inseparable from the body of folk goddesses, who, though often specific to a locale, are conjoined in the archetypal mother goddess of Hinduism, *Aadiparashakthi* (or Primal Energy). Thus she is often, even within the pages of the narrative, inseparable from the tribal deity. The bureaucrat sahib tells us that

the Vano village deity is a stone image of a half-woman with full breasts of a fertility symbol but the torso of a coiled snake, because the tribals believe they once ruled a great snake kingdom until they were defeated by the gods of the Aryans. Saved from annihilation only by a divine personification of the Narmada River, the grateful tribals conferred on the river the gift of annulling the effects of snakebite, and I have often heard pilgrims who have never met a tribal reciting the invocation

Salutations in the morning and at night to thee, O Narmada!
Defend me from the serpent's poison. (6)

Hence, a strange, intriguing, mythic tapestry forms the ground of the narrative, traversing through all of the stories, and repeatedly linking the river and tribal beliefs in a serpent goddess, foregrounding the feminine principle and reifying the primordial link between women, rivers, and serpents. This underlying leitmotif lends great strength to its central theme of exploring the “The human heart... Its secrets” (48). These tales appear designed to teach us about the importance of life through invoking the life forces which are yoked to a feminine principle. The feminine principle, a central concept in Eastern philosophical systems, is perceived as the principle of birth, transformation, and rebirth – the nurturing and sustaining influence in the universe (Preston, 1980: 8). Indeed, this central contrast between “the feminine” as life-signifying/affirming and the masculine as “ascetic/denying the fecundity of life” that is central to the Samkhya and other schools of Hindu philosophy that propound “Purusha”, the male principle, and “Prakriti”, the female principle, as central tenets, is actively invoked in various ways in the tales. The idea that one cannot ignore these powerful life forces (allied to the feminine) without a cost is a strong idea that is built up throughout. But this is not the only way in which the “feminine” is affirmed in this text.

In the past decade or two, an important stream of criticism to emerge has been ecofeminism. Mies and Shiva, citing Ynestra King, a speaker from the first ecofeminist conference in March 1980, define ecofeminism as follows:

We are a woman-identified movement and we believe we have a special work to do in these imperilled times. We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way. (Mies and Shiva, 1993: 14)

Aside from the activist agendas that they pursue, ecofeminist critics (see Carr, 2000; Cook, 2008) have also been involved in theorizing ecological matters from a feminist perspective. One such undertaking of theirs has been to draw attention to a school of women writers who, through their creative activities, have attempted, first, to forge a closer link to nature; second, to invoke nature for specific, feminist purposes; and third, to present nature in their narratives as an active agent of resistance through creating a mythopoeic world of liberating myths that are entwined with the landscape. An interesting subcategory of these are what Susan Rosen identifies as the “littoral” women writing from the margins (Rosen, 2008: 21). Others like Linda Lear talk specifically about the contributions of littoral writers such as Rachel Carson in raising awareness about the environment (Lear, 1999: 12-23). Rosen labels the coast with its “literal” as well as its metaphorical applications as an “ecotone”, which can be defined as a transition area. The shore in particular, she insists, is a specific type of ecotone, a boundary zone that acts as a threshold. The “littoral” then is an environment that blends two disparate biotic communities (water and land) and becomes a land of possibilities. Ecofeminists identify a tradition of littoral writers such as Rachel Carson, Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1995/1955), Jennifer Ackerman (1995), and Mary Parker Buckles (1998), all of whom have set their narratives in the

littoral zone, explored it, and felt that it was “important to consider a definition of the coast for its realistic as well as metaphoric applications”. What women coastal nature writers discovered was that “the ecotone, or margin, was rich in discovery and change” (Rosen, 2008: 21).

With *A River Sutra*, one could also make a case for Gita Mehta as a littoral writer who, to adapt an observation from Carson’s *The Edge of the Sea*, is committed to ensuring that “[a]lways the edge [...] remains an elusive and indefinable boundary” (Carson: 1998/1955: 1). Indeed, Mehta, in writing from the shores of the Narmada River “[s]panning a mile from bank to bank” like a sea (3), opens up precisely this land of possibilities. It is my contention that in keeping with Barbara Cook’s remarks about Carson and other littoral writers as “invok[ing] nature for feminist purposes or [...] us[ing] nature as an agent of resistance” (Cook, 2008: 1), one could view Gita Mehta in *A River Sutra* as opening up avenues of female resistance by aligning her writing to littoral literatures by women. This alignment, an acknowledged strategy of patriarchal resistance that connects land and life to women, is strengthened further by the subtle yet consistent evoking of serpent myths in most of the tales and linking them to rivers and women in order to create a backdrop similar to that of feminist narratives that resist, even defy patriarchal power structures. These narratives are particularly pervasive in the popular cultures south of the Narmada River in contemporary India today. For instance, in the goddess cult films which first began to be popularized in the southern states of India, with the first of its kind significantly entitled *Adiparasakthi* (primary cosmic energy, another name for the mother goddess) being released in 1971 (Gopalakrishnan, 1971), the link between serpents and women is consistently emphasized since these women are all [secret] serpent worshippers and finally get saved by the Goddess manifesting as Serpent. This link forms the central theme of many box-office hits like *Vellikizhamai Viratham* (Thyagarajan: 1973); *Amman* (Tamil)/*Ammoru* (Telugu)/*Maa Ki Shakthi* (Hindi), the single film by the same team dubbed in three languages (Ramakrishna, 1995) and finally, *Devi* (Ramakrishna, 1999), to name only five out of hundreds of such films produced since the 1970s and released in all four southern languages: Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam – and sometimes even in the hegemonic northern language of Hindustani (Hindi). In these films, the female protagonist is shown to be a serpent worshipper while the male protagonist is a sceptic. But in the climax, the serpent incarnates as the mother goddess to save the couple, so the sceptical male is brought into the fold.

This link is by no means peculiar to Hindu mythopoetic traditions. The connection between serpent and woman is, in fact, a timeless one. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament, the serpent and the woman are both indicted for their joint act of disobedience against God and therefore, calumny against humanity. As Alex Hunt succinctly summarizes it:

The common understanding of Eve’s transgression in the Garden of Eden has long served to fuel Western cultural misogyny. Yielding to the serpent’s temptation to be god-like, Eve eats the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. She gives fruit to Adam and he eats. In their new state of knowledge, they cover their nakedness. God curses the serpent creating enmity between animal and human. He curses Eve with the pain of childbirth and with subjection. (Hunt, 2008: 7)

Thus begins the saga of women's subordination – a position that feminists such as Phyllis Trible have of late attempted to redeem by scrutinizing theology and unearthing ancient cults that offer an alternative path of liberation from the crippling Genesis myth of the Old Testament that condemns women, the daughters of Eve (Trible, 1999: 388-90). However, as Sidney Dekker argues (Dekker, 2007: 574), although the Adam and Eve creation myth may be considered the oldest in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, having emerged in written form between 1000-900 BCE, it was actually not the first to appear but the second. Dekker clarifies that the account that biblical editors ended up placing first was the priestly account which is dated only around 400 BCE (Dekker, 2007: 574-5). The author of this version introduced the serpent as wily and quite the equal of Eve who gets cast in the role of the harbinger of temptation to humankind. However, as Dekker points out, snakes were long before that a mythical notoriety. He observes:

Snakes have played key roles in many myths across the world, from ancient ones of Eskimos in the far north (who don't even have snakes!), to Kipling's more recent *Jungle Book* and the shield of the medical profession. Apparently the snake offered the convenient embodiment of a wise [emphasis mine] but wily and beguiling mind. (Dekker, 2007: 275)

Thus, the connotations surrounding the serpent were not always negative. As early as 1888, Varina Anne Davies writes about the remarkable status accorded to the serpent in so many world mythologies:

[The Serpent] is held in honor among the Chaldeans, Babylonians, Chinese, Greeks, Phoenicians, as well as in Egypt and India[...] Nor were the classic nations alone fascinated by the sinuous grace and brilliant coloring of the snake. Serpent worship in different forms was to be found in many cases among the American Indians, of which the religious dance of the Moquis presents an example. (Davies, 1888: 162-3)

The above study affirms serpent worship as ubiquitous in Middle-Eastern and Asian contexts and closely allied to goddess worship. Equally interesting is the discussion by Balaji Mundkur and others that links Native American serpent myths to Asian, specifically South Asian myths (Mundkur et al., 1976: 429-55). In all these myths, the serpent is shown to be an aspect of the ancient earth goddess, among other things, and often a symbol of fertility and even life. Indeed, Alex Hunt states that “the serpent is a powerfully charged iconographic figure for both Judaeo-Christian and Tanoan cultures” (Hunt, 2008: 9). Hunt declares that in Tanoan ceremony “the serpent is no symbol of evil [...] but one of water, the essence of life in the desert” (Hunt, 2008: 12).

These views definitely find a parallel in the Hindu world view. Indeed in the Shaktha cult, dedicated to the worship of Shakthi or the mother goddess, the emphasis on Kundalini energy, the primordial cosmic energy that is said to exist in every individual, is believed to be the direct manifestation of the cosmic goddess who is coiled as a serpent. The Sanskrit word *kunḍalinī*, is the feminine of *kunḍalin* meaning circular, coiled, from *kunḍala* or ring. In Shaktha literature, therefore, the cosmic goddess is frequently and pervasively linked to a serpent (see Farquhar, 1967/1920: 167; Vanamali, 2008: 295-314). Hence, in making these associations, Mehta is not straying from the Hindu world view. In *A River Sutra*, both the river Narmada and the serpent are consistently linked to

the essence of life and this perspective is reinforced throughout the several narratives, both subtly and overtly. Already in the frame narrative, the bureaucrat, discussing the pilgrims of the river Narmada, sets the stage by linking the river to primal energy:

[T]he purpose of the pilgrimage is endurance. Through their endurance the pilgrims hope to generate the heat, the tapas, that links men to the energy of the universe, as the Narmada River is thought to link mankind to the energy of Shiva. (8)

Even to the civil servant, a man as untouched by the extremes of love, who had in his own words “no recollection of burning desire” in his entire life (48), this stark energy is not to be taken lightly. When informed by a colleague of the desire of his nephew, Nitin Bose, to stay at the lodge since he was interested in tribal customs, he is alarmed:

[W]hat did the young man really know about the beliefs of the tribals?

Did he know the goddess who had incinerated even the Great Ascetic [Lord Shiva] in the fires of longing, the goddess whose power had been acknowledged by the ancient sages with such fearful names as the Terrible One, the Implacable Mother, the Dark Lady, the Destroyer of Time, The Everlasting Dream – did he know the goddess had been worshipped by the tribal inhabitants of these jungles for thousands of years? (97-8)

The above passage helps to establish a firm link between the Vano folk deity, the serpent goddess, and the primal goddess, Parvati, consort of Shiva, since the narrator does not distinguish between them. This too is entirely in keeping with the ethos of Hinduism where all folk deities are ultimately seen as manifestations of *Adiparasakthi* (Shulman, 1980: 40-63). Also, it was not fanciful for the bureaucrat to have been worried about Nitin Bose since eventually we are told that “he has been touched by the power of the goddess” (141). Therefore, the goddess and the serpent are linked to the essential source of life, here identified as love. As Mr Chagla explains awkwardly:

It is not a woman who has taken possession of Mr Bose’s soul, sir. How can such a thing can [*sic*] ever happen?... Sir. Really, sir... 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... And Mr Bose did not show her respect so he is being punished. (142)

The above words clearly indicate Chagla’s view that Bose has been punished for ignoring the life-affirming feminine principle. It is inevitable under these circumstances that the snake, already identified with the essence of life and linked to the goddess, should be involved in the cure.

The head bearer at the tea estate where Nitin Bose was the manager records that when the latter was brought back home from the jungle semi-comatose and blathering about collyrium and vermilion, the village priest, after enquiring into the circumstances “returned an hour later with a covered basket” (135), containing a snake. The bearer was stunned when he saw the priest “was holding a snake only inches from [Bose’s] face and reciting some spell” (135-6). He could “see the snake’s tongue flicking to touch the skin of [Bose’s] face. But [Bose] did not wince, or even blink” (136). After this, Bose recovers enough to wake up and enquire about what the priest was doing and to record the strange

circumstances surrounding his following the enchantress into the jungle on the full moon night. The priest repeats the ceremony again with the snake and finally pronounces: “this serpent has helped you. But only a little. And not for very long...”. He tells the head bearer “[i]f your sahib wants to recover his mind he must worship the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River. Only that river has been given the power to cure him.” (137). Thus, river, serpent, and the life-affirming feminine principle are firmly yoked together and cemented by the bureaucrat’s repeated personification of Narmada as a woman adorning herself for a lover. The following passages consolidate this link:

Dawn lightened the sky and I was able to see the Narmada ... refracting the first rays of sun into arcs of color as if the river were a woman adorning herself with jewels.

Or again,

[...] the water was still dark, appearing motionless in the shadows like a woman indolently stretching her limbs as she oiled herself.

And further down the same page,

I ... imagined the river as a woman painting her palms and the soles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover. (139)

Mr Chagla reinforces this primal link much more overtly when he declares unequivocally,

“desire is the origin of life. For thousands of years our tribals have worshipped it as the goddess. You have heard the pilgrims praying, ‘Save us from the serpent’s venom’. Well, sir, the meaning of the prayer is as follows. The serpent in question is desire. Its venom is the harm a man does when he is ignoring the power of desire”. (143)

Hence, both subtly and overtly, the link between serpent, river, and goddess as the primal life force is continually reiterated between the pages of the novel. It is a lesson that needs to be repeated because the characters in the frame narrative are men like the bureaucrat who have either not quite cognized the pre-eminence of this link or have only understood it partially. Dr Mitra, learned in ancient myths and history, glimpses the force of the primal power of the goddess and attempts to educate the bureaucrat sahib of it when the latter is struggling to understand Nitin Bose’s predicament:

“My dear fellow. This is where the war for the possession of India was fought – pitting Aryan reason against the primal beliefs of the tribals. Though they weren’t tribals at all really... they had a civilization long before the Aryans arrived, with great cities and so forth. Called themselves Nagas and worshipped Naga, the snake. In my opinion the Sanskrit word for city, nagara, comes from them”. (150)

Indeed, Dr Mitra has grasped an important lesson when he glimpses the great power of the feminine principle and sees that although ostensibly “the ‘reason’ of the Aryans

seems to have taken centre stage, the primal power of the goddess cannot be vanquished". When he casually remarks to the bureaucrat "[d]id you know Narmada means 'whore' in Sanskrit?" (150), he has already absorbed the idea that binaries such as reason and enchantment, discipline and passion, science and mysticism, are not opposites but only different dimensions of the great drama of life and hence different attributes of the great goddess, who stands for the fullness of life.

This link between "woman and nature", however, though it strives to affirm the feminine, may itself be considered deeply problematic by feminists. As Denise Riley argues, in Western intellectual traditions, as elsewhere, theologians and philosophers from the sixteenth century onwards expanded nature's domain to engulf "woman". This casting of woman as synonymous with nature, Riley asserts, effectively embalms her as a passive being mired in nature, thus thrusting her outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency (Riley, 1988: 43). Historically, women have been closely associated with nature through their biological as well as social roles, unlike men who have always marked their separation from the natural world and signalled their transcendence. Therefore, feminists such as Riley, Plant and others argue, if woman's perceived proximity to nature leads to her oppression, then her liberation would depend on her distancing herself from it. In line with feminism's wariness about linking women to nature, feminists such as Riley and Plant have emphasized the dangers of this alliance (Plant, 1988: np). Indeed, Riley has summarily dismissed fictional attempts that link women and nature and ecofeminism itself as reifying this alliance. From this perspective, Mehta's endeavours as either a "littoral writer" or indeed as affirming the feminine through her invoking of goddess myths, may still be unacceptable to feminists.

Recently, however, theorists such as Stacy Alaimo have reviewed the stand taken by these feminists. Alaimo, in her book *Undomesticated Ground, Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, suggests that the way forward is to redefine nature itself. If nature is no longer a repository of stasis and essentialism, then the female body need not be misogyny's best resource (Alaimo, 2000: 10). She endorses Carolyn Merchant's "ecological approach to history" that "reasserts the idea of nature as historical actor". Alaimo believes that "viewing nature as an actor radically challenges the idea that nature is passive matter, there for cultural consumption" (Alaimo, 2000: 12). She discusses a range of women's texts that "inhabit nature in order to transform it, not only contending with the natures that have been waged against women but writing nature as feminist space" (Alaimo, 2000: 13). She believes that

while the fact that nature has been represented as both an empty space and a field replete with cultural values may make it a peculiarly paradoxical place, this paradox may actually make it an auspicious terrain for feminism. Both the ideological saturation of nature and the concomitant positioning of nature as outside of culture make it the perfect site for the "movement" that engenders "the subject of feminism", as deLauretis explains: "It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses." Rather than fleeing from or retreating to an already defined realm of nature, many women writers instead undertake this very movement between the hegemonic constructions of nature and the elsewhere beyond them. This movement characterizes women's attempts to write nature as a feminist space. (Alaimo, 2000: 17)

It is in this feminist space described by Alaimo that I would unhesitatingly place *A River Sutra*. Mehta's creation of Narmada River as unorthodox and sexual could be seen as offering women a figure of identification outside the law by depicting nature as a force that resists mastery. Using oral and folk myths, Mehta's Narmada River and its surrounding land becomes a place to cast off constricting domestic values. In *A River Sutra*, nature as the Narmada, serves as a place of possibility, or to use Alaimo's words "a space of disidentification from rigidly gendered cultural scripts" (Alaimo, 2000: 65-6). There is a further intriguing feature in *A River Sutra*, one that would align it to feminism as a whole but more specifically to ecofeminism. This is the effort made to offset the woman/nature alliance by linking the male to nature. Rather than attempting to disentangle "woman" from the web of associations that tie her to nature, Mehta adopts the unusual tactic of embedding the male with the natural elements. This alliance which occurs repeatedly in the narrative is made possible because of the fluidity of the folk and oral myths that are still pervasive and dynamic within Hinduism and which, like most oral traditions, work to undercut the power of the status quo.

Mehta appears to be judicious in her choice of folklore and myths, since they seem designed for her purposes. In the very first mythic tale that she chooses to elaborate on, Lord Shiva, the divine ascetic, even in his act of austere meditation, is irrevocably linked to biological bodily functions, normally the terrain of mortal females: "It is said that Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills" (8). But as A.K. Ramanujan asserts in his foreword to *Folktales from India* (Ramanujan, 1987: xviii), and as indeed every Hindu child knows, in Vedic mythology, Hindu gods do not blink, sweat, nor do their feet touch the ground. Therefore the description of Shiva, one of the Hindu Trinity, as perspiring, is already a deviation from orthodox Hindu belief systems. It does not stop there. When the bureaucrat describes the Narmada in full spate, he observes that "[t]he distant waterfalls, swollen by monsoon rains, crash through the marble rocks like surf breaking at full tide, and below the rest house the river churns and bubbles around sudden rapids, *eroding* the gray-green stones lying on its riverbed into *the oval lingams* [emphasis mine] that are the symbol of Shiva" (175). This description that insists on the feminine Narmada *eroding* the rocks into *lingams* – phallic images associated with Lord Shiva – once again affirms the pre-eminent power of the feminine principle. Then Mehta's act of choosing oral myths, where great liberties are taken with the gods and where they are thoroughly humanized (as is generally the case in folk literature; see Ramanujan, 1987: xviii) becomes illustrative of Noël Sturgeon's provocative argument that essentialist moments in ecofeminism have distinct and significant political purposes (Sturgeon, 1997: 10-11).

One of the primary political messages that *A River Sutra* enacts is the profound futility of pursuing binaristic modes of thought that patriarchal discourse has constructed to privilege the male. Life on the banks of the Narmada is certainly not so cut and dried. As Amir Rumi's poem explicates, and the wise old mullah, Tariq Mia, has realized, even so pure an emotion as "love" can disfigure the face and shrivel the flesh:

The heat of Your presence

Blinds my eyes.

Blisters my skin

Shrivels my flesh.

Do not turn in loathing from me.

O Beloved, can You not see

Only Love disfigures me? (71)

Indeed, story after story enacts this lesson. The stark austerity of the Jain monk pulling his hair painfully out by its roots in preparation for his complete renunciation of life occurs in the middle of the jamboree arranged by his father; the accomplished girl groomed to be the perfect courtesan becomes the epitome of the devoted wife – almost a sati – who takes her own life after her husband’s death, except that *her* death occurs in water, not fire, but significantly, in another *panchabhuta* (one of the five primary elements in the Hindu cosmology; see Chatterjee, 2007: np); or again, the most mystical and seemingly irrational of the sages, the Naga Babas, who live in cremation grounds, wander naked and smear themselves in ashes can turn out to be the most urbane and sophisticated of modern intellectuals and in the text, a leading archaeologist like Prof. V.V. Shankar.

The bureaucrat’s black-and-white approach to life makes his attitude representative of the limitations of patriarchal modes of thought. Tariq Mia repeatedly laughs at the bureaucrat’s reluctance to face the contradictions immanent in life and love. He questions him “Oh, little brother, are you so unfortunate? Have you never been scalded by love?” (49); “You mustn’t be so frightened of love, little brother” (91). It is only towards the end when all the narratives have been recounted that the bureaucrat, the “everyman” of the book, begins to gain some understanding: “I was thinking of the people I had encountered since I had come to the rest house, and Tariq Mia’s observations that they were like water flowing through lives to teach us something. Perhaps the old mullah was right. Perhaps destiny had brought me to the banks of the Narmada to understand the world” (269), he admits. The bureaucrat’s understanding, however, is even now imperfect. When the last recital, an ode to the River Narmada is rendered by the river minstrel, it once again evokes the fullness of life that nullifies opposites, where is underlined, paradoxically, the “ardour” of the “Great Ascetic”:

They say the Ascetic sporting with the goddess

Mingled the sweat of his ardour with the drops

Of love’s exertions from her breasts

Creating you from the liquid of his divine desire.

Then he changed you into a river

To cool the lusts of holy men

And called you Narmada,
Soother of Desires. (275)

The bureaucrat is still not completely ready to receive the message of the fullness of life. He struggles to understand the demands of the Naga Baba turned archaeologist “[w]hy [he] became an ascetic, why [he] stopped. What all this means”. The Naga Baba’s reply: “Don’t you know the soul must travel through eighty-four thousand births in order to become a man?” (281) only leaves him puzzled. The lesson that he (and we, the readers) need to learn is that it is harder to learn about life and love than it is even to renounce the world. It is interesting and significant that the bureaucrat who had declared himself at the very start of the narrative to be a “vanaprasti” ready to renounce the world is instead taught by the different tales about the importance of the world; of life and love. This is the ultimate, clear affirmation of the pre-eminence of the feminine principle that the text offers.

In the final analysis then *A River Sutra* is born of a mythopoeic impulse to evoke the productive tension between the fluid boundaries, fecundity, and multiplicity of the feminine principle and the ordering proclivities of the masculine world. The message that these narratives enforce is the message of the immediacy of life; of human emotions and the pulsing vibrancy of human activity and love. The river becomes a character, with the power to affect plot, thus blurring previously inscribed binary divisions. The landscape itself dispels cultural order. Narmada, existing in a liminal world as character and an elemental force of nature, facilitates the blurring of the line between nature and culture. The tribals, living along its banks, respect it and adapt to it efficiently and willingly. Here, Narmada emerges as an actor, not as a passive, malleable natural element; as an influence on culture, not as culture’s raw material. Since the river and the land around it are persistently coded as feminine and since Mehta herself frequently employs the trope of a female nature, her insistence on the land as an actor with infinite potential to influence human destinies carries feminist implications. The myths evoked then, work to overcome the restrictions on “being”, that is built into the symbolic code to instead affirm a feminist message.

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Notes

1. The first of Gita Mehta’s works, these are a collection of humorous essays that satirize Western depictions of India’s spirituality.
2. A river in central India and the fifth largest in the Indian subcontinent, the Narmada forms the traditional boundary between North and South India and flows westwards over a length of 1,312 kilometres before joining the Arabian Sea at the Gulf of Cambey.
3. Within Hindu literature *sutra* denotes a distinct genre and is used as suffix in the title of many texts of this genre, as in *Kama Sutra*, which then indicates that this “sutra” is about “Kama” or sensual or sexual pleasure.
4. This occurs when the assessment of a literary work is premised on the author’s intended meaning rather than on an actual response to the work per se.

5. Subsequent references to *A River Sutra* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the text.
6. Naga Babas are strange mendicants of Shiva who wander naked and live in cremation grounds.

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