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ART, MUSIC AND ECOLOGY IN *THE TEACHER'S STORY* AND *THE MUSICIAN'S STORY* IN GITA MEHTA'S *A RIVER SUTRA*

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Abstract:

Gita Mehta's A River Sutra is a portfolio of short stories connected with a common thread-the sutra of the Narmada river that intertwines stories and lives of the people on Narmada bank. The eclectic ecology and fullness of nature are the major themes of her novel that trigger human interactions and also facilitate them completing their course of action and life. These stories mainly delve with nature, art, environment, ecology, chill, cold, deserts, rain, water, music and society that throw light upon the relationships between teacher-pupil and father-daughter and their passion for art and music more than the affections. The paper attempts to examine the modest connections of art and music with ecology and society.

Keywords: *Ecology, Art, Music, Nature and Society, Indian Literature, Short Stories, etc.*

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* is a collection of snippets annexed with a common thread-the sutra of the Narmada river that interweaves accounts and lives of the people on N banks. Ecology plays an essential role in this novel. *The Teacher's Story* and *The Musician's Story* deal with the relationships between teacher-pupil and father-daughter and their passion for art and music more than their affections. It also throws light upon how art and music becomes the nexus between society and ecology.

The fourth part of the novel *A River Sutra* deals with a story about Music teacher Master Mohan in the story titled 'The Teacher's Story', he has been living in utter poverty with a quarrelsome and greedy wife who never approves and adores Master Mohan. His father was a music teacher who spent his earnings on training Master Mohan. Master Mohan used to go for singing and playing upon music on the occasion of a wedding or a birthday. Gradually, his father dies due to tuberculosis. Master Mohan leads his life as a music teacher as his voice does not suit singing. His wife taunts him and even does not serve him proper food. Master Mohan moves into the city giving Music lessons all day to students. As time passes, Master Mohan's wife does not give him food, which ultimately results into cooking on him on the small roof terrace of the house. Thus, Master Mohan lives a secluded life, away from his family though they live under the same roof. Though he tries to escape from his wife and the scornful looks of his daughter and son, they disturb him with the loud noise of film music which he never likes. In other words, Master Mohan's seclusion is always interrupted by his family members. The loud noise of film music becomes ecophobic for him.

Gradually, the writer narrates a healthy friendship between Master Mohan and the Paanwallah. The Paanwallah provides him comfort and information about Quawwali musical concerts. These Quawwali musicians are from Nizamuddin and Master Mohan considers it a great opportunity to listen to such music. The music sung by these Quawwali musicians function as ecophilic, as Master Mohan is relieved of his stress. Music has an ecstatic effect on him. The writer observes, "The more the singers were carried away by their music, the more Master Mohan felt the weight that burdened him



lighten, as if the ecstasy of the song being relayed from one throat to another was lifting him into a long-forgotten ecstasy himself” (Mehta, *ARS*, 39).

The singers sing with unity and as chorus, praising the Lord. Sacrificing oneself in the service of God is sacrificing happiness for ecology. These singers uphold sacrifice as the utmost human passion that makes a human meet the Almighty. The lead singer explicates ecophobia and ecophilia in singing through the sacrifice, as Prophet Mohammad sacrificed his son for pleasing the Almighty. The singer sings:

I prostrate my head to the blade of your sword.
O, the wonder of my submission.
O, the wonder of your protection (Mehta, *ARS*, 40).

At the Quawwali concert, Master Mohan comes across a young blind boy, Imrat who sings so beautifully that Master Mohan starts wiping unwarily. The power of singing and the purity of voice are so heavenly that Master Mohan forgets everything. Also, he learns that Imrat has an elder sister who has brought him to Calcutta. The unnamed woman tells him that terrible floods wipe the entire village. This also highlights ecophobia. The young woman narrates ecophobia, “Last year I brought Imrat with me to Calcutta to sell my embroidery. While we were here, terrible floods swept our village away. Our father, my husband, everybody was killed” (Mehta, *ARS*, 40). Master Mohan is so much influenced by the singing of the Quawwali singers that he feels ecstatic. The combined voices of the singer and the singular voice of Imrat are so ecophilic that Master Mohan is hypnotized by their voices. Imrat means nector who makes everyone forget their existences and in addition to his mesmerizing voice he is blind, which means impartial like nature and ecology. Master Mohan explicates his ecophilia, “The singers were already intoxicated by the power of their combined voices, unable to distinguish the singular voice of the child from all the other voices praising God” (Mehta, *ARS*, 40).

Further, the narrator develops intricacy in the plot as the young woman requests Master Mohan that he should keep her blind brother till she gets a job in the city for herself. Master Mohan is convinced by her and Imrat begins to live with Master Mohan. Initially, Master Mohan's wife and children hate the nine year old blind boy. They are disturbed by the singing of the boy. The paanwallah advises Master Mohan to go into the park and practice singing there. The park becomes a space in nature that accommodates both Master Mohan and Imrat. For them, the park is ecophilic as it separates them from the public. The paanwallah states, “Go to the park in the early mornings. Only goats and shepherds will disturb you there. Don't give up, Master. After all, there is a whole world in which to practice, away from the distractions of your house.’ So the music teacher woke his young charge before dawn and they boarded the first tram of the morning to reach the great park that is the center of Calcutta city” (Mehta, *ARS*, 45).

Gradually, Master Mohan with Imrat enters the park near the Victoria Memorial by climbing the wall. It is in the early dawn, nearly in darkness they enter the park and by unrolling the cane mat. They start practicing the raga. Music, darkness of early morning in the company of nature symbolize the rise of a sun in the ecology. It also symbolizes the rise of a great singer who has the soothing capacity like the sun, and who also can enlighten the world of music and singing with his pure singing. Also, Master Mohan and Imrat combine Hinduism and Islam as they belong to two different religious practices, now combine in nature. The voice of Imrat is so pure that it adds to the beauty of nature in the early morn. The writer captures ecophilia:

Again Imrat sang the scale, but there was a new resonance in his voice.
He could not see the faint blur of the picket fences ringing the race



course in the distance, or the summit of Ochterlony's Needle breaking through the smoke from the illegal fires built by the street hawkers around the base of the obelisk. He could not even see the guard looking through his sentry box, his hand half raised to expel them from the gardens, frozen in that gesture by the boy's voice. He only saw the power of the morning raga and dreaming visions of light, he pushed his voice toward them, believing sight was only a halftone away. Afraid the raga would strain the child's voice, Master Mohan asked Imrat to sing a devotional song. The boy obediently turned his heat towards the warmth of the sun's first rays and sang (Mehta, *ARS*, 46).

Subsequently, the writer brings forth the song of Imrat that flows from his throat incessantly like nectar. The prayer in the early morning in the praise of the Lord showcases Him as Creator and Destroyer. The lines bring forward ecophobia:

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?" (Mehta, *ARS*, 46)

Gita Mehta showcases that Master Mohan gets another voice in the guise of Imrat. The Almighty has given him a second voice, greater than he had ever heard in his life. The prayers composed by Kabir and the devotional song that flow out from Imrat's voice gather many listeners outside the gardens of the Victoria Memorial. This gathering becomes regular and ever increasing. The place of garden and the melodies of Imrat bring ecophilic impact on the listeners:

By the next morning people were already waiting for them, and the guard waved Master Mohan and Imrat benevolently through the gate. Word had spread in the park that a blind boy with the voice of an angel was singing in the gardens of the Victoria Memorial. In the darkness goatherds, street hawkers, refugees with children huddled to their bodies, waited patiently for Imrat to practice the scales of the morning raga before Master Mohan permitted him to sing the devotional songs that would give them the endurance to confront the indignities of their lives for another day (Mehta, *ARS*, 48).

Gradually, the popularity of Imrat's singing spreads in Calcutta. The crowd outside the garden increases. The admirers pay him money and food. Music recording company signs a treaty with Master Mohan and Imrat for thousand rupees. Imrat sings flawlessly and his music is played on a radio station. A talent should not be wasted in the dust and germs in the park. Ranjit, the owner of a recording company hires Imrat and his guardian. A wealthy Muhammad Sahib gives offers of five thousand rupees but Master Mohan does not like it. He declines the offer as he thinks that the singing of Imrat should be for people and not for a single person. But Master Mohan's wife takes rupees five thousand and forcefully takes the boy to Muhammad Sahib. After listening to the song of Imrat, the boy is murdered. It is like after taking the fruits the tree is cut down. The sacrifice of Imrat is the



highest sacrifice by Muhammad Sahib who symbolically presents Prophet Muhammad who sacrifices his loving son in the service of god.

The next part of the novel begins with the anti-climax of the previous story as the narrator is curious to know what happens with the music teacher. Tariq Mia wants to know from the narrator what did Master Mohan do after the murder of Imrat. The narrator tells Tariq Mia that two musicians were charged with the murder of the boy. Master Mohan listens to the record of Imrat's several times but the distress keeps him restless always. For a time, he decides to return to his family, but he changes his mind and he commits suicide by throwing himself down under the train. This act of suicide records Master Mohan's life as ecophobic without Imrat and, death becomes ecophilic as it relieves him from agony of living. Tariq Mia illustrates Master Mohan's love for the blind singer. His love for Imrat is so strong that life becomes meaningless and threatening without Imrat.

Subsequently, he comes across a pilgrim woman who has covered her face, but she is with a veena, a musical instrument. The woman is with a masculine face with delicate fingers. Both the narrator and the woman observe how pilgrims worship the water and religiously chant Om. They see the ecophilic connectivity between the pilgrims and the Narmada river, "Below us two pilgrims were standing waist high in the dark river, cupping water in their hands then letting it fall in a steam through their fingers as they chanted, "Om.Om.Om" (Mehta, *ARS*, 126). The woman with masculine face is a pilgrim who narrates the story of her life. She is at Mahadeo not as a pilgrim on a religious pilgrimage but to learn music. The river, water, lamps, trees, flowers, animals, darkness, insects, and rain create music. She is on her educational pilgrimage, attempting to learn music from nature. It is her father who always desires to teach music to his daughter. 'The Musician's Story' is a story of a veena maestro known for his classical music. He is the father of a young girl with an ugly face. Her mother hated her for her manly face. As a child she attempted to learn music at the age of six. Her father does not teach her the music directly as 'sa re ga ma pa dhani.' Instead he taught her the music from nature like the birds sitting on the tree or the careless waterfall and its sound. The enthusiasm of the father is evident when he attempts to make his daughter aware of the music of ecology:

I tried to imitate him, bending forward in my chair. "Hear? How that song ended on a single note when the bird settled into the tree? The greatest rags must end like that, leaving just one note's vibrations on the air.

...Do you know why birds sing at dawn and at sunset? Because of the changing light. Their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is truly music (Mehta, *ARS*, 131).

The story projects a strong nexus between the father and the daughter. The father is desperate to learn and teach music not from instruments but from nature, environment, birds and animals. For them, nature is the teacher who teaches music in true sense. Both the father and the daughter walk into the forest behind their house with an intention to learn music from nature. According to him, a feeding deer drops its food to listen to music and so also, a king cobra sways its hood in pleasure. A peacock's cries denote 'sa'. Similarly, a calf calling its mother has a note 're'. A goat says, 'ga'. The herons say 'ma'. The nightingale sings in the night 'pa'. The neighing of horse, 'dha' and an elephant trumpets 'ni'. These details exhibit how the musician has established a rapport with ecology. For him, music is everywhere in nature. The girl says:

Then my father sang the notes of the scale. So I could hear him imitating the animals we had seen--the strutting of the peacock, the panic of a lost calf, the destructive antics of a goat, the sweeping flight of the heron, the



nightingale nesting in a tree, the rearing of a horse, the power of an angry elephant—until the nature of the notes became second nature to me. (Mehta, *ARS*, 132).

Gradually, the girl tells the narrator that she was not interested in her initial stage to learn music, but her father makes her understand the link between music and the world. She learns raga in the initial stage and after that her father allows her to take the veena across her knees. He tells her that the language of raga is the language of the soul. Also, she learns that music is the mathematics which the universe should understand. The girl introduces herself with her name for the first time as Leelavati. As an adolescent girl she is aware about the changes in her body. One day, a young man appears in front of her father requesting him to teach him the music. The stranger is so beautiful that the girl seems uglier in front of him. Her father puts a condition that he will teach the stranger music if he marries her. The stranger is a twenty-one year old young man whereas the girl is eighteen. Her father connects ecology with music. She remembers, “Now I remembered my father’s teaching as I tried to be the water to the river of the stranger’s raga, the moonlight to his night. And when I thought how my father had said that a raga without the waterfall of grace notes was like a woman without a garment,... (Mehta, *ARS*, 142). The elements of nature produce music which her father understands.

Subsequently, the father, as a gentleman, frees the young man from his unwritten bond of marrying his daughter. Instead, he says that his daughter is given in marriage to music. The stranger proves to be a stranger as he does not turn up for marriage. He declines the marriage and the girl loses faith in everything. She stops playing music, as a result, her father has brings her to the Narmada river so that she should be cured from the ailment. She adds:

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 again the ragini to every raga.

He says I must understand that I am the bride of music, not of a musician. But it is an impossible penance that he demands of me, to express desire in my music when I am dead inside.

Do you think it can be done?

Do you think this river has such power? (Mehta, *ARS*, 145)

Gita Mehta concludes the story of musician and his daughter with a doubt about the ecology and aquaphilia of the river. Though, human beings are away from ecology, when they surrender to ecology and the ecophilic nature nurtures them. To conclude, *The Teacher’s Story* and *The Musician’s Story* chronicles the Master Mohan and Musician harmonious relationship with their students. It also highlights how the Narmada River becomes the mediocre to cure them from their agonies and free them from their pangs.

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