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NATURE, ECOPHILIA AND MYSTERY OF THE STORY 'THE EXECUTIVE'S STORY' IN GITA MEHTA'S A RIVER SUTRA

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Abstract:

Gita Mehta's A River Sutra is a collection of short stories connected with a common thread-the sutra of the Narmada River that intertwines stories and lives of the people on her banks. The richness of the nature plays pivotal role in the lives of the subjects of Mehta. Mystery is an indivisible aspect of ecology which the writer brings forth through 'The Executive's Story'. Nitin Bose, the executive of a tea estate is mysteriously haunted by a tribal woman with whom he establishes sexual relationship, and gradually as the obsession retreats, he experiences the fits of madness. It is the tribal goddess on the bank of the Narmada River in a tribe helps him to cure from his madness. The present research paper attempts to examine impact of ecology on human mind in healing. It also highlights mystery as one of the imperatives of ecology that keeps the readers drilled.

Keywords: *Mystery, Ecology, Ecophilia, Ecophobia, Nature, etc.*

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* is a collection of short stories connected with a common thread-the sutra of the Narmada River that intertwines stories and lives of the people on her banks. The richness of the nature plays pivotal role in the lives of the subjects of Mehta. Mystery is an indivisible aspect of ecology which the writer brings forth through 'The Executive's Story'. The sixth and seventh parts of the novel *A River Sutra* discuss how Nitin Bose, a visitor to the narrator at the Narmada rest house is captured by Police as he is caught attempting suicide. Surprisingly, the policeman tells the narrator that Nitin Bose introduces himself as Miss Rima Bose. This instance showcases that a male introduces himself as a female. It is also a case of shifting of gender and identity. Gradually, the narrator unveils the story of Nitin Bose, an executive of a tea estate who mysteriously develops sexual intimacy with Rima, the wife of coolie. Rima is a tribal woman whose curse or unsatisfied passion seems to haunt Nitin Bose when he parts from her. Finally, he restores to his senses with the help of the tribal people who help him in worshipping the tribal goddess to bring him back to his self.

Illustration: The story opens with Nitin Bose, a nephew of a friend of the narrator is caught by the police as a madman and put into custody. Nitin tells the doctor that he is possessed. A police constable named Shashi narrates these details to the narrator. Certainly, this makes the narrator to visit the police station at Rudra hurriedly. Shashi is a rough driver who drives very fast. The narrator mounts upon his

motorcycle and Shashi drives through the jungle towards Rudra. The narrator emphasizes the speed of the vehicle and its impact on him. The ecophilia and ecophobia—both are evident as the narrator explains his journey towards Rudra through the jungle:

The wind whipped past my face, making my eyes water as we raced through the jungle towards Rudra. By the time the motorcycle bumped onto the tarmac road, my eyes were watering so badly the small painted houses were only a blur of lime-greens and blues connected by bougainvillea bushes and rows of black crows perched on electric wires (Mehta, *ARS*, 67).

Further, Nitin Bose, the young man who is the visitor to the narrator asks him that can the narrator help him in getting to a shrine of a goddess jungle. She is a tribal goddess who cures the madness of people who are possessed. This indicates that Nitin who is urban dweller needs to cure not from the advanced medical science but from a jungle goddess, who is the symbol of nature and ecology. Also, it amplifies the idea of ecoculture and ecopsychology as a tribal goddess who is situated in a remote place has the power to cure the madness of people. Nitin Bose asks, “They say there is a shrine to a goddess in these jungles. A tribal goddess, who cures the madness of those who are possessed. Can you help me find it?” (Mehta, *ARS*, 68). Further, he threatens that he will commit suicide if he does not visit the shrine. This indicates that if ecology does not cure, it kills. It is not the threat but his firm belief that the shrine has the capacity to cure him. “I will cause no trouble, I swear it. If I cannot visit the shrine I will have to kill myself. I can’t go on like this” (Mehta, *ARS*, 68). This snippet underlines the cathartic function of ecology. The narrator realizes that Nitin Bose is neither mad nor possessed. It is a temporary aberration. Soon, he is restored to his self. The narrator brings Nitin Bose to his government rest house to stay with him.

Gita Mehta unfolds mystery through the seventh part entitled ‘The Executive’s Story’, in the novel narrates a mysterious phase of Nitin Bose’s tenure who works as an executive in a tea estate. He is a young executive in the oldest tea company in Calcutta. The story is an account of mystery, possession, haunting, magic and dreams-like sequences of Nitin Bose who experiences love and sex in the company of a mysterious woman, Rima. The writer shifts the urban dweller into rural setting who undergoes the mixture of mystery, sex and dreamlike phase of his life. Also, it is natural, too, as a young man enjoys sex for the first time in his life the woman creates a spell around him.

Nitin is working in Calcutta, a demographically dense city where refugees from Bangladesh stay on the railway platforms. The density of demography highlights the over exploitation of land as a resource. Nature is exiled resulting into ecophobia. The narrator explicates the ecophobia through the observations of Nitin Bose:

Outside our office Calcutta crumble under the weight of neglect, exploitation, poisonous humidity, traffic jams, power failures, and roads plowed up like rice fields to make an underground railway, while a whole generation stoically waited for the city to return to what it once had been as more trainloads of refugees arrived to sleep on railway platforms already overcrowded with refugees from the partition of India fifty years earlier, the war in Bangladesh twenty years earlier, the devastations of nature that daily drew the desperate to a great metropolis itself desperately surviving as if a war had just ended.

But we experienced only claustrophobia as we stared through the darkened windows of our airconditioned cars at the crowds teeming across the broken pavements (Mehta, *ARS*, 71).

Further, Nitin prefers to be the manager of a tea estate of his company and lives on the tea estate away from the claustrophobic city life. His selection of a secluded life to be manager of a tea estate indicates his retirement from urban life like the narrator. He observes the wonders of people who are a part of ecology. Nitin narrates, “Our tea garden colleagues were young, good-looking Indians bursting with alien energy. We listened to their boasts of rogue elephants tracked, man-eating

tigers shot, hot-blooded women tamed, and envied the cowboy quality to their headlong pursuit of pleasure during the weeks they spent in the city” (Mehta, *ARS*, 72).

Gradually, as the manager he observes how the tea estate boys spoil their health by carelessly consuming whisky. Alcoholism and adultery become the necessary evils for the estate boys. This hints at exploitation of health in ecologically enriched spaces. Contradictory to the urban and overly populated life, Nitin feels life on the tea estate as the real man's life. Nitin feels suffocated in Calcutta where nature, solitude and peace are rare. Therefore, the tea estate becomes ecophilic and soothing for him. He says, “To me, suffocated by the sheer weight of Calcutta’s inescapable humanity, the solitude of the tea estate was its most attractive prospect” (Mehta, *ARS*, 74). Nitin travels from the small airport to the tea garden. After an eight hour drive he reaches the lush green tea estate and is mesmerised by the rich ecology of the greenery on the land and the beautiful clouds in the sky. His journey symbolizes his stepping down from the urban status through high flight to a road drive and then to the nature. For the first time, he is away from the densely populated Calcutta in the company of nature. Awestruck by the beauty of nature, Nitin proliferates ecophilia:

I stared in awe at the green emptiness stretching in circles below the hill road. Each shepherd beating his animals off the road, each coolie laboring under the bundles tied to his head, required an individual greeting, so rare was human encounter. Overhead the small clouds rose like foam above the distant Himalayas before breaking in a white wave as the windswept them toward the plains, and I felt like a pebble thrown into a wooded ocean, expanding the empty horizon as an alien object moves the water outward. (Mehta, *ARS*, 74).

Further, Nitin Bose observes the thatched cottages in a village with plastered walls and weathered timber beams that are isolated from the city. The ecology is so rich that there is no light during the night, the tranquil sky and the tranquil tea estate during darkness. The tranquility underlines ecophilia as Nitin narrates, “As dusk fell we could no longer see the fields of tea bushes. Only the dim lanterns from the tea pickers’ colonies broke the darkness. Then night enclosed us in a velvet embrace, and the lights from the tea pickers’ huts were no less gentle than the stars in that tranquil sky” (Mehta, *ARS*, 75).

Nitin reaches the tea estate and finds that he is respected by every servant in the quarters and similarly, by the workers on the site. Nitin represents Neo-Colonial identity as he is respected profoundly by everyone as if they are working for some British Colonial officer. Nitin selects the posting only to detach himself from the urban life. He prefers to sit alone and enjoy the solitude in the company of nature. His ecophilic emotions are evident when he explicates his solitude, “I sat alone in the wood-beamed dining room reveling in my good fortune, the only noise the sound of crickets outside and the creating of the pantry door each time the head bearer brought me another dish” (Mehta, *ARS*, 76).

Gradually, Nitin Bose narrates the juxtaposing situations in his life in Calcutta and his present status in the tea estate. In the initial stage, he remains away from alcohol and sex. Gradually, as he spends more time on the tea estate, he realises the lives of people around him. His becoming one with the environment exhibits ecophilia:

I suppose I had begun to exhibit the mannerisms of an elder. Certainly, my old self of the Calcutta days has less and less present my new self-increasing so, like a shortening shadow merges with its subject. I hardly drank, and I never thought about women. If women showed themselves in my dreams as I lay asleep in the ebony bed, they did so with such subtlety that I awoke with no memory of them (Mehta, *ARS*, 77).

Further, as the impact of nature and rich surrounding, he spends time reading the Puranas. This hints at the mythological connections of Hindu sages and scholars that are encouraged by the Narmada river to read and meditate. Also, he spends time walking through tea gardens. The stories of demons, sages, gods, lovers and cosmology fascinate him. He prefers to sit in the veranda reading books during evenings. This symbolises Nitin Bose’s space between ecology and human residence and also between

day and night—evenings. This space is very symbolic as it bridges ecology and human construction as well as day and night. It also symbolises doubtful areas of environment. Similarly, he enters the dubious zones of mythological stories of vast underground civilization, mysteries of people—half human and half serpent. The tales from the Puranas exhibit ecophilia as Nitin enjoys the landscape and beautiful descriptions of people, gods, and gardens. He says:

But I enjoyed their poetic descriptions of palaces and universities constructed from many-coloured marbles. Of gardens more beautiful than those of the gods themselves with ponds of crystalline water alive with leaping fish, silver among the water lilies, and trees bending under the weight of flowering vines. A world devoted to pleasure and learning, its serenity guarded by hooded serpents with great gems flashing from their hoods (Mehta, *ARS*, 77-78).

A River Sutra deals mainly with the spellbound beauty of the night and the tribal civilisation spread across the Narmada river. The novel also juxtaposes urban life with all luxuries placed against the simple serene lives of the tribal people. It also has the spice of superstitions and unbelievable stories from the past. The urban dwellers are fascinated by the mysterious stories and lives of the tribals around the Narmada. The bushes and trees represent the tribal civilisation. Nitin Bose amalgamates ecophilia and the mysterious ecoculture at his tea estate:

After dinner I would sit on the veranda in my wicker armchair, staring into the velvet night, the stars so low in the sky. I felt I had only to reach up and pull one down to shed more light on my open book, imagining that the gentle tribals I had seen bending over the tea bushes were in fact descendants of this civilization, still able to do that Indian rope trick, and when I fell asleep in my ebony bed under the sails of mosquito netting, I dreamed of legendary kingdoms guarded by hooded cobras (Mehta, *ARS*, 78).

Gradually, Nitin spends two years on the tea estate by becoming one with nature and people at the tea estate. He is not an alcoholic and still he wants to stay with the tea estate. Even after a call from the Manager of his company through Ashok, Nitin declines to return to Calcutta. This act amplifies Nitin's assimilation with ecology as a vanaprasthi. Ashok does not believe that a young man like Nitin stays at a tea estate without drinks and women. As Ashok leaves, Nitin is disturbed by the thought of his loneliness, his life without a woman and his unused manhood. For the first time he is restless in the rich ecological set up. Now, he traces the other aspect of ecology wherein the sexual acts are performed casually and naturally by insects and animals. His thoughts reflect his psychopathology. Nitin narrates the ecopsychology that he undergoes:

Like some small night animal, sexual restlessness began to gnaw at the edges of my content. After dinner I sat on the veranda, unable to relax in the wicker armchair as insects and mother flung themselves ceaselessly against the glass domes covering the light bulbs. The darkness that had always seemed so serene now mirrored my restless mind. For the first time I was lonely, and when I entered my bedroom I felt the massive bed sneering at my unused manhood (Mehta, *ARS*, 79).

Subsequently, Nitin does not find any interest in books which he used to enjoy earlier. His behaviour towards workers changes as he frowns and shouts at them. He prefers to drink while sitting lonely in the dark. After his drinking, he is dragged by his attendant and pushed into his bed. As time passes, Nitin drinks continuously and becomes lonelier. These instances showcase that man is basically a social animal who is not entertained by nature and ecology for a long time. One night he experiences a woman in his bed that makes love with Nitin. This mysterious woman is Rima who stealthily enters his bed every night and enjoys lovemaking. Rima's mysterious appearance during the dark when Nitin is under the influence of alcohol creates both ecophobia and the mystery of ecoculture

that surrounds the estate with the anecdotes of the past. He is under the influence of both- alcohol and woman like every predecessor of the tea estate. Nitin chronicles the mystery of his being with Rima:

I did not know whether I had fashioned her from the night and my own hunger even though her small teeth pierced my skin again and again like the sudden striking of a snake, and I heard the hissing of her pleasure against my throat. But when she left my bed I was already asleep, dreaming I still held a creature half serpent in my arms, my sated senses pulling me into the underground world of my grandfather's legends. If in the morning the mirror had not reflected the vermilion marks of her painted feet on my chest or the streaks of her black collyrium on my skin I would not have believed she existed. Seeing them, I was sick with love as if I had been pierced by all five arrows of desire (Mehta, *ARS*, 81).

Further, the desire of filling his solitude with human presence, Nitin waits for Rima the mysterious female in his bed. But as his desires are fulfilled, he realises that he is enchanted. He does not remember how she appeared during the day. Nitin is also aware about the mysterious body of Rima and the fear of the tribal culture. He explicates his ecophilia and at the same time, the ecoculture of the tribal women. Nitin narrates the dubious and mysterious Rima and her culture:

She even knew when our passion was in danger of becoming repetition. Then she seduced me with tribal songs in a language. I could not understand that I heard only the sweetness of the melodies. She told me tales of a great serpent kingdom lying inches beneath the soil. She spoke to me of charms that gave men the strength of elephants in rut 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. She swore she had seen an old woman raise flames from the palms of her hands, and a tribal priest cover a mango seedling with his shawl, then pull it away to reveal a dwarf tree bending under the weight of ripe mangoes. Swarming like clusters of black bees in the whiteness of her eyes, her pupils mesmerized me as her low voice gave substance to worlds I had dreamed of when reading my grandmother's books (Mehta, *ARS*, 82).

Consequently, as the spell of Rima withers, Nitin begins to take pleasure in the work of the tea estate. Similarly, the tea estate pickers again begin to treat him with esteem. The song which he heard in his enchanted state is actually the song being sung by women as they pick the leaves. The songs are natural that project nature, human relations and mystery of the legends. In his proper senses, Nitin remembers that he enjoyed sexual pleasure with Rima for a year. Sexual companionship is a part of love. Nitin notes the mysterious love, ecology and ancient past and the stories of gods from the books. Rima and Nitin's companionship brings forward a combination of ecology, mystery, past and anecdotes. Nitin narrates:

For a year Rima came to me every night, sliding into my ebony bed to coil her limbs around me. Like a magician she drew me into a subterranean world of dream, her body teaching mine the passing of the seasons, the secret rhythms of nature, until I understood why my grandfather's books called these hills Kamarupa, the kingdom of the God of Love (Mehta, *ARS*, 84).

Further, Nitin is called back by the head office and while leaving Rima, he learns that she is the wife of coolie at a railway depot in Agartala. The spell breaks and he feels ashamed of sleeping with a Coolie's wife. Gradually, he feels the life he spent in the tea garden, was very primitive. In the darkness, he searches for her with a torch but fails to find her out. The ecology in the night is so mysterious that he does not make out whether it was Rima or his enchantment that he chases during

these days at the estate. He swoons down while chasing Rima in the night. This indicates the mystery and ecophobia. He narrates:

I waited in the shadows. After a while I heard a rustling in the undergrowth, then the sound of breaking twigs as footsteps retreated into the woods that ringed my house. I ran to the wall. As I flung my leg over it I heard her call again, "Nitin, Nitin Bose."

"Rima, wait! I must talk to you!" I shouted.

"Nitin Bose!" The voice grew fainter as she ran into trees. The darkness was so dense I wished I had taken a torch from the guard so. I could see my way. Then I remembered the moon was in eclipse that night, and the superstitious guard would not venture out of the doors on a night so full of ill omen.

Heedless of the low branches whipping against my body. I ran after them through the jungle, calling her name my voice loud in the night (Mehta, *ARS*, 86).

Mysteriously, Rima disappears into the jungle leaving Nitin lying under a tree. He is suffocated in the dark. The vegetation in the night exhales Carbon dioxide as a result he is breathless. The ecology does not allow him to breathe freely. The guard and the attendant help him to come back to the bedroom. The guard and the attendants consider him haunted as Nitin behaves strangely. A priest is called in to check and control the spell on Nitin. The priest with a snake helps Nitin to relieve from the spell. The priest is from ecology and so also the snake. Therefore, it is ecology that helps Nitin to restore to his senses, "The priest was holding a snake only inches from your face and reciting some spell. I could see the snake's tongue flicking out to touch the skin of your face. But you did not wince, or even blink" (Mehta, *ARS*, 88). As the snake drinks the milk after the ceremony, the spell on Nitin disappears but it certainly affects his memory. As he starts to disbelieve the priest, a doctor is called in and with the help of medicine he tries to recover his senses. Further, Nitin does not believe the priest and the Adivasis. He begins to consume alcohol more than ever and loses control on his mind. Finally, the priest explicates the healing power of nature as he says that the Narmada River has a power to cure Nitin from his madness. In this act, the priest articulates ecophilia to cure the diseased mind of humans, "If 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" (Mehta, *ARS*, 89).

Gita Mehta introduces Rima as the Satan in the Garden of Eden - the tea estate and Nitin, as Adam who is happily relishing his life in reading books - destroys his happiness of peaceful life. As Adam loses the bliss of the Garden of Eden, Nitin Bose loses his peace of mind. The Garden of Eden has the mystery of Satan; similarly, Rima adds mystery, the mystery of nature, through darkness in the life of Nitin Bose.

To conclude, Gita Mehta, though a modern media person and a director who has been known for her experimentative art, advocates ecophilia through this story of Nitin Bose as the readers are made to believe that highly educated person like Nitin has to rely upon nature and the rituals of the rustic people in their remote jungles to cure himself. The tribal goddess, tribal people in the dense forests of the Narmada river and the elements in nature like clay, leaves of plants and water heal him from his madness.

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