

Communion with Nature - Rethinking Ecological Consciousness:

A Study of ‘The Minstrel’s Story’ in Gita Mehta’s

“A River Sutra”

Anitha Tangellamudi

Assistant Professor in English

Muffakham Jah College of Engineering and Technology

Banjara Hills

Hyderabad

Telangana

India

Abstract

The greatest challenge of the 21st century is to re-discover our lost connection with nature since humanity and nature are inseparable. Understanding that human well-being is possible only when we live in harmony with the natural world is vital for this.

In the days to come, humanity is going to experience drastic changes in the environment. Many regions of the world are likely to experience severe water shortages. Rising sea levels due to global warming will threaten large cities. Degradation of coral reefs and mangroves will impact fishermen. Glacier melting in the Himalayas is certain to disrupt water supplies in the region. Changes in temperature and rainfall are likely to reduce crop yields increasing the risk of hunger.

The decisions and behaviours of ecologically alienated individuals lead to environmental degradation. When we damage and destroy any part of the ecosystem in the natural world, we are certain to damage and hurt our own selves since our well-being can be experienced only by having a participatory relationship with nature. For the very same reason, we are challenged to become environmentally literate and ecologically conscious.

We need to look at the world through an ecological lens. Though our cultures are diverse, the way of looking at the world should be the same. There is a greater need to design everything we do in harmony with the rhythms of nature. Communing with the natural world makes us understand the diversity of life forms, the splendour of the universe in which we live in. This awakens us and turns us into caring citizens.

Ecologically affective and respectful consciousness or ecological consciousness is a prerequisite in order to improve the environmental behaviour of the individuals and to meet the challenges posed by a global environmental crisis and literature plays a very important role in instilling such ecological consciousness in the individuals.

INTRODUCTION

I thank you God for this most amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes (1-4).

Can this thanksgiving prayer offered by E. E. Cummings remain forever on our lips? Most of the world is seem to have been cutting down, and building on. Where has the nature in its resplendent glory gone? The question agonizes every environmentally conscious individual as he/she is deeply concerned about the state of the planet and the humanity's insensitive behaviour and its impact on the ecosystem.

In order to aim for a transformational change in the attitude at the individual and social levels, it is imperative to have a more participative behaviour with the non human other and a sustained, caring engagement with the non world. Our search for the meaning of our lives can only be understood in relation to nature. Nature is an open invitation to care - not only to care for ourselves but also to care for each other and to care for the entire community of life. "In the end, it is not new laws or more efficient solar cells that will play the leading role in solving humankind's environmental and social problems, it is our awakened and caring hearts" (Uhlxx).

We need to awaken to the "awe and wonder of the living earth; second to the dreadful beating we are inflicting on Earth and one another; and, third to our collective capacity to reverse present trends and to create a life-sustaining and just world" (xviii). Exposing the young minds to ecological literature can mould them into ecologically sensitive individuals.

MAN AND ECOLOGY

Ecology is sometimes characterized as the study of a natural web of life. Ecology is very often described as the study of the relationships between living organisms and their physical environment. Ecology was defined by Alee (1949) as "the science of inter-relations between living organisms and their environment, including both the physical and biotic environments, and emphasizing inter-species as well as intra-species relations" (Pachhauri, chap.3). Man is a part of such an ecosystem and not independent of it. He is dependent upon it for his survival. He is a product of a long evolutionary process in which as Donald Hughes says "ecological balance played a decisive role" (Jolsnaben 1).

Such ecological balance is being destroyed over the world. Environmental degradation or the deterioration of the environment through depletion of natural resources such as water, air and soil has become rampant on the earth. The world doesn't seem to mind the value of such a precious resource. Very aptly the High Level Threat Panel of the United Nations cautioned environmental degradation as one of the top ten threats of the world.

LITERARY RESPONSIBILITY

As a result, since the 1990s concerns about the environment have predominated the thinking of all the conscientious individuals. Today's world doesn't seem to be afraid of Third World War as much as it is afraid of environmental degradation. Almost all the disciplines of study have been trying to voice concern about environmental degradation in their own way to bring about awareness in the world on the need to conserve nature. These fields of study through their works, hope to, in their own small way redeem the world and preserve our only planet, the earth as destruction of the planet will lead to destruction of human life.

Literature too is not unaffected by this issue. In the paper entitled "Overtones of Ecofeminism in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*", Sumitha Roy says: "In its role as pragmatic, didactic and aesthetic discipline, literature seems to have taken a lead in fostering and sustaining this mission." Subsequently this tool came to be known as ecocriticism.

Literary ecocritics began to deliberate on the relationship between literature and the physical environment in their literary works. They have tried to analyze the depiction of nature as an indicator in understanding the text. This paper tries to analyze 'The Minstrel's Story' in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* through its depiction of nature. It is an inspiring example of how nature encompasses the physical and spiritual realities of our being.

ECOCONSCIOUSNESS IN LITERATURE

Traces of eco-consciousness in literature can be found as early as in Chaucer's and Shakespeare's works. Most of the works of Shakespeare depict an intimate relationship between man and nature. His works reveal a relationship with nature both literally and figuratively. His representation of nature is surely in favour of a green world.

Romantic Literature is known for its depiction of nature, nature imagery and its symbolism. Poets such as William Wordsworth emphasized intuition over reason and the pastoral over

the urban. Keats's concern for nature in some of his poems is evident. They are rich with nature images which are fused with not only aesthetic but spiritual aspects too.

Also Alexander Pope's "Solitude" (1700), Wordsworth's "Daffodils" (1804), Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818), James Kirkup's "No Men are Foreign", John Masefield's "Laugh and be Merry" (1903) can all be called nature poems.

The poem "Tree" by Tina Morris, a twentieth century British poet gives an apt picture of how the world would be like without trees. Nature and its beautiful forms are also celebrated in the writings of William Bartram in "Travels of William Bartram" (2012). During his camp in a Florida swamp, he wrote: "The verges and islets of the lagoon were elegantly embellished with flowering plants and shrubs" (Bartram 115).

Indian Literature is rich in nature imagery. Nature is worshipped as God. The Vedas teach the importance of Ahimsa. The Classics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata depict the journey of the divine characters through nature. Indian Writing has always merged and traversed through nature. Nature precedes life in all its forms in Indian literature. Hinduism, Indian culture and faith draw their strength from nature. They portray the relationship between nature and human survival.

Derozio's "Leaves", Kashi Prasad's imagery of nature, Manmohan Ghosh's enchanting nature descriptions create a sense of respect and understanding for the natural world. Toru Dutta's Savitri, Sita, Dhruva and Prahlad depict Indian culture and glorify nature. Sarojini Naidu's "The Nightingale of India" is full of poignant feeling and picturesque Indian imagery. Aurobindo Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, endeavoured to realize his oneness with the Universal soul through nature.

Gita Mehta's 'The Minstrel's Story' in "A River Sutra" too presents an awe-inspiring picture of the resplendent glory and overpowering qualities of nature. It depicts as to how one is humbled and feels helpless in front of the God's creation and its magnificence. It reveals as to how a sweet communion with nature in itself or communion through spirituality can become an avenue for ecological consciousness in a person.

GITA MEHTA'S A RIVER SUTRA

The setting of Gita Mehta's "A River Sutra" is on the banks of river Narmada. The narrator is a former bureaucrat who tries to escape the world by becoming a manager of a Government Rest – House on the banks of river Narmada. Narrator plays the role of Sutradhaar or a storyteller in this novel. He shares his experiences with the pilgrims, with his

friend old Mullah Tariq Mia and to the readers. While going through his daily routine the narrator is inspired by six stories, which construct the novel. One of the stories is ‘The Minstrel’s Story’ which is replete with nature imagery.

THE MINSTREL’S STORY

It is the story told to the narrator by Tariq Mia. It is the story of a small unfortunate girl. Her father calls her misfortune because her mother died giving birth to her. For this very reason, he dislikes her. She is scolded and beaten by her father.

She is sold by her own father for only five hundred rupees to a woman who pretends to be her new mother. The woman promises the family that she will arrange some job for her and will treat her like her daughter but pushes her in to prostitution. She is saved and taught by Naga Baba, a naked Sadhu who transforms her into a beautiful minstrel-woman (singer) travelling about, completely free and liberated. She finds her identity in nature with her in nature and nature in her.

EMBODYING NATURE

During Naga Baba’s final destination as an ascetic, he visits a brothel where he sees a man forcing himself to kiss a child’s lips. He denies accepting any offering by the woman of the brothel house but asks for that girl. Initially the woman tries to convince him to take something else instead of the girl. But being afraid of his resentment, she agrees to give the child to him. Naga Baba seizes girl’s hand and carries her with him into the jungle.

In his essay entitled “Ecological Asceticism: Cultural Revolution”, John expresses:

[Spiritualism] always begins with deep respect for the material creation, including the human body, and builds upon the view that we are not masters and possessors of this creation, but are called to turn it into a vehicle of communion, always taking into account and respecting its possibilities as well as its limitations.

It is true for spiritualism and asceticism does not mean moving away from this world and being insensitive to the problems plaguing it. It is being a part of this material world yet maintaining one’s own sanctity. Spiritualism is respecting every individual. It is being participative in fighting against social injustices, ecological degradation and such evils that entangle the society. Spiritualism devoid of humanistic values is futile.

On the way to the destination in jungle, Naga Baba teaches the little girl how to live in/with nature: “The Naga Baba [makes] a small fire and [burns] the dung so it would crumble

between his fingers into ash that he [smears] all over his body, an antiseptic and insulation against heat and cold. When he [rubs] the mixture on her arms she [finds] mosquitoes [do not bite] her” (Mehta 249).

Science explores the outer world whereas nature helps explore the world within us. Nature is the first teacher. All the intellect is stored in nature. It contains repertoire of knowledge in it. It reminds us of the beautiful poems written by Wordsworth - “Tables Turned”.

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks; (1-3)
... And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher. (13-16)

Naga Baba collects grass around the tree to make a bed for the child. The little girl's personality is bloomed in the midst of nature. She ultimately finds her identity in nature as has been said already. She is taught by the ascetic “to drink fresh milk directly from the teats of wandering goats, and how to look for cattle markings” (Mehta 249). “Together they [collect] pats of cow dung to be left in the sun to dry” (249). She “[looks] for water snakes, learning where they [swim] the water [is] pure enough to drink. She watches the ascetic dig bulbs and tubers from the ground to roast over an open fire, and [is] surprised at how good they tasted and how they filled her stomach” (248-249).

Our search for the meaning of our lives can only be understood in relation to nature. Nature is an open invitation to care- not only to care for ourselves but also to care for each other and to care for the entire community of life. Spirituality involving a deep respect for nature is strongly conditioned by the view that nature acquires sacredness only in and through the humans. Such a view, gives humanity decisive importance and responsibility to protect nature.

They climb the jagged hills of the Satpura range together until they reach the Amarkantak plateau. “She [sees] how animals came near the Naga Baba because he did not fear them , even the leopards she [hears] coughing at night, and when she [falls] asleep with the Naga Baba chanting next to her, deep in meditation, she knew the animals would ignore them as they [ignore] other species unthreatening to themselves”(251).

By simply learning more about nature and all its intricate, amazing details, we can gain a deeper appreciation and respect for it. We need to notice the birds animals, rocks and trees, and enjoy our "tour through the natural world" (Spretnak 7). This can put us in awe of the miracle of life itself. An intimate relationship with the environment has to be built into the human psyche to experience greater peace, contentment and bliss. This would lead to a better connection within ourselves and with others around us.

Finally after reaching the banks of the Narmada, the holiest river, which divides India, he tells the child that he gives her a new name, Uma, which means the peace in the night. "The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become a daughter of the Narmada" (Mehta 254). He tells her, he finally found her a mother in Narmada.

By developing deep affection towards nature, the little girl's own existence becomes gracious. She is able to understand her own rhythm and its connection with all the essential components existing outside. In this way she is able to form a connection and communion with nature which gives rise to ecological consciousness.

During summer, they spend together in the caves with Naga Baba teaching her the songs in praise of River Narmada. For monsoon, they together build a two-room hut with bamboo branches, banana leaves. Swollen waters of the river would flow "right into the hut, as if trying to embrace the child learning to recite the river's praises" (256). Nagababa teaches and helps the girl to learn about nature so that she can live in harmony with nature. Ecological consciousness is but living in harmony with nature.

Commenting on the reverence for nature, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in his essay entitled "Our Spiritual Connection to Nature" says:

Historically, nature, mountains, rivers, trees, the sun, the moon have always been honoured in ancient cultures. It's only when we start moving away from our connection to nature and ourselves that we begin polluting and destroying the environment. We need to revive these attitudes that foster our connection with nature.

'The Minstrel's Story' in Gita Mehta's "A River Sutra" shows the way of communing with nature spiritually. By being spiritually close to nature, a connection with ourselves, the world and the power above is established. It draws us closer to nature, creates respect for the Supreme Power paving way for Ecospiritualism. It humbles us and compels us to be ecologically conscious individuals.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar further says:

For this to happen, human consciousness must rise above greed and exploitation. Spirituality, the experience of one's own nature deep within, provides the key to this vital relationship with oneself, with others and with our environment. This connection to our own essential nature eliminates negative emotions, elevates one's consciousness and creates a spirit of care and commitment for the whole planet.

Eventually, Tariq Mia's sees the little girl growing older, travelling from temple to temple with Nagababa's encouragement singing praises to river Narmada. The girl spiritually bred and uplifted in nature, ultimately finds her liberation and identity in nature. 'The Minstrel's Story' in A River Sutra sends a compelling message that spiritualism does not mean moving away from the world but being a part of the world and maintaining the sanctity of the world. Spiritualism devoid of humanistic values is futile.

WEAVING WITH NATURE

The girl who grew up out of ascetic Naga Baba's selfless love is emancipated in nature. Commenting on her emancipation in the lap of nature, Mohit Kumar Ray writes:

[The story reflects] a woman's equation with nature, and her act of reaching out to nature in her crisis and despair... And coming close to nature the woman also imbibes the serenity and strength of this unchanged, "immortal" nature. This helps her to find fulfilment through a positive process of being and becoming (Ray 31).

Ecofeminists see creation as a beautiful, nurturing, intensely natural moment and one in which women continually engage. Brammer in her paper, "Ecofeminism, the Environment, and Social Movements" says "Because women weave life like the earth was weaved, women have a unique unity or special connectedness to the earth." In Uma, this is clearly evident. In spite of not knowing what it is to live in a jungle or near the river banks, she weaves herself completely with nature. Ecofeminists say it comes naturally for a woman.

PRAGMATIC APPROACH TOWARDS CONSERVATION OF NATURE

It shocks the bureaucrat-narrator to find out that this Naga Baba is in fact Professor, V. V. Shankar, the foremost archaeological authority on the Narmada in country. Nagababa's search for enlightenment led him to become an ascetic. As an ascetic, Naga Baba had renounced the world. He wandered the countryside, bathed in the ashes of the cremated,

begged for sustenance and bred and uplifted Uma spiritually but is led back to his old profession of archaeology learning that the greatest enlightenment comes from being a man and part of the rush of life- unlike what the narrator had envisioned that Naga Baba was “in a cave somewhere, seeking higher enlightenment” (Mehta 281).

And, while this may be a rather dramatic example, it acutely demonstrates how individuals must “reenter the world” (281), without dwelling in their sorrows or hiding from the world. They must be in the world to experience it, to live in it. Not everyone can become an ascetic to conserve nature for such a concept is retrogressive but with regard, respect and sensitivity to the human and non-human world around us, they can contribute to the preservation of nature in their own small way.

CONCLUSION

"Everything is connected to everything else"(Egan 126). Literature does not float above the world where humans live but is a product of this world and is connected to it. It plays a vital role in this immensely complex global system, in which we live. Encouraging learners to read such texts instils coconsciousness in them. Therefore literature must attempt to ensure a world where development, progress and ecological conservation go hand in hand. It plays a prominent role in doing so.

References

- Gross, Francis L. *Searching for God*. Rowman& Littlefield, 1989. 55. Print.
- Uhl Christopher. Preface. *Developing Ecological Consciousness: Path to a Sustainable World*. Rowman& Littlefield, 2003. Print.
- Pachhauri, Suresh. *Environmental Education*. Pearson Education India, 2012. Net Library. Web. 8 June, 2014.
- Jolsnaben, G. *Ecology and Literature*, 2010. Web. 16 May 2014. shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in
- Roy, Sumitha. "Overtones of Ecofeminism in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*." Forum for Musings V: II (2011): 102-113. Print.
- Bartram, William. *Travels of William Bartram*. Courier Dover Publications, 30 Apr. 2012. Net Library. Web. 5 May, 2014.
- John of Pergamon. *Ecological Asceticism: Cultural Revolution*. Our Planet 7.6. April, 1996. Web.21 May, 2007. <<http://www.ourplanet.com>>
- Brownson, Orestes A. *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson: The Transcendentalist Years 1838 - 39*. Marquette University Press, 2003. Print.
- Spretnak, C. "Ecofeminism: Our roots & Flowering." *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. Ed. Diamond, I and G.Orenstein. California: Random House, 1990. Print.
- Sri Sri Shankar Ravi. *Our spiritual connection to Nature*. Huff Post Religion. 23 July, 2010. Web.21 May, 2014. <<http://www.huffingtonpost.com>>
- Ray, Mohit K. "A River Sutra: A Gyno-ecological Perspective." *Indian English Novel in the Nineties*. Ed. Shukla Sheobhushanand Anu Shukla. New Delhi: Sarup, 2002. Print.
- Egan. *Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival*. MIT Press. 2007. Print.