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A Study on the Aqueous Empowerment of the Narmada River

in the select Novels of

Hartosh Singh Bal's *Waters Close over Us* and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

Abstract :

An endeavor of this paper is to establish the water related facts in relationship with people,

especially reference to the Narmada River. The central theme of this paper is on water

empowerment, its traditional acquaintance as a part of culture, myth and spiritual values.

Water is a required element more than the cardinal elements of earth, air, fire, and sky. It

plays a prominent role in human life. All the elements are interconnected through the sacred

river the Narmada, which is connected with people through its holiness. This statement

express through the select novels of Hartosh Singh Bal's *Waters Close over Us* (*A journey*

along the Narmada) (2013) and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993). Both the novels are involved about the water as a sacred element for mankind's life.

Keywords - Acquaintance, Cardinal, Holiness, Parikrama, Salvation

Aquatic literature deals, water as a significant element in the mankind's life. Water is the most general substance found on the Earth. Around 72 percentage of the earth is enclosed by water. Water is a treasure to discover more things from in it and it makes up the planets, surface, oceans and it also exists in the air as water vapor, rivers, lakes, icecaps, glaciers, and in the ground as soil moisture. The origin of the term 'aquatic' begins from the Middle French 'aquatique' means living in water, and also from Latin 'aquaticus' means related to water.

The Aquatic Ape Hypothesis (AAH) refers to as "Aquatic Ape Theory" (AAT) is an idea first widely publicized by a marine biologist, Alister Hardy in the 1930s. A NASA report announces that decades of theoretical, laboratory and field research are executed in order to give the most detail about the theory of the water and its origin of life on earth. The water world theory clearly depicts about the origin of water life. Water is viewed as a home and family where in the relationship between human and Nature. Hence, holistic views of water and the environment of human beings are connected together. Literature on aquatic is to analyze the evidence of the effects of aquatic in the terrestrial between the human beings and water. In many indigenous cultures women have a unique spiritual relationship with water. This is in part due to the intimate connection between water, childbearing and birth.

In Indian literature the newer generations of authors are also aspire to represent the entirety of life in modern India; instead they aim to explore much more limited regional, mythological and cultural aspects with its narrative frameworks. The Indian writers

contribute more to enrich the richness of the Indian literature through their works. This paper seeks to the water base concept in the fiction of two twentieth century Indian writers in English. It deals with water as a life and portrays the multi variant roles of water in human's life. Under this theme Hartosh Singh Bal's *Waters Close over Us: (A Journey along the Narmada)* and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* both the novels are depicted about the river Narmada and its function in multiangular is reflected in the life of mankind.

First, Hartosh Singh Bal is a popular contemporary writer of the twentieth century. He is a leading independent journalist in New Delhi, holds a Master's degree in Mathematics from New York University. Additionally works as a political editor of The Caravan magazine and OPEN magazine. His first work as a co-writer along with Gaurav Suri is *A Certain Ambiguity: A Mathematical Novel* (2007). This novel wins the Association of American Publishers award for the best professional and scholarly book in Mathematics in the year of 2007. Hartosh Singh Bal's second book as an individual writer is *Waters Close over Us* (2013) explains his travel about the Narmada River, and partly deals with sociological, political, artistic, historical, and anthropological commentary on the culture of the tribes region, which located in the surroundings of the river.

The second writer Gita Mehta is a journalist and a documentary filmmaker, born on 1943 in New Delhi, in a well known Odia family. She is the daughter of Biju Patnaik, the former Chief Minister of Orissa. She has written four books in Indian writing in English. *A River Sutra* (1993) is Gita Mehta's second novel. It is a colorful fictional account of India that showcases Indian history and culture. Her writings are related to modern themes and exclusively focused on India; its ethnicity and history. This book speaks about the life of a disillusion bureaucrat who learns about life from the stories of six pilgrims heading to the banks of India's the holiest river Narmada. It also focuses its shifts towards Indian traditions, its diversity and other aspects related with Indian religions and mythology.

Water empowerment is the central theme of this article. Water can be used as an effective tool to study, to analyze and to interpret the works of literature. Both the novels depict the picture of the Narmada River. In *Waters Close over Us* it is connected ideally with water and its importance in each and every aspect in one's life. The author expresses his real experience in his own perspective through this novel. Bal himself states that, *A River Sutra* is interlinked with his novel as, "I was living in Himachal Pradesh when I read Gita Mehta's book *River Sutra*" (WCOU 9).

Narmada is the holy river in India. The Narmada finds its mention in the ancient texts of India as one of the seven most sacred rivers in India. The river is believed as the deity and is adored in India. The birth of the Narmada River begins from the sky as by the order of the Lord Shiva, and also springs from the body of the Lord Shiva, while performing the tandava (Lord Shiva's cosmic dance). Narmada means 'Giving Pleasure'. It is considered as the mother and giver of peace. In Sanskrit, 'Narma' means 'pleasure' and refers 'to give'. In some parts of India the Narmada is called as a Narbada. In the great epics like *the Ramayana*, *the Mahabharata*, and the Puranas frequently refer the river Narmada in those works. The Rewa Khand of Vayu Purana and the Rewa Khand of Skanda Purana are entirely devoted to the story of the birth and the importance of the river Narmada. The Narmada River originates from the place known as 'Amarkantak'. Bal asserts that the poet Kalidasa, who wrote: *Reva's streams spread dishevels at Vindhya rocks*, in this novel as, "Fed entirely by rain, it flows through terrain intensely rocky foothills, like ashen streaks on an elephant's flank" WCOU (5).

The Narmada Parikrama is considered to be a meritorious act that a pilgrim can undertake because the banks of the Narmada River dotted with many temples. The view of the river cleanses the mortal's sins and do purify if they take bath in the Narmada. As a result the man can be free from all the sins of his life. The water of Narmada River purifies a man

and helps to attain salvation. A journey along with the Narmada River is considered as holy and spiritual. So the people strongly believe and get connected with water.

In the first novel, *Waters Close over Us* Bal illustrates his personal experience along with the river Narmada. According to Hindu mythology, Narmada is the only river in India to merit a parikrama, literally a going around. The traditional journey takes more than three years and ends where it begins and has covered nearly 2,700 kilometers.

Bal's seeks to understand the history and nature of realizations and reconciliations about the Narmada River as he travels around the route of the parikrama. In his narration, the stories and the people he comes across take an existential journey along with the river Narmada. The Narmada River is a major component of this novel, because each and every character has some connection between the water and their life. The major character, Mahant is one of the famous characters who run to the ashram every day to take part in the daily prayers and the preaching. Sadhu is a preacher who goes to ashram each day to meet his disciples and the people to bless them. Marietta or Mira stays in ashram to circumambulate a parikrama in the river of Narmada.

This novel portrays the life of Verrier Elwin and his connection with water as his soul element in his real life. Elwin is a priest and he comes with his friend Shamrao to Mandla to know about the life of tribes who lives nearby the Narmada valley. He is very much influenced by Gandhian principles. He also gets attract towards the territory of the Bhil tribe which is on the border of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat consider to be the most feared stretch of the entire parikrama. Though it is the feared stretch, the Bhil tribe considers this parikrama as their important ritual to purify their sins. Based on this statement, it is witnessed that the other country people show their keen interest to know more about water mythology in India. Consequently, the foreigners start visiting the Narmada valley to experience the spiritual journey.

Gond is a head priest of Elwin in Amarkantak. The disciples of the head priest are known as 'the Gonds'. Their main duty is to set out different places and to preach the varied people about the religious principles. Elwin is already renounced his Christian religion and starts his spiritual journey with his Gonds. He is a married one, his wife name is, Leela. Unfortunately she dies due to some health issues. When he starts his work among the Gonds, Elwin meets Kosi, during his preaching and gets attracted towards her. After Leela's death he marries Kosi. Dom Moraes is a foreign traveler who collects more information on water myths and its holiness for his study of research. In this novel the characters are allied by some means with the Narmada River for their personal issues.

In the second novel *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta also deals with the bond between water and human. It is a lyrical series of interlocking stories that transport the reader to a contemporary India that is a magical blend of reality, myth, India's spirituality, its culture and tradition, which are interwoven with water. This novel plays a vital role on the Indian concept of a "sutra" literally, a thread, and more figuratively, a morality which is delivered in the fiction genre. The Narmada River is considered as, "The River is among our holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva" (ARS 1).

Gita exhibits the gratitude of Indians for nature, especially their gratitude for the river, and also considers nature with its feminine qualities. The river Narmada is described as a lover, going to meet her bridegroom, the Lord of the Oceans. The narrative style of Gita reflects the depth of water which is clearly depicted in this novel. It narrates the life of every character and their connections with water. The six unconnected tales explores about the idea of love and about the holy site of the Narmada River, a place of worship and community.

The narrator is the author herself; she narrates these unconnected tales to a nameless man. The first story the nameless man hears from Gita is "The Monk's Story." In that story, Ashok a Jain monk, is renounced his billionaire lifestyle to become an ascetic. The monk tells

us about the sacred human practices done by every Jain. He always uses the Narmada River for his spiritual life, because the holy water is a symbol of purification for all the sins. In the second tale “The Teacher’s Story” the nameless man hears tales from Tariq Mia, an old Muslim mullah whom he has befriended Tariq later. Another character is Master Mohan, a music teacher. He finds Imrat, a blind, enormously musically gifted orphan, whose promise recalls Mohan of his own. He learns the music for seeking alms from the pilgrimages who actually came for parikrama in the Narmada River. To Mohan, the water engages in recreation of his life.

The third story is “The Executive’s Story”, it’s about a wealthy tea estate manager named, Nitin Bose. He loves a tribal woman, whose name is Rima. Initially, he promises her that he will marry her. But he fails to keep up his promise. Rima later, allows Nitin Bose to worship the Narmada to seek her forgiveness for his sins. Rima believes that Bose after his dip in the holy river, he becomes quite a normal person free from any possession. The Narmada River also helps the human to remove his desire towards his worldly possession. The fourth “The Courtesan’s Story” it is about the story of a widow’s life. The criminal Rahul Singh is a Courtesan who kidnaps one of the Courtesan’s daughters and forced her to marry him. After his marriage with her, he died in a shootout by the police. No one is ready to marry this widow for being the wife of a violent criminal. This hurts the widow badly and she kills herself. In this story at last the widow’s mother offers funeral procedure for her daughter to dissolve all her earthly sins of this birth in the banks of the Narmada River.

The fifth narrative is “The Musician’s Story”. A musician’s unattractive daughter explains that her father is a famous raga player. A young man wants to learn the secrets of these ragas from the musician and to secure his patronage. In the beginning, the young student promises the musician to marry his daughter after his studies are completed; but he rejects the homely daughter and married someone else. So the musician’s daughter becomes

obliged to do a parikrama in the Narmada River for her good life. In the last “The Minstrel’s Story” the narrator is again Tariq Mia. In the surroundings of the Narmada he meets a Naga Baba. Naga Baba is the surname of a Professor V.V. Shankar, an archeologist whose studies focused on the Narmada River, and his core intention of his works is to dispel harmful superstitions and oppressive religious traditions about the river. One night Naga Baba and his villagers celebrate a Hindu festival for the God Shiva with all the night revelries. In the same village, a little girl Uma gets kidnapped and shortly sold to Harlotry by the robbers during that festival night. The Naga Baba comes to know about that and he rescues her, from that misery. All these tales unite at one spot, and express that the Narmada River is a perpetual source of Life and so immortal.

In conclusion, both the novels analyze that the beliefs about the powers of the river are signs of man's assurance in the River Narmada. In India people fasts to death or immolating themselves on the river's banks, or drowning in waters to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth. At present it is insisted that to create a more habitable world it is compulsory that human being cultures and their viewpoints on nature should be conferred, which leads to a harmony about the roles of man and water with regard to nature.

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