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T. Swarnalatha

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science

Theni. Tamil Nadu, India.

swarnalatha.rvst@gmail.com

Feminist Issues In Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*- A Study

Abstract

Gita Mehta is one of the most significant writers in Indian Writing in English whose writing mainly deals with Indian culture, tradition and political condition of India. Women are confined in the name of religion, customs, society and tradition. Most of Gita Mehta's female protagonists want to break such social taboos and establish an identity in the society. *A River Sutra* is her second novel which was published in 1993. Mehta has touched up the sense of male dominance, racial discrimination and one's continuous search for identity in this novel. This paper will show how the novel *A River Sutra* can be read from a feministic perspective. The key argument of the paper deals with women's hardship, suffering and self-identity in the patriarchal society.

Keywords: emancipation, identity, feminism, exploitation, individual

Gita Mehta is a well-known writer in Indian Writing in English. Her novels predominantly portray Indian culture, tradition and the contemporary image of today's woman who is eager to break the domestic walls of her house to build a world of her own. Gita Mehta was born in Delhi in 1943 and has obtained her degree from the Cambridge

University. As Mehta is the daughter of Biju Patnaik, a famous freedom fighter, she has presented historical facts along with Indian culture and tradition in her novels. Through her novel *A River Sutra*, Mehta weaves together not only colourful pictures of Indian culture but also paints a picture of Indian traditional woman who is subjected to male domination. Woman's emergence as an individual from a feminist perspective is portrayed as well.

The term 'feminisme' is first coined by Charles Fourier, a French philosopher, in 1837. The word 'feminisme' refers to women's freedom or emancipation. Feminism is a modern one which is emerged only after women started questioning their inferior status in the society and demanding amelioration in their social position. The objective of feminism is concerned with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the right of suffrage. This modern movement is highly influenced by ideas postulated by thinkers like Alice Walker, Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter and many others. Feminism aims to liberate women from all forms of patriarchal and sexist aggression.

In ancient India, men were considered bread-winners of the family and women were viewed as bread-maker confined to the kitchen. In the modern India, women receive education, inherit and own property and participate in public and political life and they gradually receive equal status on par with men in all fields of life. However, women face various crises such as dowry, domestic violence, female infanticide, sexual exploitation, molestation and murder. In his work *Gynesis: Configuration of Women and Modernity*, Alice Jardine states that "Feminism is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women" (Jardine 15).

In *A River Sutra*, there are six stories: 'The Monk's Story', 'The Teacher's Story', 'The Executive's Story', 'The Courtesan's Story', 'The Musician's Story' and 'The Minstrel's Story'. The river Narmada is the central character in the novel. According to mythological beliefs, the Narmada possesses the power of relieving a person from mental and physical

worries or disorders. Mehta uses the Narmada as the thread that knits together the main story and the six sub-stories. These six stories transport the reader to a contemporary India through its evocative narration. It narrates the oppression of women from different angles.

Among the six stories, the last three stories can be read from feministic point of view. In 'The Musician's Story', Mehta detects the similarity between nature and music. The musician teaches his daughter how the classical notes of 'Sa', 'Re', 'Ga', 'Ma', 'Pa', 'Dha' and 'Ni' associate accurately with the sounds of various creatures in the natural world. The musician's daughter is neglected by her mother and society because of her lack of the so-called physical beauty. The poor girl laments how she is degraded for her so-called ugly appearance by her own mother. Mehta describes the pathetic condition of the poor girl: "Unfortunately my mother seldom spoke to me. My ugliness upsets her" (ARS 136). The musician's daughter is betrothed to a young man, who later rejects her. Out of disappointment and grief, she abhors music. The very sound of music irritates her tremendously. Following her father's instruction, she meditates on the bank of the Narmada to heal her intimacy with her lover. Nature provides her comfort and she is relieved from stress.

In 'The Minstrel's Story', Uma is a victim of Western patriarchy. In the beginning, she does not have any name. She is called as 'misfortune' (ARS 159) by her own father who sold her to a brothel for five hundred rupees. Mehta describes the horrible condition of Uma in the brothel. The woman who owns the brothel refuses to free Uma by saying: "But I paid five hundred rupees for her. It was a great charity I did her Father. When I bought her, there was no flesh on her at all. See how well I feed her, and still there is not enough of her to satisfy a man" (ARS 158). This gives a clear proof that society has manipulated Uma and treated her only as a commodity. Women are regarded as mere objects. This kind of male domination is stated by Millett in his work *Sexual Politics*. Millett clearly states that men have considered his life partner as "Who is nothing but an object to him in the most literal

sense” (Millett 20). It is the mentality of the society that makes people view woman as an object of male desire.

In the brothel, a customer names Uma as “chand” declaring her skins are as soft as moon. It is a hint that she is sexually abused by the customer. Even though she is a child, she is forced to lose her chastity. It is the Naga Baba who has renamed her as ‘Uma’ which means ‘peace’. As soon as she takes a dip in the holy river, she is emerged as a new individual. She comes out with a new identity. She is also glorified as the minstrel who sings in praise of the river Narmada. As the novel proceeds, Uma undergoes the process of self-analysis and self-realization. Mehta explores the character of Uma who has lived under several identities first as ‘misfortune’, then as ‘Chand’ and finally as ‘Uma’. She undergoes hard times that involved rape, getting neglected in the society and terrifying challenges in her life. Later, she identifies her unique space in the society. In her work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir rightly remarks: “A woman who is not afraid of men frightens them” (Beauvoir 698).

In *A River Sutra*, Mehta clearly presents issues pertaining to discrimination of women. In Indian society, women are not permitted to dine or have food before men do. Mehta depicts such society in “The Minstrel’s Story”. Uma is treated inequity in her own house. She faces some restriction even to eat food. She mourns: “I was never allowed to eat until everyone else had eaten, so I was always hungry. And I was beaten by my father” (ARS 161). In another instance, Mehta explores that women with less talent cannot be sustained in the present male-dominated society. Women are regarded as weak and inefficient. The mother of an ugly daughter feels: “a woman without genius could be protected only by a husband in a harsh world designed for men” (ARS 137).

The paper intends to examine the society that has failed to protect the safety of women in ‘The Courtesan’s Story’. The courtesan laments that she has failed to save her

daughter from a dangerous bandit, Rahul Singh. Rahul Singh has abducted her daughter in the crowded bazaar where no one is bothered to step in and protect the girl. Here, Mehta highlights how society is not involved in the protection of women.

The courtesan's daughter is scared to survive in the society as a bandit wife, locked in a jail, on charge of abetting to the offence of her husband. She faces the social crisis. She is caught between society and her own desire. She regrets: "Some ambitious policemen accuse me of assisting in my husband's crimes. Can you imagine my fate then? Locked in a cell? A girl known to be a courtesan and a bandit's wife?" (ARS 120). Frightened to face the society as a wife of bandit, the girl jumps into the Narmada and becomes oneness with nature. She becomes a victim of the heartless society.

Mehta also explores that women is humiliated in the scientific world. Here, Mehta utilizes ecofeminism theory which equates women with nature and also tries to show how women who stand for the maintenance of natural resources, regret for environmental devastation. It is because of ecofeminism theory which argues that there are important amalgamation between the domination of women and exploitation of nature by masculinist attitudes.

The courtesan laments that women could be permitted to relax themselves along the bank of the Narmada before the advent of industrial development in Shahbag. They used to spend their time in boat riding and were walking in the garden without any fear. But fifty years later, due to the scientific and technological development, women are treated as sexual transactions. They are restricted to roam in the open space. Mehta vividly portrays the current social status of women which threatens their virginity in the patriarchal society. She is aware of the present society where women cannot seek any protection if they get into an unsafe environment.

The paper aims to criticize the society which remains silent, witnessing the atrocities and failed to protect women's safety. The paper also deals with some of the feminist issues such as race discrimination, sexual exploitation and low social status in the male-dominated society. Mehta's women protagonists do not want to be projected as traditional women. Instead, they want to be identified as complete human beings.

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