

## **Culture–Nature Coherence in Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*: A Comparative Study**

**Sanjay Prakash Dubey**  
Research Scholar  
DDU Gorakhpur University  
Gorakhpur (UP)  
&  
**Prof. Gourhari Behera**  
Department of English  
DDU Gorakhpur University  
Gorakhpur (UP)

**Article History:** Submitted-29/09/2020, Revised-18/10/2020, Accepted-19/10/2020, Published-31/10/2020.

### **Abstract:**

The last few decades have witnessed unprecedented awareness about environmental and ecological issues. The economic growth model invented and espoused by advocates of various ideologies like capitalism has done irrevocable damage to the environment and ecology. Unscientific and unsustainable growth model accompanied by over exploitation of natural resources has threatened the delicate and fragile balance that exists between human and non-human life forms. The world may have become aware of the environmental crisis in recent times, but ancient Indians had realized the importance of co-existence with nature long ago. There is much similarity between Indian ecological philosophy and contemporary deep ecology. Indian philosophers since the classical times have been emphasizing the importance of culture-nature coherence. The culture/nature binary created by Western discourse has caused immense damage to nature as it naturalized the domination and exploitation of nature for human consumption. This binary ought to be disrupted and dismantled, otherwise domination and exploitation of nature for human consumption will continue unabated. Human beings must recognize the right to existence of all creatures. Human beings must consider themselves to be a part of a greater design that includes all the elements of nature. Human beings cannot survive alone in this universe and therefore he must learn to respect and revere all the objects of creations including rivers, forests and mountains.

The objective of this paper is to examine the culture-nature synthesis as revealed in Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* and Amitav Ghosh’ *The Hungry Tide*. I shall use deep ecological framework to interpret and understand the subtle relationship that exists between nature and culture as revealed in the above-mentioned novels.

**Keywords: Culture, myths, Deep ecology, Indian eco-aesthetics, Bon Bibi, Dokhin Rai Narmada, Jainism.**

Deep ecology’s central precept is that the living environment as a whole should be respected as having certain basic moral and legal rights to live and flourish, independent of its benefits for human beings. Western thought has often taken an instrumentalist view of nature-nature is there to serve human needs. Deep ecology proposes drastic changes in our habits of consumption, not only to avoid environmental disaster but as spiritual and moral awakening. Deep ecological concerns are also reflected in Indian cultural-religious discourse. Since the ancient times, culture/nature synthesis has been emphasized in Indian scriptures. In fact, Indian eco-aesthetics places nature on a higher pedestal compared to humans and human culture. Even during the ancient period, the importance of trees and forest was realized and preservation of trees and plants was linked with religious and cultural traditions. That is the reason why ‘Tree worship’, which evolved during the Vedic age, is still an important eco-cultural tradition in Indian society. Trees like Peepal, Bargad, and Neemand medicinal herbs like Tulsi (basil plant) and Brahmiare still revered in Indian households.

Contrary to unabashed anthropocentrism displayed in the Western and modern scientific discourse, Indian philosophy and ethics have been overwhelmingly eco-centric. K. J. Warren rightly observes that unlike the discourse of domination that determines human - nature relations in the Western world-view, the classical Indian world view emphasizes the importance of nature and the need for a reverential attitude towards it. The Indian scriptures speak extensively about the sanctity of the earth, the rivers and the mountains. The concept of ‘Supreme Being’ or ‘Brahma’ envisioned in Indian philosophical framework, not only unites all human beings into a single family, but also unites all that exists in the universe-living and non-living, making them interdependent. Arnold Toynbee in his book *One World and India* recognizes the strength of

Indian tradition and he even goes to the extent of declaring that the only effective way to save the world from an environmental apocalypse is by following the Indian way of life,

“It is already becoming clearer that a chapter which has western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. At this supremely dangerous moment in history the only way of salvation for mankind is the Indian way”. (Toynbee, 54).

An ecocritical analysis of *A River Sutra* and *The Hungry Tides* prove beyond doubt the significance of nature in the cultural-religious life of the people. In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta explores the theme of synthesis of culture and nature. Mehta has shown how Narmada and her surrounding hills and forests have influenced the life and imagination of the people. Narmada is not only a water body, it also symbolizes the spiritual, mythical and religious significance of the people. The novel makes use of myths, folklores, rituals and superstitions to emphasize the essential unity among different organisms and elements of nature. Ecocriticism includes in itself the cultural connotations also because it is difficult to draw the demarcating line between nature and culture. Cheryll Glotfelty rightly observes, “Nature and culture do not exclude each other but are entangled with each other in multiple ways” (Glotfelty, xv).

In *A River Sutra*, Mehta presents Narmada as the holiest of all rivers. It is a popular belief amongst the people that even a glimpse of the river water purifies human beings of their sins. The river Narmada is associated with the religious faiths and beliefs of the people. The river is a symbol of continuity and sustainability of life. Mehta in *A River Sutra* presents the river as a mother figure who is ever ready to help her children by relieving their mental and physical pains and sufferings. Thus, the river is depicted as an empowered woman who can contribute a lot in creating a spiritual and eco-conscious society. It is a bounteous river not only for human beings but also for other life forms that take shelter in her protective hands. The river, believed to be the daughter of Shiva, commands great spiritual significance among the pilgrims who visit her banks every year for ritualistic purification. It has the power of annulling the effects of snakebites and it can even nullify the evil effects of Saturn, a dreaded planet in Indian astrology.

One of the prime concerns of deep ecology is to disrupt the culture/nature binary that privileges culture over nature. Mehta, in *A River Sutra*, attempts to disrupt the binary power

structure that is used to dominate and control the subalterns. “Narmada” in Sanskrit means a “whore” but a dip in the river can cleanse a man of all his sins. The songs of praise sung by the river minstrels are a tribute to the ‘holiness’ as well as ‘sensuous’ beauty which resembles a woman. The novel abounds in examples of culture/nature proximity. Nature has been personified to express human emotions. Spring, the most pleasant season, has been personified as ‘Kama’, the god of desire.

Nature/culture synthesis is also revealed in “The Minstrel’s Story” where Naga Baba rescues a girl child from a brothel and brings her up in the lap of nature. Nature provides solace and sustenance to the girl who has been discarded by her parents and the society. Naga Baba teaches her to lead a sustainable and care free life in the lap of nature. The orphaned and exploited girl now gets a new identity in association with the Narmada. She grows up to become the minstrel of the Narmada. She is recognized and respected at the festivals on the banks of the river Narmada as a singer-saint. Her transformation from an oppressed and exploited girl to a river minstrel is symbolic of the fact that human-nature coherence can play important role in establishing eco-cultural consciousness.

The existence of temples and mosques on the banks of the river and the visits of the foreigners to these religious places to understand the cultural synthesis –speaks volumes about the cultural and religious significance of the river. The river with Hindu, Buddhist and Jain temples and shrines on one side, and mosques and the tomb on the other side, signifies the cultural synthesis that is both ancient and modern. Thus, we find that the river Narmada stands for the synthesis of not only different cultures and traditions but also it stands for a synthesis of culture and nature. “The Monk’s Story” also illustrates the association of man with nature. The story of the Jain monk is an attempt by Mehta to harmonize life with nature. There is much similarity between ancient Jain philosophy and modern deep ecology and this similarity is delicately depicted through the story of the Jain monk. Ashok is a man born in a rich family but he is disillusioned with worldly lavishness and materialism. So he decides to become a Jain Monk and embark on ‘Diksha’ ceremony. After the ‘Diksha’ ceremony, Ashok covers his face with a mask so that he does not unintentionally kill a living microorganism by inhaling it. The monk always looks down while walking so that he does not step on an ant. He is also very careful while plucking banana because “Who knows what small creatures live in the leaves or trunk of a banana tree? (Mehta, 11).

‘Diksha’ in Jain philosophy is a way of life that encourages its adherents to live life with minimum requirements. When ‘Diksha’ is given to someone, a very important advice given is: “you will protect life” (Mehta, 41). Here ‘life’ is taken in a wider sense. It includes all living beings -bees, birds, flora-fauna, herbs, plants, trees, insects and creatures- on the earth, above the earth or below the earth. Jainism’s emphasis on non-violence has deep ecological significance. The sensitivity of Jain philosophy towards ‘other’ life forms is evident when the Monk reveals,

“That is why we are bankers or merchants. There are so many activities we cannot undertake for fear of harming life. If we were farmers we might unknowingly kill creatures under our plows. In industry the earth is drilled for oil, iron, coal. Can you imagine how much life is extinguished by those machines?” (Mehta, 24).

In *The Hungry Tide*, too, Amitav Ghosh interweaves mythological concepts with cultural, environmental and ecological concepts of the Sunderbans. Ghosh uses Indian mythical tradition to reveal the associations of the local inhabitants to the sacredness of nature and its protective aspects. The legends of the river Ganges and Bon Bibi teaches the locals to establish symbiotic relationship with nature. In Indian mythical traditions, it is believed that river Ganga’s fall from heavens would have caused serious devastations on the earth had Lord Shiva not controlled her torrents by tying it into his locks. It is only when the Ganges approaches the Bay of Bengal that it differentiates itself into thousands of streams, which ultimately results in the formation of the Sundarbans, where the water of the Himalaya merges with the tidal water of the sea.

Deep ecology believes that mythical stories, folklores and cultural ethos play a significant role in creating eco-cultural consciousness among the people. Some of the myths are universal in their appeal whereas some myths remain confined to a particular region or locality. In the Sunderbans, the natives worship the forces of nature by enshrining them in their myths and folklores. It is through myths and symbols that we understand the bond that the inhabitants share with nature. The story of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess who protects the forest people from the tiger demon, Dokkhin Rai, is familiar to each and every native of the place. The Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai story enables the inhabitants to imagine themselves as a coherent community. The Bon Bibi story is an integral part of their tradition and folklore. That is why Kusum is shocked

when she discovers that Kanai is ignorant about the Bon Bibi story. Kusum’s unflinching belief in the Bon Bibi myth highlights the way these mythological beliefs dominate the lives of the locals. Though she once had a bitter experience when her innocent prayers to Bon Bibi to save her father from the tiger went unnoticed, she continues to believe in the benevolent nature of Bon Bibi.

The inhabitants of the tide country display a sacred and reverential attitude towards nature. They admire, respect and fear nature. “Fear” is especially important in relation to the tiger. They believe that it is fear that protects them from tigers. The inhabitants generally don’t venture out in the territory of the tigers. They are well aware that as long as they don’t cross the imaginary border that separates the realm of Dokkhin Rai, from that of the humans, they are safe. It is interesting to note that even an educated person like Nilima believes in the Bon Bibi myth,

“I have come to believe what people say in these parts: that if you see a tiger the chances are you won’t live to tell the tale”. (Ghosh, 242).

Thus, we find that in a region where hundreds of people are killed by tigers, no local person will ever venture into the forest without seeking the protection and blessings of Bon Bibi. But Bon Bibi’s blessing is not easily granted. To placate and appease her, certain rules must be followed. For instance, the natives have been made to believe that the wild parts of the forest are domain of Dokkhin Rai. The purpose of this idea is to convey a clear message amongst the locals to avoid encroachment into the territory of wild lives. Any sign of human penetration is likely to invite retribution from the demon. Fear from the tiger is very crucial for the indigenous people. This fear reminds them of the strength and might of nature and protects them from tigers and other deadly animals. The fear created in the minds of the inhabitants protects not only the people but it also protects the tigers and other wild animals from human interference. At a significant moment in the novel, when Kanai questions Fokir of how he sensed the presence of the animal, Fokir says “it is fear that tells me” (Ghosh, 322). On another occasion Horen emphasizes the importance of “fear” and tells Nirmal that without fear, the danger to human lives would double. Once when Piya refers to a tiger by pointing out her finger towards it, she is stopped abruptly by Fokir. Fokir explains her that even to make simple gesture to refer to a tiger may bring danger to their lives. Through these incidents, it can clearly be inferred that the rules

and prohibitions laid down by myths, folklores and local traditions hold a stronger grasp over the mind of the people compared to those laid down by the government in its efforts to preserve wildlife and environment. The myths of Bonbibi and Dokkhin Rai go far way to uphold key ecological messages and deep ecological values.

There is yet another message unfolded by the Bon Bibi myth. This message is that goodness does not reign over the evil but coexist with evil. Bon Bibi seems to represent the nurturing, benevolent aspect of nature and its capacity to sustain life. She also embodies the epitome of domestic sustenance as is evident from the story of Dukhey, a young boy betrayed by his uncle. As the legend goes, one day Dukhey was collecting honey in the forest with his uncle when Dokkhin Rai offered his uncle plenty of honey and wealth in exchange for abandoning the little boy to him. His uncle eventually agrees and hands over Dukhey to Dokkhin Rai in lieu of wax, honey and wealth. The young boy finds himself abandoned and alone with no one to protect him from Dokkhin Rai. But at this crucial moment, he remembers his mother's words—that Bon Bibi is the saviour of the innocent and pure hearted. Bon Bibi saves the boy and sends her brother Shah Jongali to fight against Dokkhin Rai.

An important conclusion drawn from the above story is that Bon Bibi is the protector of the poor and the weak. She loves pure hearted human beings. But this does not mean that she does not care for nature. She is equally concerned for the preservation and protection of animals and plants as well. Therefore, though she punishes Dokkhin Rai, she forgives him when Dokkhin Rai apologises to her. She also gives a half of the Sunderbans forest to him while giving the other half to human beings.

Thus, an agreement between humans and non-humans is made. The most important aspect of this agreement is that both humans and tigers will remain safe and secure as long as they do not encroach into each other's territory. Human beings should enter the forest without any greed and desire. If human beings abide by this agreement, tigers will also remain faithful to the covenant. If any party violates the agreement and encroaches into the exclusive zone of the other, then he or she is destined to be killed. Perhaps this is the reason that during the tiger killing incident, Fokir declares that killing a tiger is fully justified if it enters into human settlements, "when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it is because it wants to die" (Ghosh,295).

The Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai encounter, however, symbolizes deep ecological concerns. It explains the process of negotiation between Dokkhin Rai and Bon Bibi as to the governance of the forest. It is during this discussion that the rules about human rights and responsibilities towards the forest are determined and Bon Bibi makes it clear that one who enters the forest only with ‘pure heart or mind’ (*pabitra mon*) and empty hands (*khali hath*) is protected by her. This is in fact, the kind of agreement between non-humans and humans that allows us to depend on nature and respect each other’s needs.

## Conclusion

Thus, an ecocritical analysis of *A River Sutra* and *The Hungry Tide* leads to the conclusion that culture-nature coherence could prove to be one of the most effective ways to preserve and conserve environment and ecology. Deep ecological concerns are well taken care of in our traditions and ethos. The Western dualism of culture/nature must be disrupted and dismantled. Also, undue glorification of capitalism, materialism and consumerism should be discouraged. Nature can satisfy our needs but not our greed. “The Monk’s Story” in *A River Sutra* is a fine example of deep ecological precepts being actually realized. Similarly, the association of the river Narmada with religion and culture symbolizes the importance of water not only in human beings’ life but also in a larger eco-cultural framework. Similarly, *The Hungry Tide* depicts a successful synthesis of mythical ideas and nature. The myth of Bon Bibi and Dakhin Rai reveals the separation of geographical territories for human beings and animals. Man-animal conflict has become a serious issue in the Sunderbans because of the dismantling of the imaginary boundaries that separate humans from tigers and other wild animals. Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* asserts the need for maintaining the sanctity of such imaginary lines to avoid man-animal conflicts.

## Works Cited:

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. Harper Collins, 2013.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. “Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis”. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press.1996, pp.xv-xxxiv.

Jalais, Annu. *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics, and Environment in the Sunderbans*.



Routledge India, 2011

Mehta, Geeta. *A River Sutra*. Penguin India, 2000

Mukherjee, Upamanyu Pablo. *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture, and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Toynbee, Arnold. *One World and India*, Orient Longman, 1960

Warren, Karen J. "Feminist Theory: Ecofeminist and Cultural Feminist". *International Encyclopedia of the social and Behavioural Sciences*. Website:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B0080430767039498>