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Anthropomorphism of River Narmada: A Cultural Study of *A River Sutra*

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Introduction:

Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1973) accepts Levi-Strauss' definition of myth – 'myth is a kind of collective dream expressing unconscious wishes'. (pp.14). 'One consequence of the symbolist development in literature has been an increasing respect for the symbolism of primitive man, and specifically for the myths, through it expresses himself. Giambattista Vico, the Neapolitan scholar had elaborated the theory that myth was a kind of poetic language, the only language the man was capable of in his primitive stage of development, and yet, for all that, a genuine language with its own principle of structure and its own logic. Vico conjectured that the language first began with gesture, then developed through the stages of myth and figurative language to the clarified and ordered language of modern polite societies'. (W.K.Wimsatt jr and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism, 1957). Doniger (1973) further remarks that the myths in India are 'vivid, startling, fascinating and complex... *That which cannot be found here exists nowhere* boasted the author of Mahabharata...the mythology of Siva forms only a small part of the material of Puranas, but it is an ideal model which reveals a pattern which pertains to the material as a whole. Siva is not only an important Hindu god; he is in many ways most uniquely Indian god of them all, and the principles which emerge from an intensive study of his mythology lie at the very heart of Hinduism.' Ipshita Chanda remarks, (2011, pp.125) 'most of South Asia is populated by shared cultures, myths and literatures differently inflected by their local histories of representation, transmission and production of literary texts that are representatives of sharing'. Gita Mehta studies Indian culture in depth and tries to hold it by strings of her narratives in her novels. *A River Sutra* juxtaposes myth, reality, desire, sorrow, passionate intensity, detachment, blind faith, renunciation, self-realization disappointment, love, pain, calmness with wisdom. Mehta treats the elemental Hindu myths through the meta-narrative technique and uses Narmada as a gamut or 'sutra' to create an ideological consensus between Hinduism, Islam and Jainism. Gita Mehta uses religious invocations, poetry, and the dialogism to construct her narrative. And her stories embody manifestations of the divine as in various religions (Hinduism, Jainism, and Islam). As Salman Rushdie (1997) puts it, 'Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* is an important attempt by a thoroughly modern Indian to make her reckoning with the Hindu culture from which she emerged.'

A River Sutra is not only about a narrator and his six stories but is much more. It explores how myths of a river (river Narmada) join the people living in and around that region. In this paper I attempt to unfold the Narmada-Siva myths and traditional Hindu practices as described in *A River Sutra*. I further posit that Gita Mehta uses the meta-narrative technique as used by the old Indian texts like *Panchatantra*, *Kathasaritsagar*, *Kadambari*, and *Mahabharata*. As Uma Chakravarti (1999 in *whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi*) remarks, 'Men and women in India, whether they have formally learnt history, carry with them a sense of the past which they have

internalized through the transmission of popular beliefs, mythology, tales of heroism and folklore. Formal history also percolates down often in transmuted form to a wider range of people through articles in popular journals, discussions and through what may be termed as the 'dispersal effect', so that elements of oral history may be overlaid by more serious historical conclusions forming a sort of medley of ideas. It is such a medley of ideas that forms the basis of our understanding the status of women in ancient times; and is also part of our deeply embedded perceptions of the past in a more general sense'. The cultural aspect of various communities which are independent but interdependent, homogenous within themselves but heterogeneous outwardly having Narmada river as unifying factor will also be analyzed, where Narmada is called the 'sutra' or the link and the unknown narrator is the 'sutraddhar' or the linkage or the commentator. The novel seeks to recover an indigenous culture unaltered by colonialism. The cultural analysis of Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra* (1993) tells us:

- i. The traditional Hindu myths incorporated in the novel, (Siva and Narmada myths being prominent), I will elaborate the father-daughter relationship (Siva-Narmada) and its symbolic overtones in my discussion.
- ii. Secondly, it highlights how Mehta presents the secularism of Indian subcontinent as an ideological consensus among Hinduism, Islam, Jainism and the tribal myths.
- iii. Thirdly it argues that Mehta through the nameless narrator becomes translator and interpreter-translator of multiple narratives, and transcripts various facets, the oral and literary traditions of Ancient Indian Culture. It presents a multidimensional view of the river. The narratology is loaded with symbolism that arises from a mixture of affirmation of myth and life - faith in life and living life itself. Mehta has used myth as a powerful tool to connect the past to the present forcing us to transcend borders of time.
- iv. And finally it states that Mehta has unfolded mythical imagery of river Narmada as a virgin woman. Also, that the novel is about the woman's relationship with nature and her unconscious or conscious action of reaching out to the river in difficult circumstances and tries to investigate the feminist politics behind the myths.

River Myth unfolded: Parent-child relationship (Myths of Siva and Narmada)

The characters of each story appear only once and the same subject-matter (river myth) travels from one story to another. Each narrative represents the story of a particular cultural unit. Gita Mehta uses meta-narrative technique and at the same time she manages to fill the gap between each story beautifully using the river Narmada as the 'sutra' or the link. And in this way she is able to reflect how different religions share the same myths, traditions, forest, space, river and still they maintain their diversity. The principal myth is that of the Lord Siva and his daughter Narmada. The novel begins with Narmada and ends with 'The Song of the Narmada'. This is echoed in the profane canvas of parent-child relationships that punctuate the many sub narratives. It may be the story of Uma-Shankar- the female infant rescued from an abusive brothel keeper and the Naga-turned archeologist or the story of the bandit and the abducted girl or the story of exceptionally talented singer Imrat and his father like teacher or the story of the musician who was deformed and stood up on her wedding day by her fiancée, but was vindicated by the love of her father.

The river Goddess Narmada, Siva's unmarried daughter, the beguilingly beautiful seductress, whose name suggests both chaste and unchaste, represents the duality of Indian myths where the

river is represented as mythological symbol of Indian culture. As the daughter of lord Siva, it is referred to as 'Her Holiness' (as a mother who nourishes surrounding human settlements) and as 'a whore' (one that takes away your sins). Dr Mitra says, 'Did you know 'Narmada' means a 'whore' in Sanskrit?' (ARS150). In *A River Sutra* Gita Mehta reports the legend of birth of Narmada, inspired by the old texts: 'It is said that Shiva, the creator and destroyer of worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream took on the form of a woman- most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer, and yet another as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire. Her inventive variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the delightful one, blessing her with the words you shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible. Then, he gave her in marriage to the ocean, Lord of rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors' (ARS 08-9). The narrative begins with narrator's musings on Narmada where he imagines the ascetics with ash smeared naked bodies, their matted hair wound on top of their ascetic god, witnessing the river's birth as they chant, 'Shiva-o-ham, Shiva-o-ham, I that am Shiva, Shiva am I.' (ARS05)

But it is strange and perhaps amazing to find out how Mehta personifies the river seeing it from the eyes of a man, the narrator says: 'In the silence of the ebbing night I sometimes think I can hear the river's heartbeat pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at least to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank of Amarkantak.' (ARS05). *The Musician's story* establishes the art of music as all pervasive and describes music-legends of Siva, also called Natraj and Bhairav meaning the 'Fire of Time'. The music teacher says explaining how melody was born, 'There was no art until Shiva danced the creation. Music lay asleep inside a motionless rhythm- deep as water, black as darkness, weightless as air. Then Shiva shook his drum. Everything started to tremble with the longing to exist. The universe erupted into being as Shiva danced. The six mighty ragas, the pillars of all music, were born from the expressions on Shiva's face and through their vibrations the universe was brought into existence.' (ARS205). 'Fire of time' also symbolizes that the musician's daughter perfects her music nodes with time but is burnt by rejection of her love, unable to come to terms with life again. The music embedded in nature cannot be imitated or trapped and in the music of nature lies perfection/ beauty. Through her story she describes her genius father who 'through music' tries 'to free' her of own ugly image so she 'could love beauty wherever it was to be found, even if it was not present in' her 'mirror'. Her father would say, 'A goddess presides over each of the ragas. If you truly meditate on a raga's sacred teaching, its goddess will give you mastery over its melodies'. (ARS211). The musician's story clearly demonstrates the father-daughter relationship. As a devoted father, the musician is almost blind from the fact of ugliness of his daughter. He helps her to elevate herself from the mundane world and takes her as his student. He wants her to be married to music. Again the narration revolves around Shiva, father of Narmada, and the musician brings his daughter for cure to the banks of river Narmada, Shiva's daughter. Incidentally the legend of Narmada is very similar to the story of musician's daughter. Both are cheated by their lovers and both remain unmarried in the end.

River Myth Unfolded: Erotic Imagery of Narmada

Mehta tries to develop an erotic imagery of the Virgin River. Narrator calls himself vanprasthi (one who seeks personal enlightenment) but watching the river in isolated darkness he imagines

her as a beautiful woman ‘painting her palms and the soles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her Lover,’ or ‘indolently stretching her limbs as she oiled herself with scented oils, her long black hair loosened, her eyes outlined in collyrium’. (ARS139). In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta, employs the ambiguity of Narmada’s driving impulse to provoke to the sexuality in her myth, ‘Did they (the ascetics) brood on the Narmada as the proof of Shiva’s great penance or did they imagine her as a beautiful woman dancing towards the Arabian sea, arousing the lust of ascetics like themselves while Shiva laughed at the madness of their infatuation.’ (ARS138-39)

Uma chants,

‘From shiva’s penance you become water, From water you become a woman

So beautiful that gods and ascetics, Their loins hard with desire

Abandoned their contemplations, To pursue you . . .

To watch you the Destroyer said, Oh damsel of the beautiful hips,

Evoker of Narma, lust, Be known as Narmada, Holiest of Rivers.’ (ARS 273-274).

The ascetic rescues a little girl from prostitution and calls her ‘Uma’ which symbolically means ‘peace in the night’. (ARS 252) and its literal meaning in Sanskrit is ‘oh, don’t do’. The Ascetic says to the little girl: ‘The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become the daughter of Narmada’. (ARS254). While I was researching about river Narmada, I came across some other myths prevailing in the region, which perhaps are not mentioned by the novelist, but they might present an interesting angle about Narmada. Geographically the source of river Narmada is in Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh. From the same source the rivers Son and river Johilla also flow out in different directions. Johilla is a tributary of the Narmada and rejoins it a few kilometers further downstream. In the legends of Kurma and Shiva Puranas, these three rivers are inter-dependent. In Indian mythology river Son is one of the two rivers that have been given a masculine form, the other being Brahmhaputra. These ancient texts recount the history of the marriage arranged between the Son and the Narmada. It is a story of love and betrayal. The Narmada, like a future traditional Indian wife had never seen her betrothed. Curious, she sent her friend, Johilla, daughter of the barber, so that she submitted a report to her on what he could resemble. When Johilla saw Son, she fell under his charm. Son, seeing the pretty young woman approaching, supposed that she was his betrothed. Consequently, he gave the order to begin the marriage ceremony. When Narmada discovered that she was deeply offended. Turning her back on Son, she flew in the opposite direction. She sprang through rocks and chasms, formant of the rapids and waterfalls which always resound of her disappointment. She finished her escape towards the west by drowning her misery in the Gulf of Cambay. The rejected Son flowed down to the top of a high hill, and ran out towards the east then towards north to join the Ganges on its way towards the Bay of Bengal. Narmada, therefore, is considered unmarried, pious, and the one who would take all the sins away. The courtesan’s daughter ends her life in Narmada and becomes free of all worldly sins or the Vano tribe that believes that only river Narmada can cure from ‘power of desire’.

River Myth Unfolded: Freedom from the cycle of birth and death

‘A mere glimpse of the Narmada’s waters is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births’ (ARS 151). Mehta remarks that the Narmada was renowned even in the ancient world. Ptolemy, Greek astronomer and geographer, wrote regarding this river in the 2nd century AD: ‘Even the Greeks and the Alexandrines had heard about the Narmada’s holiness and the religious suicides at Amarkantak- people fasting till death or immolating themselves on the

Narmada's banks, or drowning in her waters-in order to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.'(ARS152). In *A River Sutra*, Dr. Mitra, points out that the Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy wrote about the Narmada: 'The ancient Greeks would probably have sympathized with the river's mythology but at least they only had to deal with one set of myths, whereas Indians have never been prepared to settle for a single mythology if they could squeeze another hundred in.' (ARS 152). A consideration of myths surrounding Narmada leads us back to the world of psychological experience as it is magnified in cultural imagery. According to Sudhir Kakar (Cults and Myths of Krishna, in *Indian Literary Criticism*, 2004), a distinguished psychoanalyst in India, 'Filtered though the decorous symbolism of art and folk-tale, these (Indian) myths present modern psychic conflicts and their fantasized resolutions in a socially congenial form. As Jacob Arlow has pointed out whereas an individual's dreams are meant to be forgotten after they have performed their nightly task of relieving instinctual pressure, myths are designed to be remembered and repeated in order that the sharing of unconscious fantasies may confirm and consolidate the mutual identification of the members of the society to whom the myths appeal.'). The nameless narrator is a retired bureaucrat who chooses to be a Manager at Narmada rest house and lives in a small cottage adjoining the rest house. From the gardens he could see Narmada 'the river has become the sole object of my reflections. ' And because he was fascinated by the river and wanted to learn more about it, he explains, ' . . . the bungalow's proximity to the Narmada River was its particular attraction. Worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva, the river is among our holiest pilgrimage sites. During my tours of the area I had been further intrigued to discover that the criminal offence of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself in the waters of the Narmada.' (ARS02).

Paradoxically the river Narmada is a source of renewal of life (in *the executive's story*) and a giver of death (in *The Courtesan's Story*). Perhaps through *The Courtesan's Story* Mehta wants to highlight that irrespective of the caste or creed, high or low class, the river provides solace to all. In *The Musician's story* the musician brings his daughter to the banks of Narmada since 'the river has the power to cure' a person 'dead from inside'. His daughter says about her father, 'He says that I must meditate on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penece, until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed and can become again the ragini to every raga.' (ARS211). The nameless narrator tells about his experiences in first dimension. A retired bureaucrat, free from his worldly obligations, who has retired to the forest, to reflect as a vanprasthi, again reflecting the four ashramas in Hindu philosophy, (The four stages of life in Indian philosophy are called *brahmacharya*-When a Brahmin stays in a Gurukul and receives education, *grihastha*-When a Brahmin marries and produces children, *vanprastha* -When a Brahmin goes to the jungle to meditate and *sanyasa*- When a Brahmin forgets all worldly ties and permanently stays in the jungle to find the truth about life and achieve nirvana or salvation). As in *A River Sutra*, Professor Shankar points out to the Narrator, 'you have chosen the wrong place to flee the world my, friend . . . too many lives converge on these banks.' (ARS268). Nitin Bose gets cured only when he surrenders and makes offerings to Narmada. He is cured after the Vano tribe ceremony of immersing the idol in Narmada (which signifies his (Nitin's) sins drowned in Narmada). The tribal waded in behind him, their hands raised, their faces turned to the West and they were chanting:

'Salutations in the morning and at night to, thee, O Narmada.
Defend me from the serpent's poison.' (ARS145).

The last chapter is presented as the culmination of Narmada. Mehta concludes her stories here stating that since thousands of years, all kinds of people find solace when they come to Narmada. All her stories culminate in its characters finding solace in the arms of Narmada-bards, ascetics, gamblers, cheats, dancers, singers- find refuge in her embrace. As he minstrel sings:

‘You remove the stains of evil; you release the wheel of suffering.
You lift the burdens of the world, O holy Narmada.’ (ARS278).

River Myth Unfolded: Tribal Stories

The story internalizes legends (of Narmada) from two tribes, one from the eastern part of India and the other from the western part. The Naga mythology of the snake goddess Mansa (a snake goddess in human form) finds its cure in the Vano tribes near the river goddess Narmada, linked through Lord Siva. There exists no reference to the parent child relationship except when the narrator finds responsibility of Nitin Bose a burden. He says: ‘Never having been a parent, I found this unfamiliar burden of responsibility an irritant’, (ARS 150) and is relieved when finally Nitin Bose left the bungalow. According to the myth in *the courtesan’s story* the Aryan warrior had fallen deeply in love with a tribal woman of Narmada Valley. The aborigines caught him beheaded as punishment. Since then he was said to be sleeping somewhere deep in the forest. ‘He [the abductor] told me a great warrior slept somewhere close by with honey bees circling his head. He laughed, saying his men thought he was himself immortal because he had been stung by one of those bees. I wanted to be stung by such a honey bee so we could be together forever and sometimes we set out to search for the warrior but we never found him . . .’ (ARS 185) The courtesan’s daughter unfolds Rahul Singh’s greatness before the nameless narrator, who is the Manager of the Narmada rest house, and tells him how the society forced him to be a murderer. ‘Denied justice, Rahul Singh only did what a man of honor would do. He swore vengeance on his family’s murderers and killed them all. Of course he has become a hunted man. But he has never harmed anyone who did not deserve it.’ (ARS182) From the flash back she comes to the present. In the present condition she herself could not return to the society as a murderer’s wife. A victim of social ethos she is left with no choice but is forced to commit suicide by jumping into the river Narmada for which her mother is happy because ‘her daughter had died in Narmada she would be purified of all her sins.’ (ARS190)

Bose turns to Narmada, the river goddess, who is related to the snake goddess Mansa as sister. (being formed by the same father Shiva). Manasa is believed to have been born from the erotic imaginings of Shiva and his seed fell on a lotus leaf and seeped into the underworld kingdom of Nagas, or serpents, where it took the shape of a girl, named Manasa, since her origin was in Siva’s mind. Before Nitin Bose’s arrival at the rest-house, the Narrator wonders whether Bose was aware of the powers of the goddess, ‘Did he know the goddess who had incinerated even the Great Ascetic in the fires of longing, the Goddess whose power had been acknowledged by the ancient sages with such fearful names as the Terrible One, the Implacable Mother, the Dark Lady, the Destroyer of Time, the Everlasting Dream--did he know the goddess had been worshipped by the tribal inhabitants of these jungles for thousands of years? . . . Would a brilliant mind be enough to protect the young man from the dark forces of the jungle, from the tribal worship of that Desire which even their conquerors had acknowledged to be invincible, describing it as the first-born seed of the mind?’ (ARS86). The priest from Vano tribe remarks, ‘If your sahib wants to recover he must worship the goddess Narmada at any shrine that overlooks river Narmada. Only the river has been given the power to cure him’, (ARS 137), from the ‘power of desire’ (ARS 141).

River Saga Unfolded: The Show Stopper

The last chapter called *The Song of the Narmada* is the 'show stopper.' This narrative is a 'flashing forward' to a moment later in the chronological sequence of events- prolepsis of 'the Minstrel's Story'. It can be called a sequel to *The Minstrel's Story* as it carries her story further. This chapter focuses on Narmada. It further discloses the identity of Naga Ascetic as heavy spectacled and deep voiced 'Professor V.V. Shankar, the foremost archaeological authority on the Narmada in the country'. (ARS260). Through Professor Shankar, Mehta tells us about the river's immortality. She speaks about the fertility of the region around it. She even makes the mind fertile and creative. She spreads the canvas of the novel as the flow of Narmada. Professor Shankar says: 'Thousands of years ago the sage Vyasa dictated *Mahabharata* on this riverbank. Then in our own century this region provided the setting for Kipling's *Jungle Book*. In between countless other men left their mark on the river.' (ARS264). There is reference to Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger* and his great play *Shakuntala*, Poems written by Rupmati and Baz Bahadur and also the poem composed by Shankaracharya on Narmada. Shankaracharya was a great reformer of Hinduism in the 8th century. 'Sankaracharya started a vigorous campaign for the revival of Hinduism as a living and progressive faith, based on solid foundations of Vedic philosophy and ancient Indian cultural traditions. He was also the founding father of 'Bhakti movement' which found its way in the medieval period. Nevertheless, he laid stress on gyan or jnana- the true knowledge- as a means of attainment of salvation.' (Mehta.J.L. 186). Shankaracharya with his yogic powers is said to have filled whole Narmada River into a small jar (kamandal). He wrote *Narmadashtaka* to pray to the goddess Narmada to relieve common man from its flood. (Shukla, 2002).

You cross ground by leaping, Like a dancing stag,
The faithful ones name you Reva, The leaping.
But Shiva named you, Delightful and, in his laughter,
He gave you the name of Narmada.'

Talking about the father daughter relationship, Shiva in form of Professor defends and praises and exerts pride on his own daughter the river Narmada. In fact the story of Shankar-Uma runs parallel to the legend of Lord Siva-Goddess Parvati or Uma. We are further introduced to grown up Uma, the child saved by Naga Baba, who is a river minstrel. When folding her hands she chanted to the water: 'The sages meditating on your riverbanks say, 'You are twice born, Once from penance, Once from love'. (ARS275). Here she perhaps talks of Narmada but is so true for herself as well. Uma, like Narmada, has two births. When the minstrel completes her chanting Professor Shankar asks her, 'where do you go from here?' to which she answers 'to the coast'. Shankar adds, 'To find a husband, like the Narmada found her Lord of Rivers?' And Uma replies, 'You can see into the future, Naga Baba'. To which he replies, 'The future reveals itself to everyone in time.'

Religion in India and the feminist politics

The crux of all postcolonial discourses is the politics of identity that focuses on the question of representation of 'those' who have not been able to represent themselves in colonial structures. Mehta, as a translator, tries to voice the bottled sufferings of Indian women. As the river, the woman imbibes the serenity, strength, and immortal nature. Through the river Narmada, that represents (Indian) woman, Mehta explores the gap between power of speech and silence. The mythological structure in India is such that the river is worshiped like a goddess, but the voice

given to her is 'masculine' (because it is men who frame rules for her and it is men who sing her praises). She is 'praised' for being the daughter, sister and a mother, a persona that is feminine. Through the river mythology, river being the role model, women are shown the path to be followed as a traditional woman. They should always be under control and are taught to be giving, sacrificing, and if they are 'out of control' or 'masculine in traits' (which can be when she is taking her own decisions), she is regarded as an 'outcast', 'modern' or a 'whore'. Indian society, like all traditional societies, through its myths and religion tries to create a symbolic line between traditional and modern woman. The feminine portrait of river has been a deliberate attempt of paternalistic society to create norms for womanhood. As a river they (women) can flow but within boundaries. Their flow or water is to cleanse others' (men) vices and to reproduce and nurture (the children). They will be worshiped within the boundaries but exploited. Whenever the river crosses its boundaries it is a curse as the river Kosi in Bihar is known as sorrow of Bihar as it often crosses its boundaries. Uncontrolled, youthful, bouncing rivers are pleasure to eyes as a youthful girl. Therefore, traditionally these Indian girls are frustrated with low self esteem, incapable of reacting and confirming group pressure.

Gurcharan Das (2002) observes the life of an average Indian and writes, 'Religion was closely interwoven in our lives. Depending on our persuasion, we either went to a temple, a mosque or a gurdwara, or attended discourses of holy men. It was common to speak of truth, illusion and the meaning of human life. People were not ashamed to intersperse their conversations with their frustrations with the human situation, or truisms on the inevitability of death. They regarded man as a microcosm of the divine. "God is in man and man is in God" was the way people talked about it. Man's mind and his selfish nature were the cause of his problems, making him feel that he was separate from God. Everyone believed in karma- that actions mattered and determined what sorts of lives we would lead in future births; equally, our lives today were a result of our actions in past births. The aim of life was to achieve unity with God. Thus, day-to-day conversation had a philosophical edge to it.' The Hindu patriarchal society labels women either as virgin goddess or a whore, and linking the river with womanhood tries to define the path for her to follow- to nurture, to breed, to care, to be an object of admiration, to forgive sins, to give solace and surrender. The Indian society, through the myths, designs the traditional feminine sex role- of child rearing and home making- fit for a 'cultured' woman. Women who accept the so called 'cultured' and 'traditional feminine sex roles' are likely to believe that women are to be seen and not to be heard. Therefore, they are unlikely to assert themselves by making their needs and wants known. As a consequence they are likely to be overpowered. However, with the onset of globalization there is a conflict that arises between modern versus traditional. Indian men have become modern economically but their mindset is still traditional. Contrary to the popular belief, it is the women who have progressed- economically as well as intellectually. Women are truly 'modern' in the true sense of the word if autonomy, equality and freedom are archetypically modern values. Still 'Indian womanhood' is expected to represent a 'perfect mix of tradition and modernity...womanly virtues- some kind of nurturing, caring answer is expected of them' even in a beauty contest, remarks Nivedita Menon (2006), exploring significant 'disjunctures and contradictions on both sides.' (in her essay titled 'Between the burqa and the beauty parlor? Globalization, cultural Nationalism, and feminist politics'). Indian women have covered a very long journey from being an object of possession and desire to becoming a subject of power and position. The river Narmada is still singing the saga of this great transition in Indian women as

shown by Gita Mehta. She explores the sexuality or 'object' and perhaps dropping hints in parallel with the river as powerful and potent factor of cultural domination.

Conclusion:

The novel explores the complexity of the human mind. As Mehta through Professor Shankar says: 'If anything is sacred about this river, it is the individual experiences of the human beings who have lived here'. (ARS267). In her narrative Mehta is highly symbolic and changes facets like the fast flowing Narmada. A substantial part of the novel is aimed at describing connotative meaning of text which is produced simultaneously with words or alternating with them. She delves deep into Indian philosophy and tries to search the key to release from the cycle of birth and rebirth. She discusses the religious traditions in India and describes the practices in Hinduism, Islam and Jainism. She is not only presenting a great research from the ancient written texts but also gives us great description of the contemporary life of Indian subcontinent. She displays great command in dealing with complex descriptions making it simpler and lucid. She explains with definite ease how Narmada is a place of varied descriptions. She juxtaposes Hindu and Muslim myths, the tribal 'Vano' from the west with Naga tribes of the east, Jainism with Naga ascetic cult, Vedic 'slokas' with Sufi mysticism. She describes the life of luxury (Monk) and penury ridden (Imrat), beauty (courtesan's daughter) and ugliness (musician's daughter), pride and guilt (the teacher in Imrat's story), violence (Rahul Singh) and helplessness (his wife). Mehta effortlessly follows the old tradition of meta-narrative. She conveys meaning through dialogues and explains the philosophy of many religions. Concluding I would consider how Gita Mehta uses the river Narmada to capture multi-textured contemporary India, with diverse voices, myths, symbols, rituals, beliefs, behavior, and customs empowering the inherited cultural forms. Each enchanting tale is a rivulet pouring its truth into the long river of life. All are bonded through one sutra, the river Narmada. Simultaneously, using river symbolism, she unveils feminist politics and the position of women in Indian culture. The study of cultural identity reflected in the narrative also suggests that culture is a powerful adhesive force and 'controls our lives in many unsuspected ways' (Hall, 1959: 52). The problem, Hall says, is that 'culture hides much more than it reveals, and ...it hides most effectively from its own participants' (p. 53). Mehta tries to penetrate into the hidden dimensions of Indian culture by focusing on individual culture while maintain the traditional focus on the collective cultural identity of others. It also reflects the new identity of the empowered post colonial novelists who create stories keeping in mind to highlight the forgotten, ancient tradition and culture.

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