

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN GITA MEHTA'S A RIVER SUTRA

Dr. B. Kathiresan

Associate Professor & Head i/c, Dept. of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore

Dr. P. Vasuki

Associate Professor & Head, Dept. of English, GTM College, Gudiyattam

The struggle for power between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist are found in established institutions as they represent. "A set of practices by which meanings are constituted and communicated." (Chilton and Schaffner 2005: 5) such "representational practices produce and circulate meanings among members of social groups and these meanings can be defined as culture" (Smith and Godlewski 1994). The way in which meanings are built into prejudiced practices and the biased account of an individual or groups representation provides contextual meaning for persecution, discrimination, subordination, marginalization, exploitation of that individual or community.

Unless such representations are realized as Foucault argues that "Power and Knowledge are thoroughly mutually implicated: power is involved in the construction of truth and knowledge has implications for power. The production, distribution and consumption of knowledge are always political in this sense." (MacDonald, 1998: 3) The manner of representation inside the institution of society, culture and tradition would lead to empowerment of the discriminated. Individuals, groups and institutions compete to be considered as appropriate or preferred representation. Not only language but culture, tradition and ritualistic practices influence in the representation.

The image of River Narmada as serene benevolent and tolerant has been shifted from its positive connotations into the concept of an imprisoning, lustful power to influence the lives of men who live on the banks of the Narmada. Ironically the title of the novel "A River Sutra" highlights the politics of language in treating the river as a lower caste in the social order in Hindu faith. The river stands as a symbol of a woman, a goddess, who engulfs forces of life within her if men do not heed to desire. The novel is a series of stories of the Hindus, the Muslim, the Jain ascribe, a courtesan a minstrel, tea executives, bandits and sages, tribals and anthropologist mostly men who form a gallery on the banks of the river Narmada.

The river through mythological time, historical time and in the contemporary time threads the stories of the people who live on her banks. The river though conceived as the daughter of God Shiva is the holiest pilgrimage sites and is considered as a destroyer and emulsifier since "the criminal offense of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself in the waters of the Narmada." The river goddess is symbolized a half woman with the full breasts of a fertility symbol but the torso of a coiled snake. The

prayer of the tribal's to defend them from the "serpents poison" can also signify their plead to the deity to relieve from desire. The female image of the river liberates people from madness and those who are possessed. The sparkling and disappearing of the tossing and rippling waves of Narmada "like the anklets encircling of woman's foot" (96) makes the bureaucrat think of "Lord Shiva as an ascetic witnessing the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from his own penance."(96)

Elderly persons having completed the first stages of life enter the stage of Vanaprasti seeking enlightenment. These men endure an "arduous affair" (7) for nearly two years to complete the pilgrimage. The ascetics meditate near the hold pool at Amarkantak to liberate themselves from the cycle of rebirth and death. Being the daughter of Lord Shiva those who undertake the pilgrimage "must" (7) respect Shiva's ascetics before walking 800 kms to the rivers source along at Amarkantak. They must don whit clothes during their pilgrimage walking up and down along the bank of the river crossing to the Amarkantak. She is thought to like mankind to the energy of Shiva and the purpose of the pilgrimage is to acquire endurance that would generate the heat that links the energy of the universe.

Though the function of the river Narmada is holy her representation is terrific in description. The Narmada was born out of the perspiration of Lord Shiva's ascetic trance. The stream of perspiration took the form of the "most dangerous women of her kind."(8). The Narmada was a beautiful virgin tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing as a dancing girl, a romantic dreamer and as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire. She is an embodiment of inventive variations forever inexhaustible and married to the ocean God. The hills and the river are friendly only to those who are used to their ways. Even as the river flows through the hills in all its variations delighted the Ascetic who moved towards their goals. Therefore the narrator of the stories, the sutradhar who is an outsider and who narrates the tale of Narmada never enter the caves for fear of snakes. Uneven to believe that even the Narmada will protect him from a serpents fangs. The possessiveness of women limits the acceptance of outsider until the sutradhar gets acquainted to the ways of the Narmada.

Analysing the stories in series also unravels the image of women characters being represented like the river Narmada. The Monks Story explains that "at the moment of gratification, the seed of new desire is sown in man." The monk had an indolent life and seeking freedom from worldly desire through poverty, celibacy and non violence. But after enlightening the Sutradhar as he leaves the mendicant requests the bureaucrat not to detain him any longer since he was "Too poor to renounce the world twice."(41) The narration of the stories is so structured that none can renounce the world while on the banks of Narmada, which symbolizes the hold the river has on life.

The story of Master Mohan exposes that an existence needs love and love can never be substituted. The story presents woman as dangerous, selfish and merciless through the representation of Master Mohan's Wife. Had Master Mohan's wife accepted Imrat may be

Imrat's life would not have ended in the hands of the Sahib. She is a greed, intolerant, arrogant, heartless woman. She hates Imrat and considers him as a burden to her family. But when she realizes that Imrat's voice could earn money she turns arrogant fixing the recording of Imrat. While Master Mohan is depicted as the epitome of patience, contented, loving and sacrificial individual who goes beyond the barriers of religion. In spite of Tariq Mia's knowledge of the world Tariq Mia could not prevent Master Mohan from committing suicide as he suffered from the guilt of Imrat's death.

The tribal women depicted in the novel are presented as temptress to the bureaucrat. Their laughter provoke the old vanaprasti calling him back to life. They nudge each other in surprise commenting that "it must be the season. Spring rouses even old tigers from their rest." (92) They warn the young tribal woman saying "Take care the sahib does not lure us to a seduction." (93) The woman relieve the bureaucrat from his gloom for which he is "grateful" (94) The Bureaucrat is reminded of Maya who get burnt to ashes by Lord Shiva as he himself was consumed by Desire.

Desire is acknowledged as invincible as it's the "first born seed of the mind" (98) through the story of Nitin Bose as he arrives to the banks of the Narmada as a mad prisoner visiting the bureaucrat to be cured of his sickness. He had been bewitched by the moon and maddened by woman. He doubts if he had fashioned Rima from the legends of Nitin's grandfather. But the woman had struck him like a snake with marks of vermilion and three streaks of collyrium on Nitin. Rima seduced Nitin with tribal songs in a language that he could not understand. She shares mystical stories and enchanted Nitin in the tea estate. But later Nitin realizes Rima to be a wife of a railway coolie at the railway dept in Agartala. Fearing separation from Nitin Bose, Rima had cast a spell on and had eluded Nitin that he might never leave her. Nitin is possessed and so could be cured only by the river Narmada. He had been touched by the power of the goddess. Nitin had been punished by Narmada for "denying the power of desire." (141) Since Nitin did not show respect for Desire he was punished. Woman here is represented as a dictator to whom all passions and men should surrender. Even if a woman is not recognized she punishes the individual. That is why, Nitin is sent to the banks of the Narmada to learn servitude to Desire which will relieve himself of the spell of madness.

The Narmada is "every illusion that is inspiring love... call her what you will, but she is what a mother is feeling for a child. A man for a woman. A starving man for food. Human beings for God." (142) Nitin considers desire as a kind of magic disregarding desire as the "origin of life." (143)

Even the great geographer Ptolemy had written about Narmada's holiness and religious suicide at Amarkantak in order to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Reason and instinct war on the banks of the Narmada as she is also the magnet to scholars. Towns on the bank of the river are renowned for the learning of Brahmins.

The "Courtesan's Story" is again about women being an object of men's desire as the Bandit in the Vindhya abduct her. She gets convinced by the Bandit's statement that

she had been his possession “many lifetimes” (184). She seduces the Bandit weds him finally and dies falling into the Narmada after the Bandit is shot dead by the police. The story exposes woman as an object to be possessed. In the clutches of desire the Courtesan believes in the myth of she being united with the Bandit in her previous birth compels her to surrender to the desire of the Bandit. The subjugation of woman by man to his whims and fancies finally convincing the woman to surrender to him shows how patriarchy has treated woman.

Identical theme of woman being treated as a possession not only by the husband but also by the father is elaborated in the story of the “Musician story”. Here the anxiety of the father, with a physically ugly daughter to be given in marriage is the theme of the story. When the girl wallows in her ugliness the father vows to give his daughter as wife to the Gods of Music. The father teaches the daughter the “subtleties of tenderness, how to be supple before gravity, how to gently angry, how to seduce and sigh and caress through my music.” (215) the arrival of a music student relieves the father that he teaches him the art of music taking the promise that the student would marry his daughter. Instilling desire in the students the father teaches them the ragas until the girl is trained with the greatest gift of sweet voice and mellowed music.

The Irony is when on the night of Shiva the students play on their instruments (she on the sitar and he on the veena) immersed in responding to each other’s plead, the father unexpectedly announces that “Tonight I give my daughter in marriage to music. I have fulfilled my duties as a father. Now I free this man from our bargain. But if he still wishes to marry my child, the wedding can take place whenever my wife wishes.”(224). But the student after mastering the nuances of music shuns her because of her ugliness. He accepts his freedom and gets betrothed to other girls. This kills the girl’s capacity to express desire through music and she remains a ragini (wife) for the ragas. The male counterparts as father and fellow student the girl loses her desire to live, becomes disappointed, frustrated and exploited to meet the wishes of “man”.

Woman in the novel has been perceived as the epitome of beauty. One of the many myths that run through the novel highlights that Lord Shiva made the instrument veena to immortalize the beauty of Parvati. In the story of the Naga Baba on the night of Shiva, the Naga Baba accepts the child as alms from a brothel. She has been named as “Misfortune” (246); in spite of her earning breaking stones she is sold for rupees five hundred by her father to a brothel. The girl was not allowed to eat until everyone had eaten and so was always hungry and was beaten by her father. The Baba takes her to Amarkantak names her “Uma” (251). The girl was dedicated to river Narmada by Naga Baba she was called “ a singer-saint” (258) “The individual experiences of the human beings who have lived on the Narmada” (258) is the sacred thing about the river.

The novel presents the unbroken record of Human race and the oldest evidence of human life in India from successive ages- Neolithic, Iron and Bronze Age have presented

women as a commodity, object of desire and lust. Narmada stands as the symbol of woman who instills the rhythm of desire, which is the force of life in people.

The image of woman throughout the novel has been presented from a pre-Aryan perspective, with set practices to provide meaning to religion, art and life. Gita Mehta foregrounds the second sex in a as dictated by the patriarchal society. The stories present the influence of tradition and culture on women. The river sutra though seems to glorify culture it undercuts the irony of women being victimized in society. Beyond the myriad meanings and functions the river is considered as the seed of Desire. The “Discourse Theory” highlights that power circulates and is negotiated through Discourse and it is negotiated through language. So the use of language is vital in providing meaning just as culture is emphasized through practices. As a sugar coated pill, Gita Mehta’s vibrant use of language intertwines the politics in representing women in the Indian Scenario.

Works Cited

1. Mehta, Gita. *A River Sutra*. New Delhi: Vintage, 1994. Print.