Research Paper English

Sociological Status of Women in Geeta Mehta's A River Sutra

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ABSTRACT

The novel written in the last two decades of the twentieth century had inextricable links with the socio-political milieu as it stuck deep roots in the Indian sociaty. By imaginatively treating the contemporary themes, the postmodern English novelist's sought to explore and interpret India significantly in its various aspects. Geeta Mehta's A River Sutra reflects contemporary society by describing six stories and through which people's money minded attitude, indifference to the poor or low profile people, jealousy, anti-socialness, in-safety of women, optimism, kind full nature, women empowerment, metaphysis, etc. the present paper focuses on the social status of contemporary women and their importance in creating healthy society depicted in Geeta Mehta's novel A River Sutra.

KEYWORDS Geeta Mehta, River Sutra, Metaphysical

Inspired by the exigencies of socio-political history of the country, the Indian novelists took upon themselves the responsibility of giving artistic articulation to the problems of the contemporary society to make the reader aware of the current situations as well as to force their mind indirectly to think over the burning issues like the tyranny of poverty, illiteracy, suffering, superstitions, caste and sex, political issues, Indian culture, challenges etc. The postmodernist novelists with the adoption of structuralism try to convey certain message diluting the main theme of the novel into their imagination through selecting the protagonist from the different sectors of the society like farmers, labourers, factory workers, and virtuous women fighting against a zamindar, landlords, factory owners or hard-hearted men- may be their husbands. We may say that the postmodernist novelists have succeeded in their efforts to portray creatively in a realistic manner the whole India.

Geeta Mehta's A River Sutra can be described as "Metaphysical Novel" is narrated with multiple narrative directions and a protagonist who does not have direct involvement in the all subplots. The passive hero attempts to narrate his story, but at the same time he is told many stories by others. A bureaucrat at the age of retirement tells this story but in this story telling small stories of the Monk, Executive, Courtesan, Teacher, and Minstrel and within the stories, there are stories of Shiva, Narmada etc. Even though there are several stories the narrator without having any pause switches over from one incident to another easily. The narrator becomes speaker and listener at a time. The writer's this narrative technique holds the readers passion to move forward or to read the novel at a single sitting.

Almost all the main characters, including the protagonist they try to escape from everyday reality, inhumanness and materialistic approach of the whole society .At first sight they seem to be far away from woman as they realize during their personal relation with women that women become hurdles on carting on their lives to the immortality or to be free from mental disturbance. This novel reveals social status of contemporary society in different ways. The Monk, without thinking of his wife gets ready to give up his wife with wealth; children and all the comforts only taking for granted the worthlessness of life without thinking about his wife's feelings. The orphan boy's story reveals the tragedy of such children's life. He is offered to sing songs at the cost of a very nominal amount of five thousand rupees to the Great Sahib. Later on the boy is forced to sing and he sings such notes that they spoil his voice. Suddenly the Great Sahib slits the throat of the boy, kills him as the boy seems unworldly to him. Generally women are considered merciful & kind but here the boy is forcefully offered to the inhuman character by the wife of Master Mohan. The Executive's story shows the modern attitude of lustful eyes to use and throw women as they wish. The story of the courtesan reveals the current situation of male-dominated society- unsocial men's kidnapping of girls and their emotional black mailing. The story of the Musician's daughter describes the reality that how any female of the society is exploited as a daughter in the hand of own father and as a beloved in the hand of her lover. The Male characters think that to get higher enlightenment in the life woman becomes hurdles so she should be avoided. This attitude of some religious paths is still existed in our society. They don't want to look woman's face or they don't want to have their shadow on their lives. This attitude shows negligence of the female section of the society which will be proved harmful towards the reformation of a healthy society. Women never became obstacles in anyone's life journey. On the contrary, so many examples women are there in our history who have supported the mankind for their better inner and outer progress. Shakespeare had rightly said, 'Behind every successful man there is a woman' as woman is always an idol of sacrifice and renunciation. The main thing is that the human beings must have to conquer their instincts, senses which misguide them towards rude or unhealthy behavior.

The status and predicament of women in Indian society has been yet another motivating force for the Indian novelist with a social purpose. Despite the fact that woman can contribute to social regeneration as much as to the cause of family welfare she became a victim of social prejudices and male chauvinism. However, Gandhi's call to the Indian women to participate actively in the freedom movement made them conscious of their duty and rights which have changed their lives to some extent. They have started to fight against ignorance; superstition and backwardness harmful to them. Indian English novelists have begun to treat women status as the central theme for their purposeful social novels. Their efforts are to be relevant to their culture by presenting characters and situations rooted in Indian ethos.

The postmodern Indian English novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor etc. have tried to depict the political, economic or social oppression of individuals in their novels. Their novels do not deal with a personal and private predicament. But, what we have to keep in mind is that these novels are more concerned with presenting the entire picture of society, the contemporary problems and topical events in life. They are born because of the writers consciousness about the phenomenon occurred around them. We have to note that "contemporary novels are the mirror of

an age, but a very special kind of mirror, a mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age, but also its inner face. (Walter Allen, Reading a Novel, P.P 18.19)

The novel 'A River Sutra' depicts the women's situation in the contemporary society through very few subplots. In the novel there is no search of identity with woman consciousness point of view as far as women characters are concerned but their life incidents show that how they have been treating since a very long period, still in the 21st century. Very few women's status are changed or they are entitled to change, otherwise the society has not given total freedom to woman to do what they like at the cost of only their duty towards the family or the society.

The first story is of a young man who renounced the world at the cost of 62 million rupees and freely chose to change his status from the richest of the rich to the poorest of the poor. As a prosperous diamond merchant's eldest son, Ashok had known the satiety of wealth-pleasure-power. He was shocked at the conditions under which the diamonds were mined, distressed by the poverty of the minors which had left his father, the practicing "non-violent Jain, undisturbed. The son realizes the absurdity of this hypocrisy and challenges his father. He gets himself much disturbed by his father's dehumanized acts. The Monk, suddenly decides to give up wealth, wife, children, friends and all the comforts of a luxurious living. He accepts the life of hermit. This story shows that the father's inhuman attitude has what to do with his wife. He decides to live a life as hermit maybe welcoming decision but at the same time he should think about his wife also. In our human society, most of the husbands are entitled to take any decision without having consent from their wives. Sometimes, they simply inform them about their decision but not ask for their suggestions.

The second story, told by the teacher Tarig Mia, is a story of a music teacher who has adopted a blind orphan boy to teach music. After sometimes it is found that the boy's singing become so popular. The Great Sahib of the village invited the boy to sing at his place. Master Mohan didn't like the offer so he denied. Master Mohan's wife wanted to make some money out of the offer. So she accepted the offer herself beyond discussing the proposal with his husband by showing her empowerment. She sold the boy and received five thousand rupees. The wife's this attitude is depiction of Mr. Geeta Mehta's positive reflection of the women empowerment. But the wife's negligence towards the death of the boy is a very simple example of today's money minded women's attitude which is quite contradictory in comparison to the River Narmada, the merciful goddess who gives peace to the human being who surrender themselves at her feet. Such kind of women is also present in our contemporary society. They feel themselves so powerful for taking any decision like men. Perhaps this is the impact of western culture on them. This "The Teacher's story" is told to the narrator by a man who is accused of murder. Actually the music teacher Master Mohan has a gentle nature. Even though he is unhappy about his life as he is kind to others and being a poor fellow married to rich woman, he has no right to do what he likes. He has been engaged in marriage to a rich woman by his father because he has lost his property. When this rich woman sells the orphan blind boy Imrat whom he met during a Quawwali Concert to the Great Sahib and the Great Sahib cuts out Imrat's tongue as he is jealous of his voice thinking "such a voice is not human", Mohan becomes very upset and commits suicide but the rich woman has no concern with the act. For such woman this sort of poor people are another commodity, purchasable at a certain prize. As women's attitudes are the base of a healthy society, the society never expect such act from women.

When such evil is prevailing in the society, for unsocial men women will always remain objects for them which could be sold and purchased anytime easily. In the novel we find one statement uttered by a drunkard, "What's the woman's price, pimp? Offer me a bargain. She won't find another customer tonight." 64 Even today girls are sold and purchased not only by man but also by women to engage them into satisfying physical need of men.

The Executive's story shows another reality of lustful eyes. It is the story of an urbane and sophisticated westernized executive who gets infatuated with a tribal girl Rima, a collie's wife, in his remote tea estate after making love to her in darkness for several nights. When he returns to the city and gets lost in the glitter of society ladies, he still is haunted by the love song of that tribal woman. The deep love of the girl snatches away the executive Nitin Bose to visit the tea estate again from the city life. When he encounters Rima again he is subjected to some kind of tribal magic. He started to think about himself that he is a woman. Then he goes to River Narmada to get cured. This story reflects three things. One thing, that first he exploits the married girl physically and then after he feels himself trapped into her love. Second thing, even he knows that he loves that married woman, he leaves her at her own situation and goes to place where again he feels himself attracted towards the modern women and the last thing is that when the married woman realizes that the man has leaf her forever there is something to take revenge of it going on in her mind. Perhaps that's way during her first encounter with the Nitin she possesses him with her tribal magic. Thus this poor lady seems powerful, empowered. At the same time this short incident also describes the social milieu that poor women are easily richable for rich men what they think.

The story of the Courtesan narrated by her mother and herself, is a tale of belief and faith based on intuition. The mother, courtesan by generations fails to protect her daughter from the increasing indignity around her, which is directly related to the growing pollution of a heartless society ruled by money-power-muscles nexus. Rahul Singh, the notorious bandit, kidnaps the young courtesan and keeps her in captivity in a cave. She denies to surrender herself physically at the feet of the unsocial element. The person is so intelligent. He exploits her emotionally by telling her that she had been his wife in many births before this one. Then after, she has started to think about her previous births. One night, when he touches her, she realizes, "Guided by his touch, I learned, I had known his body in a hundred lifetimes before he took me again a virgin on the thin quilt which was all that shielded our bodies from the ground."184 Rahul Singh has also been a victim of this society. The two victims by force come to love each other, and their only shelter is the forest. When Rahul is caught by the police, the girl ends her life. Her mysterious disappearance near the cliffs never disturbs the mother. For her it is normal thing. This story reveals that to some extent, todays women have been appearing in the front row of the society becoming less emotional. Professional approach of the society has diverted their mind because of which, sometimes they feel alone, totally free from anything or independent. Nothing can captivate them deep-heartedly. They are not like Savitri, that they run after the God of death to save Satyavan, Savitri's husband. They think if something is left, leave it and go ahead or try to capture something else which is more beneficial. There may be some women like Savitri, who try to regain the lost things. But their number might be less.

The Musicians Story is about a girl who has become "dead inside", to express desire in music. She has come to the river as a possible source of inspiration when the girl tells her father that she learnt music along with another young man from her father on the condition that the young man will marry her. She strongly longs to marry the unknown. But when that fallow gets married to someone else, she is left much disturbed. Besides consoling her by supporting her feelings, her father insists her to go to river Narmanda to be cured of her deepest attachment for the fallow and marry Music. He wants to make her Ragini to every raga for which she has to surrender herself fully to the Music by becoming the bride of it which she does not like. In this male dominated society, sometime it happens that the father shows his back to fulfill his promise given to his daughter while accomplishing his work from her. In this story, we can see that the father has turned off his

face from his responsibility to fulfill his daughter's very common desire of marring someone whom she loves and wants to make her life-partner. The music would not be able to satisfy her physical necessity. Thus, one daughter's common requirement, desire to marry someone is killed by her own father. Even today in many houses female child is not given that much importance given to male child in the same house by the same parents. She has to do what her father expects from her as a daughter, what a husband demands from a wife or at her old age what her son orders her to do.

In the novel, main women protagonist is river Narmada. She is depicted with motherly love who always welcomes her children to relieve them from mental and physical sorrows or disorder. It is the central character of the novel like a women character in Lakshmi's Kaveriai Pola, a Telugu novel. She is described so empowered as, "The most dangerous of her kind: A beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her in flaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer."8-9 It is this character around whom all the sub plots are woven. Any virtuous women can be proved pain-killer to anyone, may be in the form of a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother. For example, mother Teresa, Mataji, Kasturba, Sarojini Naidu, Rani Lakshmibai, Maa Sharda, etc. Any sufferer can have shelter in their heart. In the novel, it is depicted that almost all the sufferers find relief by surrendering themselves at the Mother Nature's lap, river Narmada. Thus, she is depicted as empowered women who can contribute a lot in creating healthy society. 88

The novel A River Sutra is a novel of pilgrimage or of people who have strong quest for some power or peace in nature. They are attracted towards the Mother Nature to lead their life peacefully. It shows importance of mother, a woman who can guide the one who comes to their shelter with tender love, if she is respected whole- heartedly. Otherwise she can be like a demon, which can ruin the unsocial elements. In the novel, many social evils are described directly. But its deep reading lead us towards the social condition of the women of the contemporary society, before twenty seven years when the novel was published in 1993 and its relevance to the present society. Very few dialogs and characters are used to unravel the present status of women in the society. But the depicted dialogues are so powerful that you can have the image of it in the novel. The novelist has tried to shape it in an artistic form of novel. The creative artists have depicted postmodern period social situation in terms of life rendered artistically through frictional devices and techniques. Really, this novel has conveyed its message powerfully as it is "a vivid interpretation of life." And "a vehicle of truth, the most chosen theme for the creative art by postmodern English novelist.

It is the Goddess River to which various shorts of suffering people or questing could get themselves related in meaningful ways. In this novel, six stories are described to depict the potentiality of the river Narmada. When the Monk realizes the hypocrisy of his father while giving answer to his question regarding pitiful condition of the diamond minors: "How can you worry about a dead insect more than you care about a human being?"25, he feels: "Wealth had exercised my father's emotions freeing him to examine people as if they were abstractions. His benevolence had a cold mathematics" And he decides to live a hermit's life by renunciation of his father's property alongside the holy river. Thus the monk surrenders himself to the river mother. When the Music Teacher sees that the murder of the innocent orphan blind child, Imrat, the Great Sahib goes unpunished because of his money-power, Master Mohan soon on his way back to Calcutta commits suicide in the River water to get free from the grief. To get back his manliness, Nitin Boze performs the rites at the shrine, which is "on a big Banyan tree."141 on the river bank and he comes back cured. When Rahul Singh was caught by the police, the girl whom he had abducted and later on accepted as his wife, ends her life in the Narmada. The minstrel story is about one Naga Monk. When he came to the Narmada, he begged a child from a brothel and saved her from a miserable life of violence and corruption in a society. She is taught that the Narmada is her home and mother. She was renamed as Uma and brought to the river bank to plunge in the cold water. Then after, she is supposed to become the daughter of Narmada. It is significant that as she later chants her hymns to the river, she seems " ageless to the narrator."

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