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**Women and Water-The Politics of Water and Gender in Literature**

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**ABSTRACT**

Ever since the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were laid out by the United Nations (now expanded upon to become Sustainable Development Goals-SDGs) in the year 2000, water has assumed a central place in the debates that surround topics such as globalization and development of Earth's common resources. A common resource such as water becomes inseparable from issues of neocolonialism, discourses of neoliberalism that includes privatization, and gender. Women have most commonly been defined as essential users and providers of water in the domestic sphere as well as subsistence farming, and much of the burden of water collection in rural areas falls on young women (unmarried daughters, young daughter-in-laws). Global gender inequalities associated with water alert us to how women are negatively impacted and affected, especially through policies of corporate privatization of water. Hence, women are materially and bodily affected by the lack of access to safe and clean water, that too disproportionately and especially so in the developing world. This paper shows how these issues are examined in literary texts in the South Asian literary and social context, and how certain writers consciously subvert these inequalities to imbue women with social agency through water instead of just perpetuating a stereotypical view of women as victims in patriarchal modes of thought. The literary framework of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism will be used to analyze Mehta's novel, where it will be shown that women are not "naturally" connected to nature or water, and that men too have an important role to play as care-takers of water.

*Keywords:* Gender inequalities, Water, Politics, Literature, Neocolonialism, Privatization, Postcolonial Ecofeminism, Agency, Materialist

**Introduction**

This paper will give a general overview of the politics of water and gender, and explore and discuss these strands in Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra* (1994) through a postcolonial ecofeminist framework focusing on the relationship of women to the materiality of water. Mehta's *A River Sutra* is set along the banks of the Narmada River in India, and she shows that water (in rivers)—physically and metaphorically—carries social agency along with its "cultural symbolic meaning" (Ahlers and Zwarteven, 2009, p. 412). As Rhodante Ahlers and Margreet Zwarteven put it, "control over [water] translates into political and economic power" (2009, p. 412). Mehta consciously subverts and renegotiates traditional political and economic understandings of power rooted in structural patriarchal inequalities that have been historically reproduced. They allow for an alternative social agency to emerge through the registers of women and water, more specifically through the *bodily registers* of women and water.

An economic, political, social and religious background, especially in contextualizing water and rivers in the Indian context, is needed before a literary analysis of the novel is undertaken in light of this background. At the same time, this paper incorporates an interdisciplinary approach, where scholarship from the social sciences,

anthropology, hydrogeography etc critically intersects, informs and complements that of literature, literary discourse and analysis.

### **Postcolonial Ecofeminism**

Postcolonial ecofeminism is a relatively new concept which is still at a nascent stage. The related fields of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism have been dominated by a typically Euro-American point of view till date, and both fields do not address the issue of postcolonial ecofeminism adequately, where both fields need to recognize “the “double-bind” of being female and being colonized” (Campbell, 2005, p. xi). A postcolonial ecofeminist perspective would involve the coming together of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

A key argument that is furthered throughout the paper in relation to postcolonial ecofeminism is that it is necessary to disrupt the nature/culture dualism that aligns women “naturally” to nature. Disrupting the dualism would posit the women in an ambivalent relationship with nature and their immediate environment, whether rural or urban. Women then are not just simplistically and neatly aligned with nature or shown to be opposed to urban and technological development. They straddle the grey area between the two binaries. Much of the ecofeminist theory and accounts of women-led activism do not allow such an ambivalence to emerge. Women writing Indian fiction in English highlight this ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment, thus providing an important counterpoint to both theory and accounts of activism. Through this, they enable a re-imagining of women’s spatial boundaries at the same time.

### **The Politics of Water and Gender**

Tina Wallace and Anne Coles, both research associates at Oxford University’s International Gender Studies Centre, state that “[d]eepening understanding of the ways in which gender shapes who has control of water, who gets access, the different needs and positions of women and men, and the issue of rights, is crucial for development” (2005, p. 1). Women have been most commonly defined as essential providers and users of water, a role assigned to them because they have often been defined as the “natural” guardians who care for the environment. Hence, they are mostly associated with domestic uses of water—water used for cooking, cleaning, washing, care-taking (when a family member is taken ill, water use and consumption goes up significantly within the domestic unit). Women, thus, have been known to have what McDevitt-Pugh terms as “women’s water wisdom” (2009, p. 119), where women “in many parts of the world have been exercising tremendous ingenuity for centuries on water production for domestic and livelihood use. Large numbers of women in the developing world have been responsible for producing usable water where and when families, local communities, households, and even national economies require it” (McDevitt-Pugh, 2009, p. 119).

Most water policies, and indeed wider and mainstream political and economic structures, however, do not take into account women’s water management, distribution, input and even production of water seriously. This then leads to “the individualizing assumptions of neoliberal water policies to the detriment of women and other marginalized groups” (O’Reilly et. al, 2009, p. 382). This inequality at policy-level is further emphasized where productive uses of water are concerned, for example, irrigation. Although many women till the land for agricultural purposes, especially when the men in the family migrate to urban centres in search for work, “women own less than 2 percent of the world’s private land” (Ghosh, 2007, p. 444). Such a lack of access to land is one major

reason for women's inequitable and limited access to water, which is also a major reason for the poverty of households headed by females. In such a situation then, according to Mara Tignino, "women make up 70 percent of the world's population living in poverty" (2007, p. 524).

Such poverty, combined with unscrupulous privatization of water, leads to an increasingly fragile physical and natural environment, and puts women at the forefront of risks associated with water scarcity. Not only are they at risk when the surrounding areas flood or have landslides due to water mining (legally or illegally), women are put at risk bodily too. Poor rural women from peasant and tribal communities have to walk longer distances to fetch clean, uncontaminated water in such instances. This carries multiple risks for women who are pregnant and may miscarry when lugging the heavy load of water on their heads and physically straining themselves. Women, in addition to poor nutritional intake, may be prone to spinal deformities and injuries when carrying heavy pots or buckets of water on their heads as well as in their hands. There are accounts of women who get raped or mauled by wild animals when forced to fetch water at unsafe distances in unsafe environments. Certain social customs and norms may dictate what is "proper", for example, a "proper" place for a woman to be in or a woman clothed in a certain manner that is deemed "respectable" and "proper" for that place (O'Reilly et. al, 2009, p. 383; Sultana, 2009, p. 432) for women and may restrict their mobility and visibility in public spaces, thus forcing them to forego access to safe water at longer walking distances and ultimately being forced to fetch unsafe, contaminated drinking water for the whole family that is more easily available. In such instances, women then become exposed to contaminated water and to water-borne diseases the most and this has several negative social repercussions for them—inability to get married, abuse, social ostracism and lack of medical attention. Furthermore, as Karen Bower states

Women perform all the labour associated with water collection at *the expense of education, cultural, and political involvement, and rest and recreation*. It also limits their time for activities such as growing and preparing food and income-generating work...[and] their marginalized position in the monetary economy makes them suffer disproportionately when a price is put on water, for example, through water privatization. (2006, pp. 466-467, my emphasis)

Since the burden of water collection generally falls on younger women in several South Asian societies (young, unmarried daughters, young daughter-in-laws), many of them forego educational and/or economic opportunities upon reaching puberty due to the lack of privacy available for sanitation needs or due to the lack of infrastructure for the purposes of sanitation itself. Women then are materially and bodily affected by the lack of access to safe and clean water, and that too disproportionately, and especially so in the developing world.

Thus far, global gender inequalities associated with water alert us to how women are negatively impacted and affected, especially through policies of corporate privatization of water. While this is extremely important to recognize and realize, we should also be aware of not actively perpetuating a stereotypical view of women as victims. A focus on "the role of women's knowledge, initiative, and agency in securing access to what the United Nations has declared not only a human right, but also the precondition to all our human rights" (Bower, 2006, p. 467) is necessary. Wallace and Coles state that "[w]omen are often involved not only in the consumption and use of water, but also in its production. ... Failure to recognize women's active roles often results in misunderstanding of their needs and interests, and their further disempowerment" (2005, p. 17). Women then

are also able to actively contribute to and become agents of change. Farhana Sultana, for example, expands this idea in the context of a Bangladeshi society where “inter-generational tensions between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law [over water access] shows its versatility when pointing to the *potentially empowering opportunities* that younger women find when they negotiate permission to fetch safe household water from farther places” (cited in O’Reilly, 2009, p. 383, my emphasis). Vandana Shiva in *Water Wars* cites several successful grassroots activism undertaken by women who succeeded in stopping governments and companies from privatizing water. One example of a successful grassroots movement involved the closure of the Coca-Cola manufacturing plant in Plachimada, in the Palakkad district of Kerala, India. Several litres of water were being drawn from natural water sources in the village for production purposes in the plant. The villagers depended on these sources of water for their daily livelihood needs. By the year 2003, several women protesters had gathered to protest the depletion of their water sources through the exploitation of the groundwater available. Further controversy was created when an Indian photographer, Sharad Haksar, “created a billboard from a photo of water jugs lined up at a pump in front of a Coca-Cola billboard. This picture served as a commentary on the water shortages in India, drawing attention to the 500, 000-1.5 million litres of water a day used by Coke to manufacture soft drinks in the bottling plant” (Opel, 2008, p. 504). The women who were fighting the Coca-Cola plant and

[t]he protests by villagers from Plachimada, in the southern state of Kerala have shown the strength of community-led activities, even against this global multinational company. Through round-the-clock vigils outside the factory gates, they have managed to ‘temporarily’ shut down Coca-Cola’s local bottling plant. As of early 2007, the factory had remained closed for a number of years and a combination of community action and legal redress was aimed at permanent closure. (*The Rights to Water and Sanitation*, webservice)

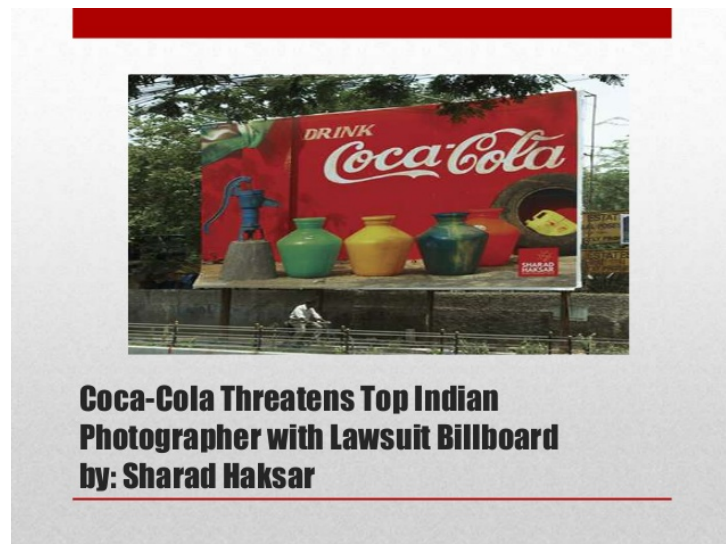


Figure 1. Sharad Haksar’s Coca-Cola billboard.

Image taken from: <http://www.slideshare.net/nethanp/unethical-business-by-cocacola>

For Shiva especially, “[w]ater scarcity is clearly a source of corporate profits...[where] companies like Coca-Cola are fully aware that water is the real thirst quencher and are jumping into the bottled water business” (Shiva, 2002, p. 99). However, such a view also tends to obscure several complexities and complications that arise from other traditional and local factors, for example that of caste, class and even intra-gender oppression, thus essentializing women to have an inherent connection to water, and generalizing that all women suffer equally. Furthermore, such views also imply stasis, not taking into account that gender issues change over time and especially so with the introduction of new technologies, although this often favours men more strategically. This leads to the reification of hierarchies with regards to questions of water access, water management and policies instead of a focus on the integration of various forms of women’s agency carved out painstakingly while being immersed in the traditional constituents of a local area. Therefore, various scholars such as Ahlers and Zwartveen (2009), Farhana Sultana (2007; 2009), Coles and Wallace (2005), and O’Reilly et. al (2009), among several others, posit that it should *not* be *uncritically argued* that women should just be simplistically included in the “devolution, decentralization and marketization processes” (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 384) but rather such arguments should be critically interrogated.

In light of this then, a better approach towards women and water is advocated by Farhana Sultana. Sultana argues that instead of a focus solely on the lack of access to water quantities, supply and gender politics, what needs to be emphasized more is how “the very materialities of water/nature itself can come to influence both the constructions of gender and of resource struggles” (2009, p. 428). Greater attention needs to be paid to questions of gendered and embodied subjectivities that are in themselves fluid—uneven, unstable and shifting—and simultaneously produced and negotiated through material water bodies. Such materialities, and gendered and embodied subjectivities, are linked to broader issues of sexual division of labour, gendered spaces and places, social practices and discourses, and all of these are critically assessed vis-à-vis water.

Therefore, an important consideration to have is that spaces, places and especially water are infused with meaning (social, cultural and religious), and both water and human beings are in turn subject to human practices of meaning-making. For example, in certain Hindu societal rituals, the various strands of water, caste and gender combine to determine notions of purity and pollution. In relation to this, Deepa Joshi and Ben Fawcett write that “water both is polluted by the touch of the impure and purifies those who are so polluted...[thus resulting in] particular constraints faced by Dalits and women” (2005, p. 39). Human bodies are assigned “temporary impurity...in the act and process of producing bodily secretions or associating with these materials are polluting” (Joshi and Fawcett, 2005, p. 40). Hence, women become polluting when they are experiencing bodily processes such as menstruating or during the process of childbirth, regardless of their caste bearings.

### **Water and Women in Literature and the Arts**

The essential place of water in the life of women as accounted in the previous section from the earliest times then leads to the prominent and recurrent role of water and its relation to women as metaphor and symbol in literature and the arts. Water has generally held a central place as an object of worship and veneration, and has become a central metaphor for poets and writers, especially water anthropomorphized as female/feminine. Such representations are cultural expressions that underlie women’s recovery of water as a fundamental human right (Kattau, 2007, p. 132) and illustrate the culture-nature dualism that underlies in the approaches to water as an economic resource.

In literature, women writers either tend to celebrate the woman-water connection or find subversive strategies to undermine the culture-nature dualism that translates into damaging stereotypes of power over nature and therefore power over women.

Professor John Gregory Brown at Tulane University writes that “[w]ater is, of course, mutable and sublime, sustaining and destructive, and throughout literature water serves as a representation not only of birth but of death, not merely of placidity but of violence” (websource). Connotations of both creation and destruction are present in Brown’s statement. Specifically, in relation to women and water in literature, Colleen Kattau further explicates that there are two archetypes that figure prominently and repetitively: the “water-related wild-woman archetype”, which links concepts of sexuality and fertility to women and water, and the “great mother or goddess” that links the maternal to water, and in extension portraying the womb as preserving life or as a dark and engulfing space (2007, pp. 143-145). Both these archetypes and the related connotations portray both creation (life) and destruction (death) as two sides of the same coin. In *A River Sutra*, Mehta no doubt establishes these woman-water links in her novel but at the same time uses these links to empower her female characters and gives them agency.

### **Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra***

Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* (1993) is set around the banks of the Narmada River in central India. The novel is told from the perspective of an un-named retired bureaucrat who interacts with a variety of travelers and residents of the area, and the various stories are relayed to the reader through a series of vignettes. The Narmada River forms the “sutra”, that is, it forms the link between the different stories and the narrator fulfills the role of a “sutradhaar”, someone who knits the different stories in the novel together. The structure of the stories told is non-linear, and through these stories, the major themes of love, the Narmada River, desire, the human heart, lust, and religion have been explored in literary and scholarly research. However, until recently, not much attention has been paid to the ecological aspects of the novel, and how they relate to gender, in particular women and water. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on one vignette told by the narrator, titled “The Courtesan’s Story”.

Rivers in India (and in many other places in the world) are typically associated with religion and are considered sacred. Metaphorically and symbolically, they are associated with drought and plenty, life and death, and rituals to do with purification—flowing water is said to remove any pollution or impurity associated with childbirth, death, and the corporeal body (Feldhaus, 1995, p. 4; Joshi and Fawcett, 2005, pp. 39-40). The purificatory power of water is also emphasized in the ability of the river to cleanse a human being of sins, past and present. In Mehta’s novel, the Narmada River is accrued with such powers and the stories weaved around its banks centre on the river water’s purificatory, cleansing and calming properties.

Rivers and their waters are often presented as feminine and personified as female goddesses, and the Narmada River is no different. There are many fables, stories and accounts of how the Narmada River originated, and these accounts are almost always associated with the Hindu god Shiva. Most traditional religious texts that are written on the various rivers in India are replete with “cosmo-sexual imagery...that indicates that the relationship between Shiva and the rivers has a sexual element to it” (Feldhaus, 1995, p. 26). For the Hindus, the Narmada River is one of the seven holy rivers in India. The importance of the Narmada River as sacred is testified by the fact that pilgrims perform a holy pilgrimage of a “[parikrama](#)” or [circumambulation](#) of the river. The Narmada Parikrama, as it is called, is considered to be a meritorious act that a pilgrim can

undertake. Many sages and pilgrims walk on foot from the [Arabian Sea](#) at Bharuch in Gujarat, along the river, to the source at Amarkantak hills in Madhya Pradesh and back along the opposite bank of the river. This is also explicated time and again in Mehta's novel by the various characters. In present times, the Narmada River has also assumed important ecological significance, and nowhere is it more aptly shown than in the activism and writings of Arundhati Roy regarding the construction of dams on the Narmada and the subsequent displacement of tribal people in that area (see Arundhati Roy's article "The Greater Common Good", 1999). Illustrated below is a pictorial representation of the Narmada River as a goddess, followed by a description of the Narmada and the mythological account of how it originated in Mehta's novel:

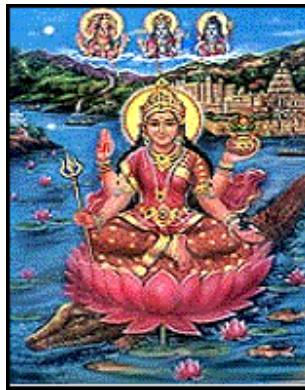


Figure 2. Image taken from: <http://ecoheritage.cpreec.org>

The river is among [the] holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva. ...It is said that Shiva, 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—the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even the ascetics...Shiva 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. (Mehta, 1993, pp. 8-9)

In her book *Water and Womanhood*, Anne Feldhaus states that "[t]heoretically, rivers that flow into the ocean have the ocean as their husband" (1995, p. 54), as seen here as well. It is important to note that the Narmada is described here as dangerous, invoking the wild-woman archetype where not only is the river and its water seen as dangerous, the *river as woman* is seen as dangerous too because she is portrayed as a temptress, and thus as an opponent for male ascetics. The overt sexuality makes her an "other" and a threatening figure because as a river and woman combined, she represents the very things that an ascetic renounces: sexuality, fecundity, continuous flow (of life—through the woman's reproductive capacity and the life-giving power of water, and the ecology present in the river waters) and beauty. In fact, in the above extract, the figure associated with the greatest of ascetics, Lord Shiva, and his austerity and penance are defeated by the supposedly feminine realm of emotion, passion and imagination. His material body takes on the significance traditionally accorded to females—biological bodily functions (a trance so strenuous, perspiration, flowing). Such a description is already a deviation from



a typical austere, objective, unpassionate and distanced ascetic. In a subtle overturning of the masculine aspects that are typically privileged in the world of ascetics, Mehta gives eminence to the more feminine aspects of the world of imagination and intuition.

### **The Courtesan's Story**

"The Courtesan's Story" starts off with an elderly woman seeking refuge in the retired bureaucrat's (narrator's) guesthouse because she is searching for her daughter who has been kidnapped by a local bandit, Rahul Singh. The elderly woman was a courtesan fifty years ago and was successful in protecting her daughter from such a life. Rahul Singh, whom the villagers feared, falls in love with the daughter and kidnaps her. He tells her she has been his wife in previous lifetimes, and treats her well though she taunts him time and again. She ultimately reciprocates his love and becomes pregnant with his child, but Rahul Singh is killed in a police encounter. The police are searching for the elderly woman's daughter now while she plots revenge against Rahul Singh's killers. The daughter seeks out the mother, tells her all that has happened and her attempts at revenge are thwarted when the bureaucrat finds her arsenal of weapons. She then commits suicide by jumping into the Narmada's fast flowing waters. The mother looks on contentedly as the river quickly washes away her daughter's body.

The courtesan reminisces that fifty years ago, the Muslim ruler of their town Shahbag "honoured the river's holiness" (Mehta, 1993, p. 163). We see here the comingling of two different religions, Hindu beliefs and Islam, at the bank of the Narmada River and its waters. It is a testament to Gita Mehta's vision of a secular humanistic approach towards all life, human and nonhuman, and among the various doctrines that are explicated in the novel. Not only has the tradition of secularism evolved on its banks, the Narmada River comes across as the most constant and enduring female figure, with a history, identity and a sustained cultural repertoire (of stories, myths and legends). The Narmada is personified as "a kind of 'everywoman', being virgin, seductress, bride, courtesan (a dancing girl), and mother...all rolled into one" (Sankaran, 2012, p. 435). This connotation of "everywoman" becomes significant when the courtesan's daughter commits suicide in its waters, where the daughter becomes another aspect and an extension of the Narmada River herself.

A multidimensional view of the river and its waters is presented in this vignette. Prior to industrial and capitalist development taking place in Shahbag, there were "fields of flowers growing on [the] river bank and beyond" (Mehta, 1993, p. 162) and the pristine state of the waters parallels to how the women were treated at that time. Women's mobility was not restricted, and they could be found along the river bank enjoying leisure activities such as walking in the garden, boating and taking in the fresh river air. With capitalist development making inroads fifty years later, the industrialized Shahbag is described by the courtesan as thus:

how Shahbag has changed in my lifetime. Where there used to be gardens now we have factories. Our gracious buildings have been torn down to be replaced by concrete boxes named after politicians. The woods that once ringed the city have been cut down for the shanty-towns of labor colonies. ...we must keep the windows closed because of the smell from the open gutter. The city is owned by men who believe every human being has a price, and a full purse is power. ...we are only women to them, our true function to heave on a mattress and be recompensed by some tawdry necklace flashing its vulgarity on a crushed pillow. (Mehta, 1993, pp. 167-168)



We see here that industrial development is accompanied by capitalist patriarchy which metes out violence to both nature and women and these oppressions and violence are interlinked. In the courtesan's description above, we see the exploitation of both nature and women. The pollution of the river waters is suggested from the foul smells coming from gutters. Women now no longer have free access to open spaces surrounding the river, suggesting a public-private dichotomy, where the public sphere is dominated by "men who believe every human being has a price" (Mehta, 1993, p. 167), and the mobility of women is now restricted. As nature is exploited for industrial purposes and the river waters get polluted, a similar decline in the treatment of women is shown. Women are now just viewed and treated as sexual conquests and transactions, plundered in the similar fashion the woods have been plundered to make way for shanty-towns.

While a relevant point is being made about the effects of maldevelopment, to borrow a term from Vandana Shiva, on both nature and women, the courtesan's narrative nonetheless frames both nature and women as passive victims of capitalist development and patriarchy. Her narrative echoes cultural ecofeminism's claims that there is an essential link between women and nature (of which water is a part) which should be celebrated. The courtesan's narrative romanticizes such a connection between women and nature, thus providing an essentialist connection that mistakenly categorizes women as uniquely ecological, relating to nature and to each other in ways that men cannot. This limits women to their bodies and relegates the possibilities for womanhood to be necessarily caring and compassionate without freeing women from the negative cultural baggage that such a stereotype carries. This potentially thwarts the possibility of agency and empowerment by rooting women's "natural" characteristics in biological determinism.

However, the courtesan's daughter and her narrative challenge such a view of women as passive victims and provides agency to and for women, for water, over water and over their lives. The daughter grows up in an era of capitalist development, and has no romantic view of a bygone era where women and nature were either held in a higher regard or treated better. Although trained in the traditional arts that were the hallmark of courtesans during her mother's time, her mother has protected her daughter from the sexual advances of men. Invoking the patriarchal binaristic framework of the virgin-whore, Mehta upturns these binaristic stereotypes and modes of thought: the courtesan's daughter is a pure virgin, accomplished in sixty-four arts and philosophies that men are eager to learn from courtesans, and when kidnapped by Rahul Singh, she uses these sixty-four arts to survive in the middle of the forest flanked by the Narmada River.

The daughter's suicide in the Narmada River highlights two things in the novel: her agency in living/ending her life on her own terms and that of global water pollution and poisoning. Although the suicide accords her a metaphorical and metaphysical agency, it is still a violent end, and this violence illuminates the violence against water. Her body here becomes a weapon in resisting patriarchal notions and diktats against women viewed in the virgin-whore binary. She tells the bureaucrat that "I am Rahul Singh's woman. It will not be long before the police find out, and some ambitious policeman accuses 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?" (Mehta, 1993, p. 187). In deploying her body to commit suicide and merging with the waters of the Narmada River, the narrative does in part imply that the woman *becomes* the river, and this carries with it life-giving connotations. The suicide, however, simultaneously pollutes and poisons the water with material, corporeal flesh that makes the water unsuitable for drinking and harboring water-borne diseases, throwing light onto the unequal plight woman face when collecting water from natural water sources, where the flowing water enters global currents of ecology. The river, thus a site and means of her resistance, is poisoned by such suicides but its

continuous flow carries down the stories of such women that would otherwise remain unheard and silent.

The mother's reaction at the end that "she was happy her daughter had died in the Narmada because she would be purified of all her sins" (Mehta, 1993, p. 190) evokes the theme of purity and pollution. Anne Feldhaus quotes Diana Eck that "water used in purification must not be standing water, but flowing, living water...[and it removes] the impurity associated with childbirth or with death" (1993, p. 5). The courtesan's daughter then becomes purified in two senses: firstly, the Narmada's flowing water purifies her of the sin of death (committing suicide), and secondly, the Narmada's waters return her the virginal quality that she had before being abducted by Rahul Singh, thus "purifying" her of sexual sin in consorting with a bandit. Thus, in committing suicide, in the mother's eyes she returns to height of her former glory.

It is important to note here that Mehta makes a crucial maneuver in addressing gender inequality relating to water and nature in general. Through Rahul Singh, Mehta shows how even men can have an ethic of care towards nature and water, thus overturning and falsifying the "natural" woman-nature link that is enforced to stereotypically portray women as naturally being able to care and nurture. Rahul Singh's refuge is the forest and he knows it and the waters surrounding it intimately. Not only does the forest provide the care and sustenance he needs to live and survive, he in turn is able to imbibe those very qualities of care and nurturance as he then displays towards the courtesan's daughter. When he kidnaps her and she taunts him to keep surviving the capture, he "[watched] her as if trying to prove there was a greater art than all [her] arts, the ability to love someone as he loved [her]..." (Mehta, 1993, p. 184). Chitra Sankaran, in her article "Women, rivers, serpents: Reifying the primordial link in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*" states that "equally incredibly, it is from the rough bandit, Rahul Singh, that the most refined of courtesan's learns about the delicacy of love. Thus gender stereotypes of the crude bandit and the sensitive courtesan are upset and entrenched hierarchies shaken" (2012, p. 433). Here, love, emotion and passion, typically assigned to the "female" domain takes subtle precedence over austerity and discipline, giving urgency to the feminine principle (in nature and otherwise) that must not be ignored. Through Rahul Singh's ardent passion for the courtesan's daughter, Mehta underscores that human emotions are important in not only understanding the matters of the heart and life itself, but also in relating to others and the environment (which includes water), and thus emotions should be given their rightful place. Hence, Mehta cleverly overturns the culture-nature binary and its attendant modes of thinking that typify a structural capitalist patriarchal mindset that proves destructive to women, water and the environment.

### Conclusion

In the final analysis then, the politics of water and gender are not only illustrated in socio-economic policies regarding water or political contexts regarding water, but also in literature. Where most of the accounts of women as users of water present them as passive victims of unscrupulous private sector policies, literary accounts have the power to imbue women with agency regarding water. The materialities of both women and water are taken into account in a postcolonial ecofeminist analysis, where writers such as Mehta use these materialities (corporeal bodies, lives of women, material nature, etc) to posit resistance against dominant modes of patriarchal thought, especially where binaries such as culture-nature, man-woman, and reason-passion are concerned. Mehta illustrates that binary thinking is not only harmful to women but also to nature and water within it. It is therefore imperative to have complementary (and not opposing) modes of thought, where both women and water (policies) are mutually beneficial for each other, even where men are

concerned. In Mehta's novel, this is illustrated through the figure of Rahul Singh, where the damaging "natural" woman-nature connection is offset by linking the male to nature in positive ways. Mehta does not attempt to remove women from the equation of nature entirely to highlight this point. Rather, along with women, she embeds the men in natural elements as well, illustrating the importance and power of complementarities rather than binaries.

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