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Glorification and Ariel Depiction of Adivasi Life in Geeta Mehta's Novel "The River Sutra"

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Abstract

The River Sutra came in 1993 present the contemporary picture of Indian spiritual and cultural scenario. The river 'Narmada' is in the centre of all incident, activities and salvation of all characters. Mehta has tried to blend historical time, narrative time, contemporary and mythological time unitedly in the flow of the river, Narmada. A River Sutra is much more than six stories. It tells us the story of life through the myths of river Narmada. It's all about the Indian cultural mythical values and adivasi pathos. This research article tries to show that the tribal life is romanticised and glorified by the novelist. Issues of displacement, existential and livelihood issues are placed at side and soft depiction of adivasi life has taken place and much overrated which seems unbelievable. Issues of impact of globalization in tribal territories are totally remains in dark shadow in the novel. Adivasi history in India is full of revolt, resistance and fight against the mighty British Imperialism established in India. Man and women were in social movement of protest against all kind of unjust and exploitation but the writer has delineated only romanticization and glorification of adivasi life especially the characters of tribal women who were most victimised in India. This research article tries to examination how the issues of adivasi resistance, existentialism. Identity and dehumanization was put aside and how the levels of superstition were stick to them which seems utterly inapplicable to the indigenous community who were the biggest opponent of any kind of internal colonization and internal subjugation of the hierarchical mentality prevailing in India.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, displacement, cosmopolitanism, subversion, culture-clash

Introduction

Three chapters in the novel present adivasi life. However, the novelist has given her energy to remerge Indian mythological, spiritual identity in the postcolonial, globalized world. When we go through the presentation of adivasi characters and their development, we find a romanticization and inauthenticity about adivasi life. Her presentation of adivasi, native feminism is not just different as it depicted in Hindi films. The way, she tried to show the adivasi world with so grace and tranquillity, in reality, adivasis life is not so idealistic. It is full of challenges of neocolonialism. Regarding her romantic representation of adivasidom in *The River Sutra*, Stella Sandahl opines, "Geeta Mehta does not of course entirely ignores the poor menace adivasis, but she maintained them only as a decorate dements in a manner similar to their appearance in commercial Bombay films" (The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad: 2014:96).

In the initial chapter of the novel, readers meet the adivasi village of Vano, situating on the bank of river Narmada. Though the novelist has not used a particular adivasi character still it can be assumed that the village is adivasi-dominated. This is the first thing that surprises us. All the credit goes to a retired officer who works as a manager of the rest house. Again adivasi village and their way of living remain silent.

Even the novelist has not shared the name of the main character of an ex-civil servant, who wants to live his life in tranquillity with nature beside the bank of the river. When narrator goes for a morning walk from rest house to Vano, he meets with adivasi women who greet him. He surprises that these women behave very familiarly to the unknown person. But he could depict this adivasi grace very positively, but we do not find much exploration about their manners. Some of the adivasi works in the garden of the rest house, and then gradually he comes to know the historical past and Aryans invasion of that territory. The stories of displacement and subjugation of adivasis come very rarely in this novel. Commenting on adivasis historical past which is not suggestive enough, narrator opines:

Our bungalows guards are hived from Vano and enjoy a reputation for fierceness as descendants of the adivasis' races that held the Aryan invasion of India at bay for centuries in these hills. Indeed, the Vano village deity is a stone image of a half women with the full breast of a fertility symbol but the torso of a coiled snake, because the adivasi believes they once nailed a great snake kingdom until they were defeated by the gods of the Aryans. Saved from annihilation only by a divine personification of the Narmada river, the grateful adivasis

conferred on the river the gift of annulling the effects of snakebite (Mehata: 1993:33)

Novelist tries to show that adivasis are so superstitious that they believe that madness and causes of snakebites are to be cured by worshipping to Narmada River. It can be accepted that adivasi are nature worshippers, they worship sun, river, hills and trees but as for the concern of disease and madness, it cannot be cured only on going to Narmada river. The novel, *A River Sutra*, was written in 1993, which was an era of globalization in India and industrialization was on its high peak in the adivasi belt. The resistance of adivasi was also tremendous and in such turmoil, the novelist is projecting adivasis as so superstitious. It seems really unconvincing. As for the adivasi concern, there is no such of mythology, where snakebites person is taken to the Narmada or any river in adivasi belt to cure such diseases. Obviously, following discussion between the adivasi ladies shows that novelist is only glorifying, and sensationalizing adivasi women's conversion. She, really, does not seem responsible about the adivasi feminism when her narrator speaks the romantic dialogue about adivasi women,

"The Saheb finds our face pretty today, Rano." "It must be the season, spring rouses even old tigers." "It is true, don't you see a prowl to the saheb's walk this morning."

"Kama must be sharpening his arrows of blossoms and stringing his arrows of blossoms and stringing his bow with sisters.

"Take care the Saheb does not leave us to a seduction" (Mehata: 1993: 92-93)

Above discussion between adivasi women shows the stereotype mentality of the novelist to present adivasis as very ignorant. The pukka sahib attitude of the novelist comes out which takes the adivasi as granted. Adivasi women who live a very harsh life in adivasi territory becomes victim to the elite mentality of sophisticated society. A novelist could present adivasi women's hard work and their struggle for survival but the above conversation between adivasi characters is far away from real adivasi life. Adivasi characters who do not hold even a name in the novel presents sensuousness, is the only example to create hype among urban locality about adivasi women. It is stereotype literary gimmick of the novelist so that R. S. Pathak comments very seriously about the partial knowledge of urban writing towards adivasi struggle he says, "Since Indian English literature owed its inception to the "dominant minority" amongst Indians steeped in western education, values and culture, we find adivasi people, local and values infrequently treated in English novels written by Indians" (Pathak: 1999:179).

Nitin Bose is the character who is the narrator's ex-colleagues nephew attempts suicide, comes to rest house to introspect himself from the magical enchantment of adivasi women, Rima. Nitin's diary contains all the matter of his relations with that adivasi lady. The moral effect on Rima on him is presented in the diary as "Rima seduced me with adivasi songs in a language I could not understand so that I heard the only sweetness of the melodies. She told me tales of a great serpent kingdom lying inches beneath the soil. She spoke to me of charms that gave men the strength of elephant in a rut and of magic performed during the eclipse of the moon when a man soul could be captured inside the two halves of a coconut" (Mehta: 1993:126-127) ^[4]. The above mention description is only body celebration of the adivasi character of Rima. The mythology has profoundly used to enhance the character of adivasi lady, Rima. A typical male attitude seems predominant when we closely study the thought process of

Nitin about adivasi women. He considers Rima, responsible for his enchanting madness.

Glorification of Tribal Life

The enchanting elements in the description of Rima remind us of Bilasia of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Billy was attracted to Bilasia because of her adivasi grace and he also presents her body praising, similarly Nitin is celebrating her body parts in the above discussions. Rima's husband is a coolie, she is the tea picker, this is quite enough to guess her economic situation but by neglecting the adivasi realism of survival issues, the novelist has only glorified and romanticized adivasi feminism, showing no reality. This is unnecessary descriptions of adivasi life. Various rituals have been performed by the adivasi in the novel *A River Sutra*, but the adivasi rituals are not like other religions. Adivasis are often shown as superstitious but they are nature worshiper. Nature is their religion but a mass conversion is taking place among adivasis in major adivasi areas in India. Adivasi is dominated by the other orthodox religious groups that they are denied to choose their religious beliefs also. In this regards, Gladson Dungdung makes a serious comment on the conversion policies of orthodox structures in adivasis region: The religion of the Adivasis was not recognized by the Indian state. Though many religions Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam that emerged much later in India were recognized in the official documents in the country. As a result thousands of Adivasis accepted other religion. Enmity was created among them and thousands of their sacred groves were destroyed in the name of development and the uniqueness of their religion was lost. (Dungdung: 2013:28)

Cultural Hegemony

The mental dilemma of Nitin Bose is very similar to Billy Biswas. Nitin feels the intense rejection of monotonous and sophisticated city life with its artificiality. He wants to take a break from urban humdrum so he takes refuge in the tea estate of Assam. Nitin is the boss in a tea estate where adivasi Rima comes under his power. Without much inquiry, he develops his relationship with her and seduced her. Here, power relation seems dominant, Nitin is boss and adivasi Rima is a servant. No matter to say no to her exploitation. She has to obey her boss. But now Nitin finds himself crazy about Rima. He could not spend the night without her. Once she calls him from a distant dark place and he runs after that voice madly. This shows that he has crossed the limits of his rational or conscience. Though the intense passion, he again shows the impact of her enchantment, "Like a magician she drew me into a subterranean world of dream, her body teaching mine the passing of the season, the secret rhythm of nature, until I understood why my grandfathers book called these hills Kamapara, the kingdom of the God of love. Headless of the low branches whipping against my body, I ran after her through the jungle calling her name, my voice loud in the night" (Mehta: 1993: 133) ^[4].

In the novel, when Nitin follows Rima's voice and reached there, he is possessed by her spirit. When the adivasi priest fails to cure him of the enchanting effects of Rima, he takes him to the shrine situated on the River Narmada. The adivasi prays to Goddesses Narmada to cure Nitin. Adivasi suggest him to carry an idol of Goddesses and immerse it into the river. Nitin performs the ritual according to adivasi tradition and ultimately he gets the result that he is exempted from the possession of adivasi Rima's spirit. Rima is the major adivasi

character emerged into the novel after Nitin Bose. But we find her character very mysterious, slow, silent, full of romance and more areal than earthen. Her beauty, charm and her effect on Nitin has been presented very grippingly by the novelist. This stereotype descriptions can be justified and granted from mainstream literature but from adivasi's point of view, the novel does not show their problems like deforestation, displacement, exploited feminism and economic misery. Their religious functions with the fusion of superstitions have presented promptly in the novel.

It must be admitted that though the novelist has not presented the barbaric, wild picture of adivasi characters, still they have neglected subaltern and marginal issues of their survival. Adivasi natures and customs have glorified in the novel and character of Rima find no adivasi touch of struggling Adivasi life. Again under her enchantment, when Nitin befooled himself, adivasi goddess cured him. Adivasis dances, laughter, way of living life do not show the evil touch of industrialization and disorientation which is really a matter of research for mainstream society. Though the novelist tried to show adivasi ethos strongly it seemed unconvincing. It must be noticed that the story revolves around the character of Nitin and the narrator. Their observations about urban and sophisticated life predominate in the novel, therefore we get only small glimpses of adivasi life. The separation of Rima from her husband is because of their economic misery which is nowhere explore in the novel. These pathetic situations of adivasi life where they have to leave their families behind for the earning and has to migrate somewhere has not presented in the novel. We can be assured that Nitin feels life as boring and monotonous which becomes the central theme for the novel but havoc and struggle of adivasi life from centuries are as usual remains in silent. Their pathos is denied by mainstream writers. This is what we see in this novel also. Mainstream writers must look at these issues seriously. Notice the statement of R. S. Pathak regarding this romanticization:

Geeta Mehta has devoted some space to adivasi people, local and values in her novel *A River Sutra*. On the whole, these disadvantaged people have often remained related to the periphery of Indian society and it is but natural that not much attention has been paid to them and their ethos by Indian English novelists. Helen, in *The Coffin Dam*, hurries to reassure Bashiam, a adivasi you are not some kind of freak to me. We are freaks only to the caste we come from, not to each other." But this kind of reassurance is rare and would contain a ring of insincerity to the adivasi ear. (Pathak: 1999:179)

The adivasi character, Rima, does not find a proper presentation of adivasi feminism in the novel. Being adivasi, she does not follow the patriarchal pattern of Hindu society and remain outside of traditional society. Novel shows, she has taken her control, herself and finds comfort in several appeals. In the novel, her lover Nitin, also considers her as Goddesses. Though the novelist has shown the character of Rima with possessing some supernatural power, still her glorification seems unconvincing. In fact, while using religious spiritualism and its connection with adivasi life, the novelist has glorified the adivasi theme. But even after glorification, the adivasi character of Rima does not leave any impression on the theme of this novel. The novel *The River Sutra* is gripping while presenting religious myth and spiritual regeneration in modern life. The novel was written on the thresholds of globalization in India, which looks the fancy words for us but the barrenness of modern life and spiritual lacuna in cosmopolitan life are the results of these global policies.

Conclusion

The central character of Nitin spends his entire life as a supporter of metro life and reaches nowhere but gets madness, still, we do not have enough explanation of globalization in the novel. Novel deals with elite, bourgeois culture, its sophisticated manners and their various sources of recreation but the adivasi in the novel seems like a leftover. This is the attitude of mainstream writing towards the major population of Adivasi in Indian English literary contexts. On the other hand, adivasi life has seriously affected with such drastic policies. Their bread and butter have been snatching by corporate policies. Every opportunity of good leaving has been denying for them but the novelist does not speak a single sentence about this disorientation and deculturation of adivasi. The adivasi life, character and circumstances are not properly treated. The novel lacks authenticity while depicting adivasi life, culture and their several problems.

Indian English fiction writers should understand this fact that literature is also a product of class culture. The elite class which has nothing to do with the hardships of adivasi and Dalit life will never focus on marginal ground realities. They will promote the elite issue of cosmopolitanism and globalize culture. When these people write for India, they advocate new world orders, new economic power and give strength to the establishment of foreign values on Indian ground. Globalization came in India with economic promises. The middle class of India was advocating these policies but now their dreams have broken. Majority of middle classes ideologies of India supports new global policies therefore when some of them become writers or novelists, they support and strengthen the theories of western dominancy. Therefore Rakesh Kumar Singh opines:

The world of Intellectual writing is going through the phase of dependency and neocolonization. If these policies are not challenged by writers then we will be deprived of alternative criticism and neo-imperial world order will be challenge less. Today western theories are making neocolonization of minds of intellectuals and western dominant theories are globally acquiring acceptance. Those who advocate postmodernism, poststructuralism, multiculturalism, diaspora and make debates on these issues are indirectly diverting us from the resistance and protest literature of marginal and broken community. Indian English writing seems weaker while dealing with these internal complex situations. (Singh: 2014:38)

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