

# Flowing Narratives: Anthropomorphic Mythologemes of River in *A River Sutra* and *The God of Small Things*

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## Abstract

Rivers, with their ceaseless flow and dynamic character, have long captured the human imagination, serving as both literal and metaphorical lifelines for communities around the world. In the realm of literature, rivers have been anthropomorphized, endowed with human-like qualities, and used as powerful symbols to convey complex narratives and themes. This paper aims to analyse the mythologeme of the river where it is anthropomorphised as depicted in two distinct yet interconnected literary works—*A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Mythologeme is a word coined by Carl Jung for describing a mythological image, motif or theme which came across cultures and time. Considering the river, it is a very celebrated mythologeme in the Indian context where it is considered either as mother or goddess.

**Keyword:** Anthropomorphism, River Symbolism, Indian Mythology, Eco-criticism

Cultural Symbolism, Jungian Myth Criticism, Myth and Literature, Sacred Rivers

The concept of anthropomorphism, is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities, allows authors to imbue rivers with emotions, intentions, and agency. Here, rivers become more than mere geographical features; as they evolved into characters with their own stories, desires, and destinies. *A River Sutra*, a collection of interconnected tales by Gita

Mehta, and *The God of Small Things*, a Booker Prize-winning novel by Arundhati Roy, both employ this literary device to unravel profound ecological and socio-cultural narratives.

The novels, *A River Sutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta and *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, are primary texts for this study, focuses on the depiction of the anthropomorphism of rivers, this study analyzes the role of the physical environment in the plot construction of both the novels. The novels deal with a beautiful depiction of rivers, their encounters and their reactions to humans. *A River Sutra* deals with Indian culture and mythology. Likewise, *The God of Small Things* deals with the themes of love, morality, fear and environmental destruction. The study discusses the anthropomorphism of ecocriticism to trace the interconnectedness of all beings. The study reveals that the writers have indeed given primary importance to the rivers or bioregions in their novels focusing on the burning issue of environmental degradation- a severe threat to human beings as well as the entire ecosystem, as depicted in the novels.

In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta weaves together a tapestry of stories that traverse the diverse landscapes of India, examining the multifaceted relationships between rivers and the people who depend on them. The anthropomorphism of rivers in Mehta's work serves as a narrative device to explore the intricate connections between nature, culture, and spirituality, offering readers a glimpse into the profound influence that rivers exert on the human experience.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, set in the lush backdrop of Kerala, India, delves into the lives of a dysfunctional and deeply entwined family. The novel employs anthropomorphism to portray the Meenachal River as a silent witness to the unfolding tragedies and forbidden love that shape the destiny of the characters. Roy's vivid prose and intricate storytelling not only breathe life into the river but also use it as a metaphor for societal norms and the constraints that shape the characters' lives.

As we embark on this literary exploration, we will navigate the thematic currents that flow through these works, unraveling the symbolic significance of rivers as characters and catalysts for change. The anthropomorphism of rivers in *A River Sutra* and *The God of Small Things* invites readers to reflect on the intricate relationship between humanity and nature, urging us to reconsider our relationship with the environment and recognize the inherent interconnectedness that defines our existence.

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* takes readers on a literary pilgrimage along the bank of river Narmada. Through Mehta's masterful storytelling, the river emerges not just as geographical entities but as living entities with narratives of their own. The anthropomorphism in *A River Sutra* invites contemplation on the symbiotic relationship between humanity and its rivers, highlighting the river's roles as both givers of life and recipients of human reverence. Mehta's tales illustrate how rivers shape cultures, inspire spirituality, and mirror the ebb and flow of human existence.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy intertwines the fate of the Meenachal River with the destiny of the Ipe family. The river, referred to as "Amma," becomes a silent observer of the tumultuous events that unfold in the lives of Rahel and Estha, the central characters. Roy employs anthropomorphism to convey the river's emotions, creating a narrative wherein the river reflects the repressed desires, societal expectations, and the tragedies that burden the characters. The Meenachal River becomes a metaphor for the inescapable currents of tradition and the constraints that govern the characters' lives.

The anthropomorphism of rivers in both works transcends mere literary technique; it becomes a vehicle for ecological discourse. By endowing rivers with human qualities, Mehta and Roy prompt readers to consider the impact of human actions on the environment. The symbolic representation of rivers allows for a deeper exploration of ecological degradation, pollution, and the consequences of disrupting the delicate balance of nature. Through the

anthropomorphic lens, these rivers not only bear witness to human folly but also serve as allegories for the environmental challenges faced by our planet.

### **Ecocriticism and Anthropomorphism**

Ecocriticism is a literary and cultural theory that emerged in the late 20th century, focusing on the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It examines how literary works represent and influence our understanding of the environment, ecology, and the interactions between humans and the natural world. The word ecology was coined by the nineteenth-century German biologist Ernst Haeckel who called ecology “the domestic side of organic life” (Bala 209). It can also be defined as the study of the ecosystem or the interrelations of the biotic communities with their non-living environment. These biotic communities and non-living environments are interdependent. So, ecology is a thread which integrates the knowledge about man and his environment from different perspectives. Man, animals, rivers, mountains and plants all belong to Mother Earth. Human evolution has undergone a long process in which the “ecological balance played a decisive role” (Hughes20). The word ecology has originated from the Greek roots. “Oikos” means home, which expands to the whole inhabited earth. The word “logo” stands for reason or study.

Donald Hughes says:

Human ecology, then, is a rational study of how mankind interrelates with the home of the human species, the earth; with its soil and mineral resources; with its water, both fresh and salt; with its air, climates and weather, with its many living things, animal and plants, from the simplest to the most complex; and with the energy received ultimately from the sun. (3)

Ecocriticism is both literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist perspective. Literary and cultural texts are interpreted in terms of their environmentally harmful

or helpful effects. In the beginning, ecocriticism worked in a very restrictive way. Nature oriented writing was considered the environmental genre. But with the pace of time, it started forging its paths in several other approaches and subjects. Environmental literature, nature writing, anthropology, anthropomorphism, deep ecology, Ecofeminism, bioregionalism, social ecology, eco-marxism etc are interlinked terms. One notable aspect of ecocriticism is the exploration of anthropomorphism, the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities, which includes animals, plants, and even natural elements such as rivers and mountains. In Vedic literature earth, water, air, fire and sky were adored as supreme power of this universe. The Rig Veda says “Protect both our species, two-legged and four-legged. Both food and water for their needs are supplied. In ancient Indian culture and practices, nature was always anthropomorphised. Centuries ago, nature had a very respective space in societies. It was never treated as a utility object as it has been today. Atharva Veda respectfully considered the earth as a mother:

O Mother Earth! Born of you and living on you, we all creatures---  
human beings, birds and animals are being nourished by your water,  
air and the sun energy (Prasad 7).

Anthropomorphism in ecocriticism serves as a powerful tool for writers to engage readers in environmental issues and foster a deeper connection with nature. By humanizing elements of the natural world, authors can create empathetic bridges between readers and the environment, encouraging a more profound consideration of ecological themes. This literary device allows for a more visceral and relatable exploration of environmental challenges, making them accessible to a broader audience. The intersection of ecocriticism and anthropomorphism provides a rich framework for understanding and interpreting literature that explores environmental themes. By anthropomorphizing elements of the natural world, authors

engage readers in a more emotionally resonant and empathetic exploration of ecological issues, contributing to a broader cultural awareness of our relationship with the environment.

Ecocriticism expands its critical approaches which differ from other literary theories. Lawrence Buell arguably asserts that ecocriticism “takes its energy not from a central methodologies paradigm of inquiry but from pluriform commitment to the urgency of rehabilitating that which has been effectively marginalized by mainstream societal assumption” (Arnold 1090). Cherly Glotfelty says, “we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact” (19).

### ***A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta**

Gita Mehta was born in Delhi in a renowned Oriya family in 1943 pre-independent India. Her writing primarily focused on Indian culture, history, and Western perception of it. In 1993, her most famous novel *A River Sutra* came out. The novel has enabled her “to become a writer lionized by the world who has created a new language of literature and recreated India for India” (Chaturvedi 22). The novel *A River Sutra* is Indian both in theme and treatment, Mehta uses the traditional Indian way of story-telling where the episode follows episode. Its theme is to put it simply with the sense of oneness with nature, it portrays the scene of the holy river Narmada and is described minutely with great realism. She tells its location, and lies myths behind it. The place is represented in realistic colours.

Place plays a significant role in the theory of ecocriticism. Buell states that “an awakened sense of physical location and of belonging to some sort of place-based community has a great deal to do with activating environmental concern” (56).

Environmental concerns relate to the protection and preservation of places from destruction. In the twenty-first century place and planet is perceived as an interdependent

phenomenon (Buell 77). The place can be examined as of different types: from tiny space to dwelling, to the neighbourhood, to cities, to region, to the entire earth. The word setting substituted by place is used to refer to “physical and sometimes spiritual background against which the action of a narrative takes place” (Selvamony 189). The term place in literature is an internal element of a literary work. The term ‘physical setting’ is a more comprehensively used term rather than the term place in literary works. Glotfelty calls ecocriticism a redeeming ray of hope in the ocean of literary theories. Glotfelty says that “its redemptive force lies in its emphasis of place as the basic criterion of Literature or any cultural endeavor” (18).

Arguably, ecocriticism focuses on the real place in literary art. The setting of the novels *A River Sutra* and *The God of Small Things* occupy the real place in their plot construction. For instance, in the novel *A River Sutra*, the setting of the novel at the bank of Narmada is the real place. Likewise, *The God of Small Things* also possesses a real place which is the river Meenachal and the village Ayemenem. Ecocritics trace:

What role does the physical setting play in the plot of a novel...  
analyses the role played by the natural environment in the  
imagination of a cultural community. As an outcome, the text  
becomes a place where different vision of nature and varying images  
of culture are played out. (Sumathy 76).

Gita Mehta in her novel *A River Sutra* explores the abiding visual and oral traditions underpinning the myth of Narmada. The river Narmada’s image, therefore, is connected with Shiva’s divine power. The river Narmada is manifested as the universal female impulse. In the novel, Mehta presents a realistic picture of the river as discussed in Indian mythology. She tells the mythological appearance of the river Narmada in the stories of the novel. In the novel, the river is presented in the form of a goddess. In this way, she performs an act of revision that resurfaces throughout the novel. The novel celebrates the presence of myth as a tool that

connects the past with the present. The novel *A River Sutra* is set “halfway up a hill of the Vindhya Range which is covered with forests” (Mehta 2). The river Narmada is manifested as the universal female impulse. In the novel, Mehta presents a realistic picture of the river as discussed in Indian mythology. The novel celebrates the presence of myth as a tool that connects the past with the present. *A River Sutra* makes clear its involvement with the sacred in the landscape at every turn. The river is the central character of the novel. At the beginning of the novel the landscape is described as sacred and connected with mythic description:

...the bungalow’s proximity to the Narmada River was its particular attraction. The river is among our holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva. During a tour of the area I had been further intrigued to discover the criminal offense of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself in the water of the Narmada. (2)

The river Narmada is the only source that attracts the bureaucrat to the place where he works on the post of a manager. The bureaucrat was deeply agitated with the city life and he joined the post of manager at the rest house which is built on the bank of Narmada. It gives him immense pleasure to live with nature. He accepts that after the death of his wife, he feels lonely and wishes to spend the rest of his life with nature. Thus, his inner revolt against the hustle and bustle life of cities develops his deep affection for living in a peaceful place. It reflects that nature is the only thing that befriends a human being when the feeling of loneliness tries to conquer human beings. A true and clear picture of nature illustrated in the novel discloses the uncontaminated life of nature and its inhabitants. The birds, animals, and plants, all seem to live in an interconnected harmony with one another. The initial description of the narrative projection of the Narmada suggests innocence, lightness, and an aimlessness that belies any sense of responsibility. The setting of the novel is a crucial phenomenon. It reveals

several other interlinked tales that the nameless narrator narrates while wandering in the forest around the rest house. The river Narmada is depicted as the 'sutra' or the link in the novel. It connects all six stories through a single string. There are common things in all the stories that they all are set in the same place. It is the landscape which helps to unfold new stories related to the place, also responds to the characters as needed and makes them heard. In the story, Nitin Bose, an executive in Calcutta's oldest tea company, visits the rest house. The river Narmada is a place of life in the case of Nitin Bose who recovers from lunacy after appeasing the goddess, here she freed him from possession of Rima, whom he loved. The site of the river is observed as 'heterotopias' in Foucault's term. It is the constant transitive site for the bureaucrat, bandit, ascetic, archaeologist, civil servant, and tribes. The bureaucrat saw the Narmada River "leaping headlong through the distant marble rocks, the spraying waterfalls refracting the first rays of the sun into arcs of colour as if the river were a woman adorning herself with jewels" (139). In the novel, Naga Baba depicts the clear picture of the river Narmada in his chanting:

Turtles and river dolphins find refuge in your water

Alighting herons play upon your tranquil surface.

Fish and crocodiles are gathered in your embrace.

O holy Narmada. (279)

The Minstrel's story is about a girl-child and a Naga monk who saved her from a brothel and gave her a new birth. He rescued her and she started a new life, and learned many new things in the lap of nature (Narmada). The child takes a dip in the cold water so that she can be the daughter of Narmada, the girl child is associated with the Narmada River where she finds solace in the river as she is her mother.

In Musician's story, the musician tries to focus on the similarity between nature and music. As the musician teaches her daughter to sing, he instructs her to "imagine a raga as a

river bed. You must think of yourself as the water washed over stone, shaping it with the relentless touch of your love” (16).

Similarly, as depicted in the above stories, river Narmada is endowed with different attributes in every story, sometimes jewelled like a bride, washing guilt, a provider of life and a guardian figure as in the case of Uma and helped in curing insanity, as in the case of a merchant.

### ***The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy**

Arundhati Roy was awarded the 1997 Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things*, is an ingenious work of Indian English literature. The novel is notable for its complex narrative technique. The novel is written in non- non-sequential narrative style. Its elaborated narrative structure is the remarkable quality which is followed by layer after layer. It primarily revolves around two dominant narratives through the use of flashback technique. The first narrative covers a twenty-four-hour period that is designated by Rahel’s return to Kerala from the United States in 1992. The second narrative frames the story of Sophie Mol’s arrival in India during December 1969 which covers almost two weeks.

Likewise, the story moves alternately in 1969 and 1993. This non-sequential narrative style helps the author to deal with important events. The narrative technique also helps to build up the ideas and events at the root of the Ipe family’s experience.

Roy makes a clear picture about the role of river to shape a story. The landscape is the only source that stimulates the person to write about the things which he has experienced in his life. Roy says “Even now when I go back to Kerala it makes me want to cry if something happens to that place” (Chien 198). Eudora observes that “the truth is, fiction depends for its life on place” (Salvomony 189). Unlike *A River Sutra*, *The God of Small Things* deal with the modern way of life. In *A River Sutra* Mehta has depicted the pastoral picture in the novel, but

Arundhati Roy has presented urban life in the novel. Although the novel's setting is at the village Ayemenem, the setting represents the modern Ayemenem.

The novel describes the finest picture of two landscapes that is the river Meenachal and the village Ayemenem. These two landscapes operate from the center position in the novel. The influence of these two landscapes on the characters of the novel is undeniable.

The river Meenachal (actual name Meenachil) in *The God of Small Things* is also associated with Shiva's myth. It is believed that the name Meenachal has been derived from the goddess Meenashi of Madurai, the warrior goddess of the ruling Karthas of Meenachil.

Thus, the mythological legend of the origin of the rivers regards the appearance of the rivers' bond with the thread of culture. However, the mythological origin of the river has a very significant role in the present crisis of the environment. In the novel the river Meenachal is represented as a tool to evoke past memories in the mind of Estha and Rahel. The twins often dreamt of the river in their childhood as the river was the only source of their pleasure.

It was described as "it was warm, the water green like reapplied silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it" (123).

This illustrative image of the river tells the purity of its water and demonstrates the ecological connection between the river and fish. In their childhood the river's water was so pure and transparent that the reflection of the sky and trees could be seen clearly. The river seemed as an object of joy. In the beginning the river is shown as the source of pleasure, but with the pace of time, it becomes the victim of pollution, which came due to acceleration in the process of development. The river's attachment with twins in the novel shows the significance of the river. The river Meenachal attracts the readers with its beautiful depiction, especially on moon night: "it was past midnight. The river had risen, its waters quick and black, snaking towards the sea, carrying with it cloudy night skies, a whole palm frond, part of a thatched fence, and other gifts the wind had given"(289).

The river Meenachal plays a vital role in the story of the novel. The river gives shelter to Ammu and Velutha at night when they meet each other. The river bank is depicted as the happiest place for Ammu when she walks out to the river bank to meet Velutha. Both the lovers get pleasure at the bank of the river. They realize the dark night at the bank of the river, and feel that the place belongs to them. The place provides protection to them and gives a space to share their feelings to each other. The dark night:

As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone step, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. (333)

The river is represented as the transformative trope that evolves into a dangerous force by killing the child Sophie Mol. The river is represented as an unstable space where the twins spend the happiest time of their childhood and their most horrific one with Sophie Mol's death. The *God of Small Things* directly deals with environmental hazards. In the novel, it is clearly depicted that the motherly figure, the clean, balmy Meenachal River is changed into "a living yardstick of the body politic of Ayemenem" (Banerjee 193). Earlier, before the death of Sophie Mol, it was full of tall and lush green trees and the fish were flying. Concluding, we can see how nature is a provider of life and also can be a slayer when mistreated. Roy, through her work addressed this issue of repercussions, and how efforts to restore the environment is the basic moral duty of a human being so that upcoming disasters can be avoided.

### **Conclusion**

Literature has witnessed several phenomena occurring such as revolutions, wars, establishment of empires, etc. Literature always deals with the happenings in the world. Expansion in the area of knowledge, literature is also sharing knowledge to help the world from the problem of environment destruction. Ecocriticism invites both man and other creatures to

live together in one big tent in complete harmony. The ancient invocation for peace and balance in the ecological and human world assert that there cannot be peace in the human world unless there is peace in nature. In the light of the given novels, we can see how our irresponsible actions cause irreparable damage to nature. While in *A River Sutra*, Mehta portrayed River Narmada, as a subject of admiration, life-providing and life-sustaining Roy in her *The God of Small Things*, presented both sides of a coin. From ecstasy to misery, if treated well nature will provide us with not only essentials but also luxury but if treated unconsciously it can lead to disasters and devastations.

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