

# *Dossier of the Muses*

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## **Environmental Imagination: A Question of Repression**

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**Abstract:** To explore the discourse of repression in our coconsciousness, I have chosen two culturally different texts that are *A River Sutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta and *A Life on the Mississippi* (1883) by Mark Twain. The chosen works do belonging two different genres have many things in common as both of them bring out important of rivers in dealing with individual being. The exploited river has a tendency to strike back in the form of drought, famine etc. and the exploited human beings too steadily gather strength to hit back at the oppressor. The aim of this paper is to analyse the interconnectedness of nature and culture as represented in literature. The paper also engages with critical readings of the text examining the development and the transformations of the characters. It tries to interrogate the way dualism has been constituted that justifies the exploitation of nature.

**Keywords:** Nature, Repression, Culture, Exploitation, Dualism

Nature and culture collapse into each other. Even the ambiguity in the term ‘nature’ displays a breakdown between nature and culture as distinct entities. Raymond Williams groups the various definitions of nature into three categories: —(1) the essential quality and character of something (2) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both (3) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human being” (Williams 1976:219). Hence nature is a term deeply loaded with cultural connotations. According to Kate Soper, critic of poststructuralist feminism, nature is —”those material structures and processes that are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not a humanly created product) and whose forces and casual powers are the necessary conditions of every human practice” (Soper 1995, 132-3). Through these statements it is very clear that it is nature that builds the culture. The tension between nature and culture has been exacerbated by the influx of postmodernism, which typically takes a culturalist approach to explaining the world, suggesting that there is no nature, but only culture. Terry Eagleton explains, —”there is a well-entrenched postmodern doctrine that the natural is no more than an insidious naturalization of culture” (Eagleton 2000: 93). In opposition to this postmodern sentiment, one can agree with Eagleton who argues that we are both natural and cultural beings, and that our helpless physical nature is such that culture is necessity if we are to survive. Nature and culture, as Eagleton suggests, have a dialectical relationship: each continually refashions the other.

Rousseau says that man is born free and everywhere he is in chains which mean the government; social class, wealth and poverty are man-made prisons in which people trap each other. Rousseau asserts that modern states repress the physical condition. After Rousseau the provocative novelist of the modern age, D.H. Lawrence criticized mechanical life and the industrial world which are associated with the mechanized feeling and with the death of spontaneous, instinctive responses to life. When the narrator of *Life on the Mississippi* visits Mississippi River after civil war, he finds that the same familiar roads, rivers, and the grounds hall have undergone great changes. People littered and spread disease, greed, violence and destruction everywhere. He narrates how nature has been mistreated and feels the strong presence of American machination. Human have no right to reduce richness and diversity of nature except to satisfy vital human needs. He depicts the smell of missile, war and death

everywhere. They endanger the natural world, trees, animals, rivers and lakes and threatened the tribal world and their culture. The glory of the place had gone after civil war in America. Next morning, we drove around town in the rain, the city seemed but little changed. It was greatly changed, but it did not seem so: because in St. Louis, as in London and Pittsburgh, you cannot persuade a new thing to look new: the coal smoke turns it into an antiquity the moment you take your hand off it (LOM: 325).

All the shops were removed. By using dynamite, all the bridges near Mississippi river were blown up. All the places were shattered. The attack of dynamites on bridges swallowed the lives of the people. After 21 years when he comes back to Mississippi river, he finds drastic change which makes him unfamiliar from the well-known places. I wondered if I had forgotten the river, too, was unfamiliar: there was nothing in sight, anywhere, that I could remember ever having seen before; I was surprised, disappointing and annoyed (LOM: 326).

He accuses the government which is cause of all those traumatic events. It is obvious that narrator's complaint is not against technology but against its abuse, its employment in the service of war and repression. He expresses his anxiety about the use of large-scale industrial technology which leads to alienation, de-humanization, and domination. His stern warning is that the spectacular speed of technological development would leave a terrifying impact on people, land and its resources. The note of warning is that every aspect of environmental degradation, destruction, and abuse of nature will translate itself into a serious menace to the life of future generation that is loud and clear in his Memoir, *Life On the Mississippi*.

Vanadana Shiva supported Twain's view by saying that —it is becoming clear that our scientific systems are totally inadequate to counteract or eliminate the hazards. Each disaster seems like an experiment...to teach us more about the effects of deadly substances that are brought into daily production and use" (Mies-Shiva1993:82). Unlimited progress is a dangerous myth because it suggests that we can rape and destroy living nature of which we are an integral part, without ourselves suffering the effects. The cataclysmic harm inflicted by the swirling sweep of scientific advancement leads to sterility and barrenness. The ultra-military regime, an extremely rigid totalitarian state and the danger of theocracy are all activated by an irreparable imbalance in the ecosystem. The selfishness of the human beings started to explore new places for exploitation and they found Mississippi river useful to fulfil their wishes. The Narrator explains; Why did these people want the river now when nobody wanted it in the five preceding generations? Apparently it was because at this late day they thought they had discovered a way to make it useful (LOM: 19). It is clear that Mississippi has lost her natural value and stands for commercial needs.

After the exploration of the Mississippi river the greedy have started to exploit it and it has affected the physical features of river. At some forgotten time in the past, cut off were made above Vidalia, Louisiana; at Island 92; at Island 92; at Island 84; and at hale's point. These shortened the river, in the aggregate, seventy seven miles. Since my own day on the Mississippi; cut offs have been made at Hurricane island; at island 100; at Napoleon, Arkansas; at Walnut bend; at Council Bend. These shortened the river, in the aggregate, sixty seven miles. In my own times a cut off was made at American bend, which shortened the river ten miles more (LOM: 267). According to the statistic data, the Mississippi between Cairo and New Orleans was twelve hundred and fifteen miles long, one hundred and seventy six years ago. It was eleven hundred and eighty after the cut off of 1722. It was one thousand and forty after the American civil war. It has lost sixty seven miles since. Consequently its length is only nine hundred and seventy three miles at present. Natural resources which are useful for the people are not being used but are being spoiled and they are exploiting it for the maximum benefit in a short time. Therefore they are losing their existence and day by day they are extinguishing its resources. People are fettering and handcuffing the river. The streams of the river are being controlled by constructing dams and bridges over it. The Narrator is warning us to be alert for

the future: —any calm person, who is not blind or idiotic, can guess the future of the universe” (LOM: 268). The Narrator himself is the best example of the repression of human nature. His ambition of being steamboat man in his future was repressed by his father. He could not dare to express his ambition before his father but his ambition kept on intruding him to act according to his desire. Except Bixby no one has encouraged him to chase his undying ambition. Sometimes he found himself without any ambition and hope. Twain represents the evil nature of human being. Selling Negroes for their profit was lucrative business which was prevalent during Twain’s time. The life of the Negroes was being controlled and was commoditized. Business men transformed their business. In the beginning they were selling animals but they found selling of men was more profitable. They were enticing slaves to run away from his masters, so that they might sell them in another quarter. The narrator says: This was arranged as follows: they would tell a negro that if he would run away from his master and allow them to sell him, he should receive a portion of the money paid for him (LOM: 413). They were enticing them by convincing that they will get Free State where they would be safe. The poor wretches complied with this request, hoping to obtain money and freedom (LOM :414). Finally they murdered Negroes and threw their bodies into the Mississippi. In the name of their freedom, their happiness was repressed. Further he throws light on shifting standards in the life style of people whose livelihood depends on the river and focuses on the resultant loss of culture and identity. They were exploding the habitant of tribal people for situating new industries, while those tribal people usually prefer outdoor nature, unmodified by human intervention, to cities or artful gardens.

Like primitivist, they prefer spontaneity, the free expression of emotion, and the intuitive productions of natural genius. They are against artificial forms, rules and conventions. But in the age of progress they are longing to escape from the complexities, fever, anxieties, and alienation of modern civilization into the elemental simplicities of a lost natural life. They cannot isolate themselves from the nature. Their way of living depends on the nature. But trade, oil industry, satellite, TV, have undermined their aboriginal ways. The American pastoral landscape may have symbolized the ‘nation’ in Antebellum literature, but while the American landscape was valorized as an image of freedom, Slaves became synonymous with nature and were degraded to the outskirts of a civilized populace. Slavery refers on a demarcation between civilized and uncivilized persons. ‘Civilization’ typically refers to —a developed or advanced state of human society (OED, one which is —still contrasted with savagery and barbarism (Williams1976: 85). However the root of evil also connotes citizenship, or the idea of belonging to a community of citizens .Therefore, a civilized society is one that has supposedly overcome savagery or the baseness of nature. At the root of slavery is anthropocentrism: the natural is positioned in opposition to the civilized, suggesting that nature and culture are separate spheres and the culture always has the upper hand. Developing a civilized nation, therefore, requires a disassociation from the nature among its citizens. In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin articulates the need for early American Colonists to separate themselves from their European ancestors and from the native American tribes. They found in the continent: —the colonists had their own need to affirm for themselves and for the home folks that they had not deserted European civilization for American savagery (Slotkin 1973:15). Hence while the natural was valorized as a symbol of natural identity, the citizenry needed to avoid becoming too natural. Such distinctions between the civilized and the uncivilized justified the removal and decimation of Native American tribes in the new world and the enslavement of Africans and their off-spring. Tribal people relation to nature represents a trinity of ideal purity.

They establish a kind of belongingness with the landscapes, trees, and with all the things which are related to nature. But after the intrusion of technical apparatuses in natural life, this balance is about to be lost. In contrast, the new ‘immigrants’ connection to nature does not

generate a sense of belonging by dwelling proximate to the nature by using them: cleaning forests for the purchase and sale of lumber, building houses, etc. Twain suggests that the new inhabitants value the river for their commercial value not for their tales of the natural things. In this way, the immigrant approach to nature is not only used to figure the potential cultural damage of losing an authentic American identity, but it also reflects the potential material damage inflicted upon nature by those that only see its value in dollar signs. The opinion that is expressed above is supported by Henry Melville who criticizes our perceptions of humanity as somehow being more human and superior to nature. He is also careful not to uphold nature as a pristine identity. Melville does not suggest that nature is pure and unaffected by culture. According to Fuller, an environment is threatened not simply by industrialization or capitalism, but by displacement of aboriginal people and by arrival of new settlers. Fuller suggests that nature will not remain static as its inhabitants change. Twain mockingly suggests that America is so obsessed with material wants. Even the American farmers are not having emotional attachment with their crops and fields. They are respecting Mississippi River because it is making their fields fertile. A sense of selfishness is growing in their heart. They are looking the river for their greed. It is the effect of invention of technologies which change human heart too with objects. Except all these things, the writer presents an overview of a materialist man who does not care about other's life. He loses his life in quest of money. They do not care for other's happiness and pleasure. —In the south the Spaniards were robbing, slaughtering, enslaving and covering them up (LOM: 18). He narrates the story of Yates who committed suicide for not able to pay money to his debtors. Further he describes the competition of railroads in which people are killing each other brutally. The greed and gullibility are the cause of assassinations. Political and religious institution made the cut throat competition between the people for trades and railroads. In his memoir work *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain expresses his concern over the widening inequality, growing hunger and poverty and the vast environmental degradation caused by railroads competition, civil war and corporate globalism. The abysmal world, Twain paints, makes us cognizant of the fact that we cannot have excessive chemical products or toxic fast food without risking the loss of clean air and good health. *Life on the Mississippi*, reveals Twain's ability to peer behind the curtains into some of the darkest and disturbing truths about environmental hazards that pose a perilous threat to the world. The day to day life in our corporate globalised world is an expression of forgetfulness of the creation and becoming stranger to the creative aspect of the world.

Science and technology have become the primary driving force of life. We know well that there are hardly areas in life bereft of nature. But then of all kinds of living beings on earth, the human being alone lives in the most artificial of all environments. Of all living beings, human being is the only one who has emancipated himself /herself in his/her life surrounding almost completely from his/her life-conditions of all kinds. Everywhere he/she meets with traces of his/her own development progress, changes and transformations. He/she organizes his/her life without consideration of the needs and demands of her/his environment without a real image of himself/ herself and of the surrounding world. In western feminist studies there is a school that equates nature with woman and shows how nature, like woman, has always been expressed and exploited by men in different ways. The patriarchal society has always abused nature as it has abused woman. Ecofeminism or gyno-ecology draws parallels between nature and woman and shows how both have been exploited by patriarchal, mercantile, and imperialistic systems. Western feminist writers and critics have responded to the idea with a degree of intensity that reflects a desperate, anguished attempt at assertion against this double exploitation. And often the woman is seen to reach out; in a bid for freedom, beyond the urban exploitative society to nature—the lake, the forest and the prairie. This is what characterizes the eco-feminism of, for example, in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), the narrator escapes from civilizations to find a strange communion with nature which is also haunted and hunted.

It is interesting to see how the concept receives a new dimension in a different cultural context, in the hands of an Indian woman novelist, Gita Mehta. It is still about the woman's equation with nature and her act of reaching out to nature in her crisis and despair. But nature is not sacred and endangered here. And coming close to nature, the woman also imbibes the serenity and strength of this unchanged, immortal nature. This helps her to find fulfilment through a positive process of being and becoming. Mehta presented Narmada as a young, beautiful and attractive woman. The nameless narrator tells us that river is among our holiest pilgrimage sites. It is worshipped as the daughter of god Shiva. The river is presented as an organic being full of human emotions: I can hear the river's heart beat pulsing under the ground before she reveals herself at last to the anchorites of Shiva deep in meditation around the holy tank of Amarkantak (ARS :5). The stream is presented in the form of woman and as an innocent virgin which is tempting ascetics and is forcing them to pursue her. It is inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl: —as yet another seductress loose limbed with the lassitude of desire (ARS: 8). The river is seen as a beautiful maiden in the prime of her youth and the nameless narrator remarks: I watched the water sparkling and disappearing like the ankles encircling a woman's foot and thought of the ascetic watching the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from his own penance (ARS: 9).

It is interesting to see how all these ideas that characterize the river are later embodied in Uma, the chief protagonist of the minstrel's story, which in a way, sums up all the previous stories, transcend them and creates an atmosphere where Uma and Shankar become the earthy embodiments of the Narmada. This is a new dimension of eco-feminism where the woman and nature are being put together because both are being undermined and can be seen as a new patch to what Torsney describes as a critical quilt in a feminist discourse in the changed scenario of a different socio-cultural paradigm. Torsney writes; Multipatterned and multicoloured, stitched by women and men from various racial and national culture with various critical predispositions the feminist critical practice forms a sort of critical quilt, an alternative to the critical methods of the past (Torsney 1994: 123).

In *A River Sutra* Mehta probes the nature-woman relationship from a special perspective which constitutes the essential Indianness of the novel. The last three stories among the six of the novel underscore the above theme in different ways. But the last one-The Minstrel's Story-is particularly significant in the present context. *The Courtesan's Story* (162-190) told by the courtesan and her daughter to the narrator who again repeats it, is about a mother courtesan by generations, and thus manifesting the situation where the woman is treated as a consumer's goods, simple object and instrument of pleasure, a priced commodity. The courtesan narrates how she failed to protect her daughter from the growing indignity around her. This is directly related to the growing pollution of a heartless society ruled by a money-power-muscle nexus. Finally the girl is abducted by a dangerous bandit, Rahul Singh who is also a victim of the society. Eventually, the two victims come to love each other, and their only shelter is the forest on the banks of the Narmada. In the Minstrel's Story which is the last one, appears to be especially significant in the context of the repression. It is in two parts: the first part is about a girl child and a Naga monk who had saved her from a brothel and gave her a new life in the lap of nature; the second part is about the grown-up girl, now a minstrel, and the Naga monk who re-enters mainstream life as Professor Shankar. Apparently the child-feeble, scared and orphaned as she is, has nothing in common with the great river. Yet she eventually attains a kind of identity with the river. This has been possible due to the ministrations of the Naga monk. In the beginning, she is just as an exploited, abused child, who does not even have a name the anonymity imparts legendary status to the kid. She was just called 'misfortune' by her father and the stigma is attached to the child. It is not an appropriate justification if we say that she was being called misfortune and was being tortured because her mother had died on her birth. She represents the typical lot of the girl child in a poor household

in India maltreated, abused and exploited. The child narrates-quite prosaically and unemotionally- a story which is a grim reality so common in such homes. She apparently came from a poor labourer's family. Her father and three brothers worked breaking stones by the roadside: —"I was never allowed to eat until everyone else had eaten. So I was always hungry. And I was beaten by my father" (ARS: 249). Then the unsuspecting child was sold out to a brothel under the pretence that she was being sent to a new mother. Here she had to stay for two years. There are hints in her simple account to suggest that in spite of being a child she had been sexually abused. The customers called her —Chand; because, they said, her —skin was 'soft' as moonlight. This implies that child's body had been touched examined and enjoyed by the customers. The monk's first glimpse of the child also evidences this. As he came to the brothel, one of the three unclean houses from which he had to take alms on the light of Shiva, he found a child was cowering behind a plastic-covered sofa, her face twitched with pains as a man gripped her chin in one hand. With his other hand the man lifting the child's small body to bring her lips close to his own (ARS: 223). The monk had to intimidate the employer to get the child as alms.

Of course, she assumed that he would be using the child sexually. Anyway, the child was saved, as the monk told her later that your other life dies that day. From that night onwards they began heading towards the Narmada. She is taken by the monk into the dense jungle far away from the locality and finally taken across the Narmada. There she begins a new life, learns many a new lessons, and is endowed a new name, 'Uma'. The corrupted society had treated her only as a commodity. Now she gains a new life, and learns to live in tune with trees and creatures like the Atwood heroine. The woman and nature have been made to appear extensions of each other. The woman so long as she is under the clutches of the mechanical, cynical society is tortured and crushed. Throughout the novel Mehta has given voice to her characters to speak them about attack of the society on their freedom. And actually the characters are mouth pieces of Mehta. In the beginning itself Mehta depicts the life of Jain monk who is renouncing the world because of prevailed violence in the society and he is advocating for non-violence. While walking on the bank of river the unnamed narrator encounters with Jain monk. He asks the reason for having mask on his mouth. He tells: These masks prevent us from killing some blameless insect by sudden inhalation....a Jain monk seeks to free himself of the fetters of worldly desire through the vows of poverty, celibacy, and nonviolence (ARS :11). The Jain monk who is renouncing the world has realized the autocracy of mechanical life that is extinguishing the life of innocent creatures. The practice of nonviolence avoids killing the creatures because of harsh vow of monk. For defending his rituals and faith he continues with the statement that only for keeping such a harsh vow they become bankers and merchants.

There are so many activities they cannot undertake for fear of harming life. Further he says: If we were farmers we might unknowingly kill creatures under our plows. In industry the earth is drilled for oil, iron, and coal. Can you imagine how much life is extinguished by those machines? (ARS: 24) He is harshly criticizing the industrial era where people are completely unaware from the doctrine of Ahimsa (nonviolence). Millions of lives are being extinguished carelessly every day. And monk is escaping himself from such a cruel world where worldly desires are chaining the freedom and instincts of a common man. When he encounters with old monk, who is try to dominate on him through his discourse, he feels that people are being misguided and diverged. Old monk keeps on forcing him to accept whatever he is trying to persuade. Monk comes to know that he is trying to misguide him. Old monk starts talking about the secrets of human heart and tells that many men die before they learn the desire for the freedom that lies deep within them, like a damned river waiting to be released. Monk hints that people are repressing their desires. If once they have had that momentary glimpse of freedom, he needs to be instructed further. Every story is the story of a human heart. But each story depicts the story of repression too. Moving further from the Jain Monk story is the Teacher's

story where Mehta represents a brutal world which does not allow an innocent child to express his natural voice. Master Mohan is not able to live his life happily even in his home. Because he keeps himself busy in teaching the music which is not enough to earn proper money for his family. His wife who belongs to wealthy family starts hating him and her anger doubles when Master Mohan gives shelter to Imrat. The portrayal of Imrat and Master Mohan in this story represents the repressed life of innocence and simplicity in the materialized world. After the assassination of Imrat he throws himself before the train and ends up his life by committing suicide. In the story of Courtesan, Rahul Singh is a victim of society. A person who was standing to sacrifice his life for nation is living in the caves and forests. His freedom has been kidnapped by politicians and society. A lady who has been abducted by Rahul Singh commits suicide by drowning herself in the Narmada River. The lady knew about the harsh criticism of society that would take away her life. So she thought to rescue herself from the abuses. Even in her previous life her mother never permitted her to perform before uncivilized audiences because they lack the common sense and underestimate the value of courtesan by playing with their beauty. Throughout her life she was running away from the society and finally took shelter in the lap of Narmada.

Mehta criticizes human vanity and blames the people for brutally killing innocent creatures who are not interrupting in the life of human being. Knowingly or unknowingly they are taking away the life of creatures and they are not at all repenting what they are doing or have done. On the contrary they keep on harming. She slightly hints how the industrialization swallowed the life of mute crippled animals and mechanical life has suppressed the instinct of human being. She cleverly puts together natural life and commercial life. Before coming close to natural life the unnamed narrator was working as civil servant. He never got opportunity to think and act freely. He was bounded to act and think as system wanted. All his instincts were repressed. But when he comes close to nature, he finds himself free and thinks and acts as he wants. The repressed feelings and instincts get aroused when he sees the natural beauty and described Narmada as a 'woman' and the streams of the water, according to him, are sparkling and disappearing like the anklets encircling a woman's foot. The waves of the Narmada are arousing the lust and sexual feeling of narrator. Trepidation over the commodification of nature is obvious in both Twain and Mehta. Indeed, both authors criticize the materialization of their country. They claim that one of humanity's biggest mistakes is regarding the nature as property. Both, Twain and Mehta, criticize the commercialization of nature that reveals the power they see in the nature. They suggest that nature always has the upper hand, and there is nothing we can really take from nature that it cannot recover. In fact, they represent nature not simply as a passive entity getting raked over by humanity, but possessing the capacity to act. They suggest that sometimes nature communicates with powerful actions rather than passivity.

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