



PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

Life of Indian women is not only based on the background of the family and the society in which they were brought up but it also includes other categories like culture and religion. The major historical events have changed the outlook of women from time immemorial. The role of women in India is different from that of other countries. In India women plays a multifaceted role like mother, wife, daughter and even bread winner of the family. Amidst this she struggles to keep-up her own identity. Though bound by affection she seeks to be independent.

Writers of various periods reflect the role of women characters of their period. Indian writers stamped their experience in patriarchal societies after a detailed analysis and understanding. Women are portrayed as the preserver of home and protector of culture, but at the same time women suffer and struggle, rebel and accept the reality.

Women are the leading spirits in the works of Amitav Ghosh. Women character depicts the cultural construction of the society. Amitav Ghosh has brought out the real struggle of women characters at various social statuses; he has pictured an ideal society with a cooperative work of dreamers, social workers, traditionalist and economist. Ghosh with his imaginary vision constructs a new socio-economic system, with a new cultural consciousness. Ghosh portrays women as a life –giver and sustainer.

The novelist has made an attempt to explore the emotional world of women through the major characters like, Dolly, Uma and the Queen Supayalat in *The Glass Palace*, Piya, Nilima, Kusum and Moyna in *The Hungry Tide* and Deeti and Paultte in *Sea of Poppies*. All these women characters served the purpose of women protagonist and are independent in their own terms.

Ghosh has proved through these characters that women are much more determined in progress towards their desired goal, in spite of all odds they come across in the form of male gender. Ghosh's women are the representative of the Indian society.

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Life of Indian women is not only based on the background of the family and the society in which they were brought up, but it also includes other categories like culture and religion. The major historical events have changed the outlook of women from time immemorial. The role of women, changes according to the need and demand of the society. Each culture creates a unique context in which various roles and identities of women are determined. The role of women in India is different from that of other countries. In India women plays a multifaceted role like mother, wife, daughter and the bread winner of the family. Amidst this she struggles to keep-up her own identity. Though bound by affection she seeks to be independent.

Writers of various periods reflect the role of women characters of their period. Indian writers stamped their experience in patriarchal societies after a detailed analysis and understanding. The contemporary writers recognized the woman hood quite clearly, Raja Rao recreates the image of women in his novel *The Serpent and the Rope* as, "Women is the earth, air, ether, sound, the knowing in the knowledge; women is fire, movement, clear and rapid as the mountain stream; women is that which seeks against that which is sought" (357).

The women are portrayed as the preserver of home and protector of culture, but at the same time women suffer and struggle, rebel and accept the reality. These are the outward portrayal of women. The shift to a portrayal of the inner psyche of women started with Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande 'who probed into the behavioral patterns, focusing on the factors that account for their unconventional actions.' (P Shailaja and G Manoj, 7).

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The character Dolly in *The Glass Palace*, at the age of ten serves as a maid in the palace. When the king's family was banished, she also moves along with the king's family to Ratnagiri. There she grows up into a charming young girl. As she does not have anybody to share her feelings with, she longs for it and is soothed by Sawant a servant in the palace. Finally, she falls in love with him, who serves the king's family in Ratnagiri. But later she comes to know that the first prince is carrying the child of Sawant. Understanding the pathetic position of the princes she conceals her love and parts with him.

Piya in *The Hungry Tide* is a marine biologist, and since she was brought up in the United States, she cannot speak her mother tongue, Bengali. But she never considers that as a hindrance, as her profession demands independent travelling and she feels comfortable to travel with Fokir. Though she could not understand Fokir's language, a tribal fisher man, she could exploit his knowledge about the tide country and its inhabitants.

Deeti as a striking character in *Sea of Poppies* emerges as a sad, good hearted character carried away by the fate. Ghosh pictured her as a simple ordinary innocent village woman and she is the most unfortunate who believes that, she was born under the spell of wrong star and that is the reason why she suffers throughout her life. Even though she is unfortunate she accepts her opium addicted husband Hukum Singh and she supports her family financially by working in the poppy field and even by selling her own belongings. Though nothing happens as per her desire, she finds happiness through her daughter Kabutri. All these three major characters readily accept the life as it is, whether it is desirable or undesirable. Malathi and Prema has commented that

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independently. They are out of the purposive control of men. They pursue ideals, which they as individuals value. Ghosh's women are the symbol of growth, progress and forward movement' (6).

Ghosh's post humanist values are also apparent in his feminist treatment of the main women characters in these novels. His women never get suppressed by the patriarchal society; the will power sprouts within them and sails along with the fate, with never give up attitude, they fight against all odds in the society.

Dolly, the darling in *The Glass Palace* is a very soft character, but her husband Rajkumar proves himself to be unfaithful, through his ill-legal relationship with a woman in plantation, when he stays away from home on business. Though Dolly is a complete woman, she could not accomplish the need of her husband as she had to nurse her elder son, Dinu, who was sick. At an extreme state she feels that she could renounce family life, but her sense of duty as a mother holds her back.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the character Piya plays an important role. She is a cytologist by profession and is doing her research on marine mammals especially about Irrawaddy Dolphins. Out of own interest she visits Sunderban to study the behavior of Oracella, as she wants to explore the marine. As a young lady she faces trouble in the form of forest guards, though she was prepared to face such hurdles, it is only at the other end, she was rescued by Fokir, with whom she feels at ease. The tenacious spirit of Piyali to explore the hidden secrets about the marine mammals extends her stay in India. Though she is Western by birth, she remains essentially Indian in sensibility. She defines her life through her career and says her home is where Oracella is; she stands as a strong representative of the present generation.

Similarly Deeti in *Sea of Poppies* has been portrayed as a prey to the patriarchal society; she faces trouble in the form of her brother-in-law Chandan Singh. She keeps quite, because it is an issue which cannot be discussed with anyone. Knowing this, her brother-in-law threatens her as

"Your husband and I are brothers after all, of the same flesh and blood. Where is the

shame? Why should you waste your looks and your youth on a man who cannot enjoy them? Besides, the time is short while your husband is still alive- if you conceive a son while he is still living, he will be his father's rightful heir." (Ghosh,157).

Unable to tolerate the behavior of her brother-in-law she warns him: "Listen to my words: I will burn on my husband's pyre, rather than give myself to you" (Ghosh,158). Through these words of Deeti, Ghosh expresses the assertive nature of Deeti to restore the dignity of womanhood and this notion express her extend of her mental turmoil.

Ghosh has proved through these characters that women are much more determined in progress towards their desired goal, in spite of all odds they come across in the form of male gender. At last Piya chooses to continue her project in Lusiburi. Dolly nurses Dinu, perceiving her role as a mother more than as a wife. And Deeti, resumes her second spell of life with Kalua, one who saved her from her husband's funeral pyre.

In all the three select novels, marriage and disappointments have become an integral part in the life of women characters. The character Uma Dey, the Madame Collector, is an attractive and self-possessed character in the novel *The Glass Palace*. She gets married to Benni Prasad Dey, the Collector, who is under the impression that British people are much better than Indians. He aspires to be appreciated by the British for his service and because of such an attitude he loses his originality and leads his life behind the fake mask as an authoritarian. But Uma is quite opposite to his attitude and when she starts to reassess the entire meaning of her life, she sobs. As wifely virtues become useless to her husband; she gets terrified. Uma wishes not to be a mere role-filler, stripped off all the individuality. She wishes to have a companionship based on understanding and love, for the autonomy of the self. As she is denied the requisite space, she feels difficult to cope with the atmosphere of constrained enactment. Even before the death of her husband, she decides to quit her married life. After the death of her husband she gives up the legacy of humiliation and dependence and grows into a confident individual fighting for peace and non-violence.

Nilima, in *The Hungry Tide*, the Mashima of Lusbari hails from an aristocratic family with a good educational background. Nirmal was a professor in Calcutta University and Nilima was his student. She falls in love with Nirmal, and so they get married against the wish of her parents. Due to her ardent love for her husband, she moves along with him and settles in the tide country, where she over comes major problems, in spite of struggling even for the basic amenities she overcomes all odds with strong will. But to her dismay the contradiction of ideas arise between Nirmal and Nilima. Nirmal is highly imaginative and aspires even for impossible things, whereas Nilima is very practical in her life.

Nilima is an embodiment of endurance and she disciplines her life in such a way that does not deviate either willingly or unwillingly and finally she also succeeds in it. Nirmal's life reflects the ebb and tide of repression and projection. Nirmal's mistaken assessment on Nilima leads to repression, but with her strong will power, she pushes down the repression by projecting the best part of her. She refuses to give even a moment to think of something that drains her energy and peace of mind, especially when Nirmal says, "You've joined the rulers; you've begun to think like them. That's what comes of doing the sort of 'social work' you have been doing all these years. You've lost sight of important things." (Ghosh,120).

This particular statement of Nirmal disturbs Nilima quite very often, but she forgets this very thought and recalls how her own husband dismissed her efforts. Though this attitude of indifference slows down her action she carefully avoids the thought which disturbs her peace. She as a modern woman with her personality intact with due rationality and responsibility, leads a more dignified life and sets herself as a role model for others to follow. She uses regression to identify the true nature of people. As a dutiful wife she also fulfills the last wish of her husband and hands over the book written by him addressed to Kanai, nephew of Nilima. She says, "I always did my best to do my duty by Nirmal. It's very important to me that his last wishes are not dishonoured. I don't know why he wanted you to have the book; I don't know

what's in it - but that's how it must be." (Ghosh,120).

Even after her husband's death, Nilima was very firm in her decision, being at her desk keeps her engaged body and soul. She had coped with Nirmal's death and gracefully she channelized herself into work. She is a kind of person who stays indifferent to the odd events of life. She firmly believes that causing indifference in life is the law of nature and indifference is the strategy of life in the process of adaption. As far as Nilima is concerned, there is no distinction between the private and public life. At one point when Kanai, Nilima's nephew, entered her room, books and files lay everywhere making no difference from an office.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti's marriage with Hukam Singh is the first set back in the life of Deeti. The second shocking news is that her husband Singh who is an opium addict becomes unfit to be a father. Hukam Singh is supposed to be from the upper caste family and he served in the army. As he was wounded during his fight, he was expelled from the service and as a result he was unable to fulfill the economic need of his family. Consequently, there is no marginal economic difference between the upper and lower caste. In order to overcome the pain, Hukam Singh frequently takes opium and he ends up as an addict. Deeti permeates opium every moment of her life. The desperate Deeti discovers during her first night that her husband is an opium addict; he blows smoke in to her mouth and allows his brother to rape his wife's unconscious body, as he is incapable of performing his conjugal duties. The real father of Kabutri, Deeti's daughter is Hukam Singh's brother. An indigestible incident in her life is that she was not sure of the identity of the father of the child that she begets. The main culprit is her own mother-in-law. Deeti drugs her mother-in-law to know the truth, and ultimately her mother-in-law discloses the truth and calls her 'Draupathi', one who carries the child of husband's brother. This bitter fact is a hard-hit, a big blow on her, that she could not discuss this with anyone else. Her future is enveloped with darkness. Though she is deserted by her husband, she fulfills her wifely duties to her husband, till the end of his life, and also she extends her support economically by selling all her

properties. P Sailaja and Manija had aptly revealed, in poetcrit, jan. 2007, that 'Ghosh's major women characters get rid of their dependency, needs and break the pattern of sensuality and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally with men.' (13).

The novelist gives strength and will power to his women characters with traditional flavour. These characters are more polished and matured enough to overcome the patriarchal problem at home.

Amitav Ghosh as an expatriate writer expatriates about the contribution of women to the society. The novelist portrays the experience of women in a tide country, through the character of Nilima and Kusum in *The Hungry Tide*. Both Nilima and Kusum understand the real need of their society and are ready to approach the concerned authorities to get the necessary assistance. Kusum, the tribal woman and mother of Fokir, holds a captivating grip on the narration.

Ghosh's women live a life of fulfillment and dignity through their actions. They contributed stability to the civilized society. Following the traditional land mark developed by his forerunners like Tagore and R K Narayan, Ghosh presents his women characters with a strong will power, highly expressive and identifying the individuality with high esteem. His women characters act independently without the intervention of man. The women are the symbol of growth, progress and forward movement in Ghosh's novel. The fusion of psychological and sociological trauma can be seen as a common factor among Ghosh's women characters.

The novel *The Glass Palace* is an extraordinary achievement by Amitav Ghosh. He has taken sincere and sustained effort to present the historical document through the women characters. The history of the 20th century is unfolded across the generations with an unerring narrative skill of Amitav Ghosh. Uma in *The Glass Palace* plays a very important role in moulding other characters; her contribution to the development of the novel can be witnessed throughout the novel. It is Uma who advised Dolly to marry Rajkumar and proceed with the journey of her life, leaving the King's family. With the help of Uma, Dolly marries Rajkumar and she gets herself involved in her family.

Uma after the death of her husband struggles to release herself from the clutches of the oppressive traditional society. Due to her economic independence, she manages to be free which was a rare phenomenon during the Victorian era. She also displays the role of economic rights of women. Shobana Ramasamy comments that she has become a woman of substance, travelling abroad, quite equal of many respectable and cultured Western women under similar circumstances. Even though Uma has all the liberty to travel around the world and to enjoy, she refuses to spend her life in leisured ease, and she becomes an active member in Indian independence party. Her involvement in freedom struggle appears to be an extension of her struggle for personal independence and identity.

The character Deeti in *Sea of Poppies* is another symbol of endurance. Her husband Hukam Singh's illness and his subsequent death do not bring any financial assistance from the opium factory, though he collapses inside the factory. The aftermath is so rapacious, no one favours her. Deeti's resistance to the domination of social pressure makes her to take extreme turn, when she decides that ending her life is much more preferable than to struggle for fitting survival. It is through Kalua, a low caste bullock carter, she is saved and through him Deeti gets second term of life for which she herself is the weaver of her own life. Ghosh makes her as a complete woman in the ship Ibis, which carries coolies to Mauritius. Deeti takes up the role of a senior and helps and guides a group of women in the Ibis, with the experience she had gained in her earlier part of life. She takes decision on her own; Ghosh has changed the life style of Deeti, and has given the liberty to decide the destiny not only of her life but also the life of other women in Ibis. After the death of her husband Deeti gets a new lease of life.

Amitav Ghosh as a well known humanist has penned against all kind of oppression in his novels. He vehemently disagrees with the idea of domination of man, either it be political or social. Shobana Ramasamy says, "Most of the women characters are shown as determining the major decisions of their own lives. They are given a freedom of choice and they take the initiative in their intimate relationship." (97).

Ghosh's women character live a complete life of an Indian, serving the purpose as a wife, as a mother, a complete nurture and homemaker. His women characters are archetypal 'Earth Mother', also they have the capability to bring a semblance of order even to the chaos of Outram house. Ghosh's women characters stand as an outstanding example of adoptability to the vicissitudes of life. Their resilience is a quality to be cherished in the modern world.

Ghosh women characters fulfill their loving and harmonious relationship with others. His women characters are the embodiment of the typical Indian women with a deep concern for others, which is considered to be a profound significance.

Ghosh's women characters are well determined in their life. The tone of women characters occurs at the very beginning of the novel. *The Glass Palace*, Ma cho a road side vendor, who gives shelter to Rajkumar, the hero of the novel, is very clear in her attitude and she resists herself "abruptly she pushed him away, with a yelp of disgust. What I am doing with this boy, this child, this half-wit kala? Elbowing him inside, chambered her ladder and vanished into her room". (Ghosh, 69). The character Dolly, on the other hand, when her choice of man 'Sawant' the local servant is snatched away by the first princes, is emotionally hurt but she understood the situation of the first princes and makes up her mind. Piya, in *The Hungry Tide*, though impressed by Fokir's knowledge and ignorance, is aware of her goal and maintains her balance. Deeti in *Sea of Poppies* is another woman with self-determination who warns her brother-in-law and dares to take extreme decision.

Ghosh's women characters overcome their dependent nature and suppress the patterns of sexuality and sensuality and take the position of free and equal human beings in line with a man. These women are called as winners of life and live with dignity through their actions. They stabilize the social and family life upholding the civilization. Malathi and Prema opine that,

Ghosh develops women who are strong, who can express themselves, do things come to their own decision and live independently, they are out of the

purposive control of men. They pursue ideals, which they as individuals value. His women are symbols of growth, progress and forward movement.'(6, portrayal of women in The Select Novels of Amitav Ghosh).

To conclude Ghosh's women are the representative of the Indian society.

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