

# Portrayal Of Women In The Selected Novels Of Amitav Ghosh

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**Abstract:** Indian Writing in English which has commended unstinted admiration in both home and abroad is now in its full swing. Amitav Ghosh has undoubtedly earned his position in the canon of Indian English Fiction. The lists of contemporary Indian-English writers remain incomplete without the name of Amitav Ghosh. Indian Fiction Writers depicted Women and their experiences in patriarchal societies with a deep sympathetic understanding. Amitav Ghosh portrays his women sensitively and infact, they are the leading spirits in his fiction. They are distinct portrayals of a cultural construction. He never presents his women as overt radical feminists nor as the stereotypical images of Sita and Savithiri. They are the characters of real life and in his novels he portrays the women characters in a realistic manner. This paper dealt with the portrayal of women characters in the selected novels of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*. Through the portrayal of his women characters, he aims to envisage a future where women's empowerment will lead to emancipator changes in the larger social structures.

Ghosh eschews feminist attitudes to bring out the social traumas undergone by the women in his novels. Despite the fact that there are only few women characters in his novels and their role is limited, they are in control of the entire happening in the novels. They act as independent entities, growing and developing according to their own inclinations and finding social acceptance, defining their own space, determining their own lives, fighting their own battles, enjoying the fruits of victory and never fearing to taste the bitterness of defeat. The avoidance of vilification, victimization and degradation of women is commendable, though not surprising considering the fact that the author hails from the land of Kali.

*The Glass Palace* is epic in scope covering three countries: Burma, India and Malaya and encompassing a whole century in turbulent times. It is an intricate novel where the narrative spans over three generations. It is a saga of three families and their inter-connections. He portrays the cultural complexities and feminine consciousness through family relationships.

An important incident that occurs early in the novel sets the tone of the women characters. Raj Kumar, an eleven-year-old-orphan, works as a helper for Ma Cho. Through creaks, in the wooden walls, he views Ma Cho at nights and learns about female anatomy and sex. He even gets his first physical sensations through her. But Ma Cho resists herself by saying:

Abruptly, she pushed him away, with a help of disgust. What am I doing with this boy, this child, this half-wit kaala? Elbowing him aside, she clambered up her ladder and vanished into her room. (Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, 57)

The situation is saved by the strength and sanity of the women. This seems to be a regular pattern, in Ghosh, where woman stands as a preserver of cultural and spiritual essence.

The English force Burmese king Thebaw and queen Supayalat to exile. Dolly a nine- year old girl looking after the younger princess is transported along with them. Gradually from a child she grows into an attractive young girl. Her body and mind expand. Sawant, the local servant of the king is her natural choice. However, they are caught by the first princess, who, in need of a man snatches him away. Dolly is hurt, emotionally confused and by a psychological transference identifies herself with the first princess and says she is waiting for the baby's arrival. *Uma*, wife of District Collector Dey, restless and intelligent, strikes up a close, unlikely friendship with Dolly. But *Uma* coaxes her to marry Raj Kumar. In the end she agrees to do so as Raj Kumar loves her and marriage being a sacrament in the Hindu context is the only suitable career open to a woman. She also sees it as a security for her orphan life.

Dolly nurses Dinu, a sensitive photographer, perceiving her role as a mother more important than that of a wife. But the suffering changed her attitude and she feels: I couldn't go back to the life I'd led before (Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, 239).

A feeling of emptiness spreads. But she gracefully accepts the inevitability of pain and suffering. A visit to a Buddhist nunnery reveals her strong desire for renunciation, which in the present circumstances she cannot as she is deeply committed to her responsibilities. She proves her indomitable spirit and strength of convictions in ultimately entering the monastery and withdrawing from the world.

Dolly is a personification of the spirit of endurance and acceptance. Her very weakness is her source of strength. She stands for courage, honour, hope, compassion and sacrifice. Her tenacity of spirit lifts the other characters. There is the feeling that the traditional emphasis on feminine virtues such as obedience, humility and patience only encourage women to give in to their oppression. But it is important to remember that obedience is not the same as subservience; humility is not the same as masochism; and patience is not the same as impotence. The distinction is the first category presupposes agency and the second destroys it, so that obedience differs from subservience from being a case of intentional passivity as opposed to mere passivity. Women possessing the first category of qualities are to be treated as persons and agents.

For Dolly Sein, life can be viewed as one filled with fulfillment in the role of a nurturer and homemaker. Dolly is the archetypal 'earth mother', capable of bringing a semblance of order even to the chaos of Outram House. Dolly is an outstanding example of adaptability to the vicissitudes of life. Her resilience is a quality to be cherished in the modern world.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee says,

Social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than a man, and generally a woman's identity tends to be defined by herself as well as by others, in terms of relationship with men – as a daughter, as a wife, and as a mother. (98)

Dolly shows that a woman can fulfill herself in a loving and harmonious relationship with others. What governs her is the act of giving, going out of oneself, a deep concern for the other, which is a point of profound significance.

Uma Dey, the Madame collector, is attractive, charming, lively and self-possessed. She becomes an elegant hostess, a mere adjunct to the collector. She is a "role-filler". She starts to re-assess the entire meaning of her life being jolted out of her unquestioning acceptance:

She began to sob, covering her face with her hands. The wifely virtues she could offer him he had no use for: Cambridge had taught him to want more: to make sure that nothing was held in

abeyance, to bargain for a woman's soul with a coin of kindness and patience. The thought of this terrified her. This was subjection beyond decency, beyond her imagining (Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, 153).

If a man treats his wife as if only he could know what is best even for her, then it is a case of external constraint and power. Uma wishes not to be flattened into a role, invariably stripped of all individualizing traits of a sentient being. She wills for a companionship based on understanding and love, and for autonomy of self. But she is denied the requisite space. She finds it difficult to cope with this atmosphere of "constrained enactment". She gives up the legacy of humiliation and dependence and grows into a confident individual fighting for peace and non-violence.

Uma Dey is desperate to find recognition as the 'independent other'. Even within the narrow confines of her life as the wife of the collector, she manages to assert herself by draping her saree in the newly introduced way. This earns her the appreciation of Queen Supalayati. She is outraged by Rajkumar's infidelity to Dolly. She shares with the modern women the desire for mental freedom. Later, she has to struggle to release herself from the bondage imposed by the oppressive traditional society upon the young Hindu widow. Her situation is an argument in favour of property rights for women. Owing to her inheritance, she becomes a woman of substance, travelling abroad, quite the equal of many respectable and cultured Western women in similar circumstances.

While woman as leader in the old fashioned way is represented by the archetypal 'terrible mother,' Queen Supalayati with her mask like face and mauve lips is no ordinary woman. Though accustomed to authority, she suffered captivity and humiliation over freedom and goes on to live along with her daughters to twenty years of exile, for love of her ineffectual and scholarly husband.

Jaya, Uma's great-niece, a widow, living alone in middle and old age with her son in America and she explores Ratnagiri and Myanmar in order to understand the past. She is the woman who goes in search of roots. Interestingly, she gets the opportunity of studying the work of the enterprising Parsee woman photographer who shot the wedding photographs of Rajkumar and Dolly. Women's intellectual and professional fulfillment is depicted in Jaya who is a lecturer and researcher, and in Dinu's wife, Daw Thin Thin Aye, the reputed novelist. The latter's language is so refined that the Burmese police official in charge of censoring her manuscript is under the impression that her grammar is faulty.

The women in this novel try to seek different levels of liberation. Each negotiates with her milieu to arrive at justifiable resolutions and each attempt is an accomplishment in itself.

*The Hungry Tide* is a prophetic novel of remarkable insight, beauty, and humanity and is a remarkable book, a whirlwind work of the imagination, as epic in its scope and ambition as Amitav Ghosh's previous, widely-acclaimed novels. In this novel the author shuttles the scrupulous research that allows a mixture of fiction and fact to the extent that they stand undifferentiated. Touching upon various topics from refugees, freedom and war, to life in the Sunderbans, the absence of language in communication, development, women trafficking and much more, he takes the reader through a whirlwind of events and emotions.

The novel presents women's distinct experience through the characters of Nilima and Kusum on one hand, and Piyali Roy, an American scientist, and Moyna Mondal on the other hand. All the options between motherhood and man less life style are portrayed. Nilima, Kusum represent yester years whereas Piyali, Moyna belong to the current tide.

Kusum, a tribal woman, “a muse” in Nirmal’s words, exercises a captivating grip on the narration. She felt as an outsider on maid land. Tide country’s nostalgic past called her back, and she goes to Morichjhapi with her son Fokir joining the refugees of Bangladesh, who become the cause of her life. This concept of self as potentially unified with a place and an aspiration for psychic unity with the needy becomes her hub of freedom. This self-assertion leads Kusum to the tide country and makes her stretch a helping hand to refugees and tribals. She asks for Nilima’s help to safeguard her people through her “Union”. Nilima refuses, as she cannot go against the government. The equivocal voices of these refugees allow for the deconstruction of historical and ideological categories. Kusum reveals that women neither are naturally submissive nor uncomplaining, nor incapable of protest at the strictures of the society.

Nilima Mashima of Lusibari belonged to an aristocratic family with a good educational background. The reforms of William Bentick and Raja Ram Mohan Roy for the cause of women, the spread of English higher education and the western individualistic ideals prepared the ground for women to play active roles outside their limited family circle. The novel is a captivating read with fearful instances of a tidal country dictated in line with superstitious beliefs, the poverty of the islanders and the effort made by an entrepreneur like Nilima lead the path of such illiterate island dwellers from their subjugated existence to a healthy, educated and liberated livelihood. Nilima at a point says,

I am not capable of dealing with the whole world’s problems. For me the challenge of making a few little things a little better in one small place is enough. That place for me is Lusibari. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 387)

Unlike her idealistic dreamy husband, she remains within possible and practicable limits. In the process she is stern and strict. Yet she reveals her deep love, though suffering immense pain at his incongruous behaviour.

Piyali Roy belongs to the present generation. She is a Cetologist researching marine animals, a rare profession for women. She comes to Sunderbans to study the *Orcaella brevirostris*, or the Irrawaddy dolphin. Her tenacious spirit to explore the penetrating secrets of nature extends her stay in India. Despite changes in the norms and variations in taste acquired with the impact of western culture, she remains essentially Indian in sensibility. Modernity provides the new women a reformulated society based on a discourse of rights. Piyali Roy abandoned emotional language for the pure objective discourse of science. She is aware of her vulnerable condition as a scientist. The massive storm brings death and erases her long held notions. It also reveals the concern Fokir, the illiterate simple untrained fisherman saves her with his basic instincts. Piya stumbles upon her life’s work and acquires a taste for high ambition by researching the mammals. To Piya, her life through her career, home is where the *Oracella* are. Piyali’s ceaseless quest for a credible meaning ends up in Sunderbans.

Moyna Mondal stands in the novel as a woman with self-respect. In addition she is a woman with soaring aspirations, unlikely for a tribal woman. As a tribal, possessing basic things and living life with dignity itself is problematic. The term itself, in her case, indicates the utopian vision of society.

These women, Nilima and Kusum, Piya and Moyna shared a commonality of experience. It was their desire for continuous reaffirmation that made them strong. They never lose their faith in the essential grandeur of their existence.

*Sea of Poppies* revisits in new, breathtakingly detailed and compelling ways some of the concerns of his earlier novels. Among these are the incessant movements of the peoples,

commerce, and empires that have traversed the Indian Ocean since antiquity; and the lives of men and women with little power, whose stories, framed against the grand narratives of history, invite other ways of thinking about the past, culture and identity.

Deeti, is a striking character who undergoes suffering in her conjugal life and under the memshabis. She emerges as a sad, befuddled, good hearted women robbed by the fates. She is a simple and ordinary village woman. From her birth, she is a prey to the commotion and has never experienced bliss in her life. She is married to an opium addict Hukham Singh without her consent. As marriage has become a business the price, she pays for her husband by thatching the roof of her husband's house. This shows the prevailing dowry system in India. Dowry remains an obstacle in many young women's life. Deeti plays the role of mother, wife and nurse and shoulders the burden of house work. A hard hitting incident in her life is that she is unaware of the father of the child that she begets. Even her mother-in-law, inspite of being a woman is also responsible for this. This mirrors the mistrust, gloom and violence caused by a woman to another woman. To trace out the culprit, Deeti drugs the food of her mother-in-law to know the fact. Her mother in law refers Deeti as 'Draupati' who bears the children of brothers. Her inner turmoil is so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains silent.

Deeti is enveloped in darkness by the unconscious state of her poppy addict husband. Though she is deserted by her husband she nurses her husband by selling all her properties. Considering her loneliness her brother-in-law threatens to grab all her properties. She remains as a silent listener. When she is unable to bear the behaviour of him further, she raises her voice telling him:

Listen to my words: I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than give myself to you. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 154)

The utter depression resounding in these heart rending expression reveals the mind of Deeti's traditional value of compassion and correct living. No one helps her at the death bed of her husband. She takes precautions steps to thwart her daughter's future to be at stake. After his death Deeti is socially despised to commit sati because of the persistence of tradition by the society. Her family members say,

To have a sati in the family will make us famous. We'll build a temple for you and grow rich on the offerings. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 155)

The basic teaching imparted to every woman in a patriarchal traditional society is to commit sati in the funeral pyre of her husband. Some accept sati voluntarily while some are forced. Deeti does not mount the funeral pyre of her husband, unlike the traditional ladies to commit sati. But she is victimized to commit sati by her family. Fate rescues her from being victim in the form of a low caste Kalua to whom first she veils her face with the gungta of her sari out of caste discrimination. This shows the reason for the survival of India despite the sweeping winds of modernity. After her rescue from the shackles of humiliating tradition, she discontinues bearing the brunt of caste discrimination and accepts the low caste Kalua as her second husband.

She had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she choose and she knew that it was with Kalua that this life would be lived, until another death claimed the body that he had torn from the flames (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 175).

After her rebirth she sheds the palpable timidity and emerges as a new Deeti with mettle power to defy the predicaments. Through the portrayal of Deeti's character, Ghosh shows the socio political shifts bringing about changes in women out of their sufferings.

Amitav Ghosh's fiction portrays the two images of women: women as a life-giver, sustainer and continuer of the race as against women in search of an identity. In the tradition of Raja Rao and others he creates woman with an imaginative grace. Ghosh's major women characters get rid of their dependency needs, break the pattern of sexuality and sensuality and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally along with men. These are women who have lived a life of fulfillment and achieved dignity through their actions. They imparted stability to society and gave civilization itself continuity. Ghosh develops women who are strong, who can express themselves, do things, travel, come to their own decisions and live independently. They are out of the purposive control of men. They pursue ideals, which they as individuals value. They are symbols of growth, progress and forward movement.

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