



**JOURNAL OF INDIAN LANGUAGES
AND INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH**

Journal of Indian languages and Indian literature in English, 02(06), 31-37;2

**WOMEN AS A SOCIAL REFORMER IN THE
NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH**

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APA Citation:

MANIMOZHI.R, (2024). WOMEN AS A SOCIAL REFORMER IN THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH, *Journal of Indian Languages and Indian literature in English*, 02(06), 31-37
Submission Date: 01/01/2024
Acceptance Date: 25/01/2024

Abstract

Life of Indian women is not solely based on the background of the family and the society in which they were brought up. It 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 even bread winner of the family. Amidst all this she struggles to keep-up her own identity. Though bound by affection she seeks to be independent. 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, culturalist 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.

Keywords: AMITAV GHOSH, women, oppression, equality of rights, democracy, society and changes

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 Paulette in *Sea of Poppies*. All these women characters served the purpose of women protagonist and are independent in their own terms. Piya in *The Hungry Tide* is a marine biologist, and since she was brought up in United States, 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 a tribal fisherman, though she could not understand his language, 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. Though she is unfortunate she accepts her opium addicted husband Hukum Singh and she supports her family financially not only by working in the poppy field but also by selling her own belongings. Though nothing happens as per her desire, she finds happiness through her daughter Kabutri. 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 moves along with the them to Ratnagiri, where she grows into a changing young girl.

As there was no one either to support or share her feelings she seeks comfort in the words of Sawant a servant who serves the King's family in Ratnagiri and falls in love with him. But later, she comes to know that the first prince is carrying the child of Sawant. She gave him up for the sake of prince, understanding her position and hides her love for him. All these three major characters readily accept the life as it is, whether it is desirable or undesirable. Ghosh develops women who are strong, who can express themselves, do things, travel and come to their own decision and live independently like Uma and Dolly in *The Glass Palace*, Nilima and Piya in *The Hungry Tide* and Deeti and Paulette in *Sea of Poppies*. They are out of the purposive control of men.

They pursue ideals, which they as individuals' value. Malathi and Prema have aptly commented that "They are 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 Rajkuinar 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 familial 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 her own interest she visits Sunderbans 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 Piya 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 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. Deeti's husband is incapable of performing his conjugal duties, so with the help of her husband and her mother-in-law, her brother-in-law rapes her unconscious body by seducing her with opium. Only later the desperate Deeti discovers through her

mother-in-law, that the real father of her daughter Kabutri is her brother-in-law. And her mother-in-law calls her Draupathi for begetting the child of her husband's brother. She keeps quiet, 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. (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" (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. They come across all the problems caused by the male gender and tower successfully to raise their voice against all the odds in the society. At last Dolly in *The Glass Palace*, nurses Dinu perceiving her role as a mother more than as a wife; Piya, in *The Hungry Tide*,

chooses to continue her project in Lusiburi and Deeti, in *Sea of Poppies*, resume her second spell of life with Kalua, 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. In *The Glass Palace* the character Uma Dey, the Madame Collector, is an attractive and self—possessed character. 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 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. 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 his student falls in love with him and 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. She over comes major problems and in spite of the struggle even for the basic amenities, she overcomes all the odds with a strong will power. But the contradiction of ideas arises 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 from which she does not want to deviate either willingly or unwillingly and she also succeeds in it. Nilima'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 have joined the ruler; you have begun to think like them. That is what comes of doing the sort of 'social work' you have been doing all these years. You have lost sight of important thing. (120)

This particular statement of Nirmal disturbs Nilima quite often but she dismisses 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 her husband addressed to Kanai, nephew of Nilima. She says, "I always did my best to do my duty by Nirmal it is 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 is in it but that is how it must be" (I 20). 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. It is this interest and involvement that makes Nilima to forget the absence of Nirmal.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti's marriage with Hukam Singh is the first blow in her life. The second shocking news is that her husband Hukam Singh who is an opium addict becomes unfit to be a father. Hukam Singh is from the upper caste family and he served in the army. Since he was wounded during his fight, he was expelled from the service; as a result, he could not satisfy 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 into her mouth and allows his brother to rape his wife's unconscious body. 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 seduces her mother-in-law to know the truth, when her mother-in-law reveals the fact 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. 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.

Sailaja and Manoja have aptly commented 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 flavor. These characters are more polished and matured enough to overcome the patriarchal problem at home. 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 vital 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. She manages herself to free by the fact of her economic independence, which was a rare phenomenon during the Victorian era. She also displays the role of economic rights of women. Shobana Ramasamy comments,

She becomes a woman of substance, travelling abroad, quite equal of many respectable and cultured Western women in 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. (96)

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.

The aspiration for the psychic unity with the place and the community of Kusum becomes her hub of freedom. The assertiveness and the selfless nature of Kusum makes her to stretch her helping hand to refugees and tribal. She takes all the possible efforts to safeguard the people of her kind. At one critical point she approaches Nilima to get the medical assistance through her trust, but Nilima being aware of the consequence refuses to help Kusum, since the act of assisting the refugees would be against the wish of the government.

Both Nilima and Nirmal settle in Lusbari an estate established by Sir Daniel Hamilton, which is under the possession of his nephew, James Hamilton who lives in Scotland. Nilima's father handled some of the affairs of the Hamilton estate. With the help of her father she and her husband Nirmal proceeded to Lusbari where Nirmal is supposed to work as a teacher in Lusbari School. In due course Nilima engages herself in the social service, by setting up a mission hospital with the aid of the government. Though Nilima is childless she adopts her profession and nurtures to the extent that it has become her own breath. Whenever there is repression; she gets consolation by involving herself in the service. The union Nilima had founded, on the other hand, continued to grow, drawing in more and more members and offering an ever-increasing number of services — medical, paralegal, agriculture. At a certain point the movement grew so large that it had to be reorganized, and that was when the Badabon Development Trust was formed. (81)

Nilima with her full dedication developed the Island. As far as Nilima is concerned there is no private life for her, No clothes or personal effects were anywhere to be seen while books and files lay stacked everywhere — under the bed on the floor and even in the awell of the mosquito net. The room was sparsely utilitarian in appearance, with very few furnishings other than file cabinets and bookcases. . . , it would have been easy to mistake it for an extension of the Trust's office. (116)

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 women characters with a strong will power and has identified the individuality with high esteem. Women characters act independently at the time of crisis both in the family and society. 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.

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. 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, culturalist and economist. Ghosh with his imaginary vision constructs a new society, with a new cultural consciousness.

Dolly in *The Glass Palace* is introduced as a ten-year-old girl. When the British Empire defeated the Burma King Thebaw, the King's family was exiled to India. At that time Rajkumar an eleven-year-old boy helped Dolly from the looters of the palace. But after this incident he could not see Dolly for years together and after attaining a good position as a businessman, Rajkumar went in search of Kings family to find Dolly, though Dolly initially hesitates, Uma, a good friend of Dolly advised her to marry Rajkumar, later Rajkumar with the help of Uma, took her away from King's family and she blew a new breath in to her life.

Piya in *The Hungry Tide* as an independent traveller, travels along with the forest guards in the opening of the novel, but when there was misunderstanding among them, the forest guards leave her abruptly and at that time Fokir an illiterate fisherman who was fishing, sees Piya in trouble, and without any second thought or hesitation he jumps and saves Piya from crocodile, Piya expresses her gratitude

and she feels more comfortable with Fokir. Though she could not understand the language of Fokir, her inner voice says that she is at a safer zone. Piya never hesitates to stay along with the Fokir in the boat throughout the night and it becomes a pleasing and memorable experience for her. Deeti in *Sea of Poppies* unable to tolerate the behavior of her brother-in-law decides to immolate herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. She mentally prepares herself and sends her only daughter Kabutri to her brother's house, where she could spend the rest of her life. At that time when Deeti is about to enter into the funeral pyre, Kalua, a low caste bullock carter, saves her by racing to the mound, Kalua placed the platform against the fire, scrambled to the top, and snatched Deeti from the flames. With her inert body slung over his shoulder, he jumped back to the ground and ran towards the river, dragging the now-smouldering bamboo rectangle behind him, on its rope. (177)

Amitav Ghosh not only elaborates the problems caused by man to women, he makes his men as redeemer, one who saves women from the spell of the society and gives another chance of life. Through this action of men, Ghosh makes the society a balanced one. Amitav Ghosh elaborately discusses the realities of women's practical struggle with the patriarchal society. The novelist's post humanist values are also apparent in his feminist treatment of his main women characters Uma in *The Glass Palace*, Kusum and Nilima in *The Hungry Tide* and Deeti, Paulette, and Munia in *The Sea of Poppies* who are the victims of patriarchal feudal society.

The character Uma in *The Glass Palace* is another major character who suffers in the hands of her husband Benni Prasad, who is carried away with the British life style. The contradiction is that Uma wants to lead a common life, whereas Benni Prasad being educated and trained by the British, wants to follow the life style of British so Uma gets depressed in her married life and decides to stay along with her parents. Nilima in *The Hungry Tide* is another reflection of patriarchal society.

Though she marries Nirmal neglecting her family members, she is not satisfied in her married life. When Kusum comes across in Nirmal's life, Nirmal could not resist his feelings and woos Kusum. When Kusum comes to Lusibari to seek medical help from Nilima for the settlers, Nilima refuses to help Kusum on practical ground, but Nirmal compels her to make necessary arrangements and he protests with Nilima to help Kusum. All the women characters in this novel have a challenging task to overcome the patriarchal society. Kusum's mother is another victim, after the death of her husband, an agent assures her a job, whom she trusts, but she was deceived by him and sold to a brothel, where she died in an accident, when she tried to escape from them.

In *Sea of Poppies* the life of almost all the women characters are ruined by man in one-way or other. Deeti had several shocking news waiting in the form of her husband; the first blow being her husband an opium addict, the second becoming a prey to her brother-in-law with the knowledge of her husband. In spite of all her suffering she tolerates all the pains caused by her family members and she tried to be happy with her daughter, who is the only dawn in her life.

Paulette is another character, who escapes from a forcefully proposed marriage with an old British judge. Heeru is the most unfortunate character, who lost her child, is purposely left in a temple amidst the vast crowd by her husband, with an intention to get married to another girl. After several months of futile effort to return home, Heeru happened to meet one of her neighbors from the village and she comes to know that her husband declared her dead and he got married again. Knowing this horrible fact, she thinks of fighting for her rights and re-claim her place and position at home, but gradually she realizes that everything was preplanned by her husband. Recollecting how badly she was ill-treated and beaten —up by her husband she understands that she cannot lead a happy and peaceful life. After all these thought process she decides to put an end to the past memories.

Ghosh's women characters never get suppressed by the patriarchal society. The will power sprouts within them and sail along with the fate, with the never give up attitude; fighting against all the odds. Ghosh recognizes the intelligence, resilience and courage of these women. Ghosh's women are not so ambitious, they are happy with what they have and all are self-content in their life. Dolly in *The Glass*

Palace was taken away from her family as a nine-year-old girl to serve in the palace. When the Burma King was sent on an exile by the British Empire, she moves along with the King's family and attains both mental and physical maturity and grows into an attractive young girl. Dolly is the real spirit of endurance and acceptance. She makes her very weakness a source of strength. She realizes the ups and downs of her life and gracefully accepts the inevitability of pain and suffering. Her visit to Buddhist nunnery reveals her strong impulse for renunciation of normal life but at present circumstances she cannot as she is deeply committed to her responsibilities. She proves her indomitable spirit and strength of convictions in entering the monastery and withdrawing from the world. N. Jaishree says "she stands for courage, honor, hope, compassion and sacrifice. Her tenacity of spirit lifts other characters" (90).

The Queen Supayalat in *The Glass Palace* shown as the embodiment of supreme power has once carried out a massive massacre of her own family members including children to eliminate their claim to the throne. The ultimate power dehumanizes her completely. But at the later stage when the power is stripped off, she becomes the common Indian woman; her character too changes along with the socio cultural and economic standard of her family. Her daughters once princes, also become very common and get adjusted to the society.

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