

Struggle and Survival of Women in Amitav Ghosh's Novels: *The Glass***M. Raja Vignesh.,**

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In Indian Writing Feminism has been used as the modest attempt to evaluate the real social set up as far as the women are concerned. The novelists in Indian Writing use oriental approaches of Feminism. There are so many novels in Indian Writing which clearly portrays the conditions of women in Indian societies. Right from the past women are treated as inferior to men. They have been constantly struggling to find a meaningful and respectable position in the society. In the old social set up men are the sole bread winners. But today's world women too are equally competent in matching the family needs financially. Throughout the world, feminism has generated interest amongst the people and India is no exception. Feminism enjoys a premier position through the works of the Indian English Novelists.

KEYWORDS:

Feminism – Status of women – competent – sole bread winner – inferior - family needs - respectable position – Indian Writing in English – Indian English Novelists.

INTRODUCTION:

In Indian writing in English, feminism has been used as a modest attempt to evaluating the real social scenario as far as women are concerned. The Indian English novelists use oriental approaches of feminism. In India, feminism is looked at as a practical

effort. Right from the past, women have faced several problems. They have been constantly struggling to find a meaningful and respectable position for themselves.

Feminism does not particularly talk of equality and rights of a woman rather it is about compassion, respect and understanding from the male counterparts. The prime reason for the dissatisfaction of women in the present society is the superior attitude of men. All these years women have suffered in silence and feminism talks exactly about that. Authors like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya have already used various aspects of the male-dominated society as the prime theme in most of their novels.

This paper justifies how the major women characters of Amitav Ghosh get rid of their dependency, needs, breaking the sexuality and take their place as fellow being freely and equally along with men.

Amitav Ghosh is a great literary icon in Indian Writing in English and a humanist who through his novels raised his voice against all kinds of oppression. Ghosh being a Social Anthropologist brings in the needs of society through the clarity of language and style in his novels.

Amitav Ghosh portrays his women characters sensitively. In fact they are the lead characters in his novels. He presents his female characters neither radical nor stereotypical. *The Glass Palace* is an extraordinary achievement by Amitav Ghosh. An important incident which occurs in the novel sets the tone of the women characters. Rajkumar, an eleven-year old urchin, works as a helper for Ma Cho. Through the creek in wall he views Ma Cho at nights and female anatomy and sex. He also gets his first physical sensation through her but she resists herself from his advances, “Abruptly, she pushed him away, with a yelp of disgust. What am I doing with this boy, the child, this half-wit kalaa? Elbowing him aside, she

clambered up her ladder and vanished into her room” (*The Glass Palace*, 57). The situation is saved by the strength and sanity of the woman. In the novels of Ghosh women stand as preserver of culture and spiritual essence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Sumit K. Mandal, the reviewer is Research Fellow at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. His word on the Glass Palace is as follows, Booming sounds break into the lives of people at a food stall in Mandalay. Such jarring noise was unfamiliar and bewildering to the people of the royal capital in the interior of Burma in the 1880s. Rajkumar, however, a poor eleven-year-old Indian boy, recognized it right away: “‘English cannon,’ he said in his fluent but heavily accented Burmese.”

So begins Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Glass Palace*. The boy’s words presage the momentous downfall of the Burmese sovereign King Thebaw and the start of an epic tale. Not long after the explosions, British soldiers – mostly Indian sepoy – force the surrender of the Burmese army and March up to the Glass Palace at the center of the King’s complex, “a vast hall that is like a great shaft of light, with crystal walls and mirrored ceilings.” This great hall is looted by British forces, then by Mandalay residents who had until this day held the palace grounds in awe. King Thebaw and his family are captured and exiled to India.

It is during the desecration of the Glass Palace that Rajkumar spies Dolly, a royal household maid who becomes his lifelong love. After the fashion of epic legends and contemporary Bollywood films, they are separated but not before he promises to see her again. From his humble beginnings, Rajkumar, through fortitude and street smarts, rides the

crest of the ensuing economic expansion to achieve the heights of success as a timber merchant, simultaneously playing his part in the building of colonial Burma. Years later, his promise to Dolly is fulfilled when he travels to Ratnagiri in India, home of the exiled royal family, to be reunited with his love.

The Japanese Imperial Army's swift takeover of British Malaya and advance on Burma are evocatively rendered through the protagonists' disrupted lives in Rangoon, Calcutta, and the environs of Sungei Petani, Kedah. The war breaks the empire into parts, sundering connections that depend on sea, road, and rail transportation and ending the lives of several key characters. Rajkumar and Dolly themselves only decide to leave Burma when there is no longer transportation to ferry them away. Rajkumar had been reluctant to leave, despite the rise of anti-Indian politics and the nearing war:

After a tortuous and bleak journey through the mountain passes of northern Burma, the much-older Rajkumar and Dolly are reunited with their Indian in-laws. As the vestigial lines of the families are reunited, new nations are born and the British empire begins to disintegrate.

This novel tells the story of the British empire in Asia, but it embraces this expansive world differently than most. It is a rare and imaginative telling in which the colonized – their life experiences, voices, and formative moments – figure prominently, where so many other tellings put the colonial rulers at the center. Through its historically, culturally, and linguistically located details, *The Glass Palace* render the complex response of the colonized to the hurried modernity enforced by the colonizer.

A piece of painstaking historical work itself, *The Glass Palace* personifies in gritty and rich narratives the great transformations of the twentieth century in one corner of Asia. It

reminds us of our connections with others in the world by reviving the long dormant, even invisible, tremors that have shaped us.

BTW, the Outlook India review of *The Hungry Tide* is [here](#). Review by Alok Rai. His review in the magazine The OUTLOOK is as follows:

The Hungry Tide is the work of a novelist at the peak of his powers. It's similar in style and tone to Ghosh's overlooked masterpiece, *The Glass Palace*. But despite the similarities, its smaller scope and more limited range of characters makes it feel somewhat more accessible than the earlier book. Ghosh has managed to turn *The Hungry Tide* into a veritable page-turner -- beautifully controlled and plotted -- while sacrificing none his trademark historical sweep. Through juxtaposition.

The Hungry Tide, in contrast, is geographically quite narrow -- it is limited to the Sunderban islands in the Bay of Bengal, and perhaps by extension Bengal. And it is also a bit conceptually more limited as well. Aside from the various intertwining character plots, it has only two conceptual plots. First, it explores the plight of displaced peoples (a familiar Ghosh theme), here specifically a group of refugees from Bangladesh who found themselves in a confrontation with the Indian state in 1979. The other conceptual question is how humans share a complex and dangerous ecosystem with animals (here, dolphins and tigers). The dolphins are being studied by Piyali Roy, a marine biologist of Bengali descent who discovers some strange behavioral quirks amongst Irawaddy Dolphins in a tide pool while visiting the islands on a grant. And the Bay of Bengal is one of the only habitats where Bengal Tigers continue to live in the wild. They are zealously protected by various international environmental groups (who apply economic pressure on the Indian and Bangladeshi governments to maintain the tiger habitats by military force). But in the name of tiger preservation (or "reservation," we might say), human lives are threatened: the tigers

routinely maul and often kill islanders. Though there are the obvious modern devices that might be used to protect the islanders, the state allows the deaths to continue. In the Sunderbans, Ghosh argues, human lives are valued somewhat lower than those of Tigers. The tide country is perhaps a relatively remote corner of Bengal. But it is also possible to see it as a separate region. The protagonist Kanai, a professional translator, is entrusted the notebooks of his deceased uncle, and comes across the following explicative passage:

There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as the Sundarban, which means, 'the beautiful forest.' There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove- the sundari tree, *Heritiera minor*. But the word's origin is no easier to account for than is its presence prevalence, for in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide bhati. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as bhatir desh the tide country except that bhati is not just the "tide" but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, is to know why the name "tide country" is not just right but necessary.

One of Ghosh's most persistent themes is of the ephemerality of concepts of national and ethnic identity. The multiplicity of names for the Sundarbans is a metaphor for that ephemerality. Another metaphor for ephemerality, albeit one which has a great deal of material heft behind it, is the fact that the land itself is inconstant — subject to sometimes radical alterations as a result of late summer storms. Whole islands are washed away by the cyclones that sweep in with huge tidal surges. Thousands of human beings and animals routinely die in these storms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

The British force the Burmese King Thebaw and his Queen Supayalat to exile. Dolly a nine-year old girl looking after the younger princess in the palace, grows into an attractive young girl and attains mental and physical maturity. Her choice is Sawant, a local servant. But Uma, her friend persuades her to marry Rajkumar. Dolly is the spirit of endurance and acceptance. Her weakness is her strength. She stands for courage, honour, compassion, and hope. There is the feeling that the traditional emphasis on feminine virtues like obedience and patience are not like subservience and impotence. This distinction is the first category presupposes agency and the second destroys it. Women possessing the first category of qualities are to be treated as persons.

Meenakshi Mukerjee 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" (*Images of woman in Indian Literature* 98). Dolly shows that a woman can fulfil herself in a loving and harmonious relationship with others.

Uma Dey, the wife of the Collector, is very attractive and charming, and of the good friend of Dolly. She is instrumental in the marriage of Dolly with Rajkumar. "She began to sob, covering her face with her hands. He had no use for the wifely virtues which she could offer him. Cambridge had taught him to want more; to make sure that nothing was held in abeyance; to bargain for a woman's soul with the coin of kindness and patience" (153). If a man treats his wife as if only he could know what is best for, then it is considered as external constraint and power. She longs for companionship based on understanding and love and for autonomy for self. She finds it difficult to cope with this atmosphere of constrained enchantment. The women in the novel try to get different levels of liberation.

The Hungry Tide is an enchanting novel by Amitav Ghosh. The Sundarbans falls as the backdrop for this novel. Ghosh creates a sustainable ecology where human life is changeable as ebb and flow of water. The major concern of this novel is the human survival as it battles with the extreme forces of nature.

The novel presents women's apt experiences through the characters of Nilima, Piyali Roy and Moyna Mondal. Nilima Mashima is from the village of Lusibari, belongs to an aristocratic family with good educational background. 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. The place for me is Lusibari" (*The Hungry Tide* 387). She reveals her deep love though suffering immense pain at her husband's inappropriate behaviour.

Piyali Roy belongs to the present generation. She is a cetologist researching marine mammals, a rare profession for women. She comes to Sundarbans to study the Orcaella Brevirostris or the Irrawady dolphins. Modernity ensures the new women with a reformed society. Piyali Roy is very much aware of her vulnerability as a scientist. The titanic storm brings death and wipe off her notions about life. It also reveals the concern of Fokir. Fokir, the illiterate, simple untrained fisherman, saves her with his basic instinct.

FINDINGS:

The difference between Piyali Roy and Nilima is their perception on life. For Piya her career is her life. The Irrawady Dolphins are her home. Though Nilima is a social activist, doing some social welfare works in Lusibari, she is traditional. Piya's endless quest for credible meaning finds a solution in the Sundarbans.

Moyna Mondal and Piyali Roy are from two different social spectrums. Moyna's life is full of struggles. As a member of the local tribal community, Moyna faces lots of hardships to lead a dignified life in that society. She is a woman with soaring aspiration and that makes her distinct from her community. She stands in the novel as an epitome of self-respect.

CONCLUSION:

Ghosh's fiction portrays woman as a life-giver, sustainer and continuer of the race. The image of perfect but very human beauty lies in the figures of Dolly and Nilima. These two women have lived a life of fulfilment and achieved dignity through their actions. Ghosh developed his woman characters as strong, that they can express themselves, do things, come to their own decisions and live independently.

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