



Research Paper

Women In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: Their Struggle Against Norms And Desperate Attempt To Transgress Gender Roles

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ABSTRACT: Being an anthropologist beside being a distinguished novelist, Amitav Ghosh, in his novels appears to be deeply concerned with profound human psychology, patterns of behaviour, inner drives of the characters and connects these with broader social issues that result in most dynamic characterizations as we find in his well known fictions. One of the significant aspects of Ghosh's novels is his unique portrayal of the female characters especially in works like *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*. His women characters are revolutionaries who seem to be aware of their milieu and their vulnerable positions and are desperate to establish an identity outside traditional domestic sphere. The burning issues of woman emancipation and woman empowerment against the background of changing global politics run undercurrent in all of Ghosh's fictions. This paper will mainly focus on the position of women as depicted in his *The Hungry Tide* and try to explore their dedicated strive to challenge the gender roles in patriarchal society that spare no opportunity to enchain its women. Piya, Nilima, Kusum Moyna are all rebels in their own ways. The purpose behind my article is to study their individual struggle towards deliverance from male servitude to find a room of their own.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Traditionalism, Empowerment, Self-realization

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I INTRODUCTION

Unlike his earlier novels like *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Shadow Lines* that are set in big cities and developing towns, Amitav Ghosh's fifth novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) has as its background the immense archipelago of islands that lies between the sea and southern plains of Bengal, collectively known as Sundarbans. Along with its eco-critical analysis of the threatened mangrove ecosystem in the face of globalisation and market economy, another striking feature of this novel is its dynamic portrayal of women who are in search for their own identity. To find a firm ground to stand on, they are prepared to exceed the so called gender roles. The theme of woman empowerment also appeared in Ghosh's earlier fictions like *The Shadow Lines*, where Thamma is a revolutionary character with nationalist zeal. Evidently, the struggle of an educated, disciplined rebellious woman in the context of partition of India and consequent communal strife would be different from the struggle of those women inhabiting the impoverished land, always endangered by the sudden attacks of predators as well as natural disaster. Though there are characters who can not be claimed to belong to the tide country but later settled there like Nilima or who are complete outsider like Piya, alien to its culture or even language but later finding her root in the mud of the tide country, the novelist never fails to convey to the readers in a nuanced way how all of them are vulnerable in every step in this male-oriented society. As a matter of fact, it is the very awareness of their vulnerable position that drives them to seek an identity with an urge to defy the well established gender roles. Each woman is looking for a place for themselves, a recognition socially, economically, politically. Even myths and mythologies that Ghosh has chosen for his novel to reflect the cultural ethos of Sundarban abound in radical female characters who are sometimes presented as warrior or sometimes as symbolic rebels breaking out of domestic shell. Significantly, the role and action of the male characters of the novel are to a great extent at the mercy of those of their female counterparts.

Professor Mary Klages in her *Literary Theory: A Guide to The Perplexed* defines gender as "a set of signifiers attached to sexually dimorphic bodies and these signifiers work to divide social practices and relations into binary opposition of male/female and masculine/feminine." (92) Thus if any person wears high heels, there can be no doubt that the person belongs to the "female category" as the high heel is the signifier of feminine traits,

Traditionally, a woman is expected to perform household duties, bring up children as John Stuart Mill also states in his *The Subjection of Woman*. The male will be the bread earner and the task of women rest upon the assurance of careful use of husband's earning for the general comfort of the family. It is these stereotypes that Ghosh's women characters seem to challenge. It may appear quite natural for today's world where the women are giving a tough competition to men in every sphere but taken into considerations the time period of the novel, predicament of the women in the contemporary world and also the hostile land that forms the setting, their strive acquires an added significance. Their routes may be different but the destination remains the same- self-realization and self-fulfilment. The actions and ambitions of the women directly or indirectly challenge the established patriarchal set up. In this paper I would examine each woman character individually to explore their radical beliefs and vowed endeavour to break the stereotype.

II PIYALI ROY: HER JOURNEY THROUGH THE TIDE COUNTRY

Piyali Roy, the American citizen of Indian origin is the one of the major characters of the the novel. She does not belong to the tide country but a visitor to the place. Being a cetologist by profession, she has come to the Sundarbans for a research work. Cetology involves the study of marine mammals and her specialised area is sea water river dolphin that is found in great waterways like Ganges, Mekong, Irrawaddy. It is indeed very astonishing that a young woman who can not speak nor even understand the language of the place can dare to visit the alien land without any companion or even a translator. She is exposed to dangers from several ways: she is aware of the fact as well. Yet her courage and her determination renders her unyielding who would not stop at any condition until she reaches her destination. Her deviation from norms is marked at the very beginning of the novel that starts in a crowded Indian railway station where her "neatly composed androgyny of her appearance seemed out of place, almost exotic" (Ghosh 3) Piya does not at all resemble the so called enchanting heroine of romantic fictions, rather she is identified by "the unaccustomed delineation of her stance." What is more striking is her worldview- at a so early an age , she has embraced solitude. She does not need any companionship or assistance of others, but prefers to be alone. "It's easier to slip through the net if you're on your own." (Ghosh 12) Possibly her tainted childhood when she witnessed the bitter altercation between her parents along with her failure in relationship that ended with disastrous result led her to live a secluded life. Whatever be the case, her defiance of gender roles imposed upon the "second sex" by patriarchal society is evident in her every movement. Though the readers can never fail to trace her vulnerable position whether in her encounter with notorious Mejda or her chance meeting with lecherous city beau Kanai, she is in a sense unpliant.

There are certain implications that Kanai's intention is not so noble- "...but if life had taught him any lesson, it was that opportunity often rose unexpectedly, Piya appeared to be a case in point...If Piya decided to avail herself of her invitation, then there was no reason not to savour whatever pleasure might be an offer." (Ghosh 16) This is the eternal tragedy of women who are considered more a 'flesh' to satisfy the hunger of men than human beings with desire and aspirations. Kanai's description of Piya as "tasty young morsel" preferred by Tiger well testifies to the claim. Nilima sadly says to Kanai, "You're all the same, you men. Who can blame the tigers when predators like you pass for human beings?" (Ghosh 243) The forest guard and Mejda also had taken her granted and were convinced that a young foreign girl like her can never be able to manage without their help, as Piya senses,

The man had evidently assumed she had no choice but to follow his orders, that she would put up with whatever demands he chose to make. From the start she had sensed a threat from the guard and his friend: she knew that to return to the launch in these circumstances would be an acknowledgement of helplessness. (Ghosh 56)

Her instinct told her that she would be safer in the shelter of a complete stranger and rustic fisherman. "But her experience with the guard had bruised her confidence and she felt as though she were recovering from an assault" (Ghosh 64) that is why the assuring gesture of Fokir "had the paradoxical effect of making her aware of her own vulnerability." Fokir, however is an agent of patriarchy, rather a talisman for Piya who is saved from death at the cost of his life. Though Piya did not have "the good fortune to fall in love with the right man in the right place" (Ghosh 313) perhaps it was the presence of Fokir that assured Piya of the existence of true human feelings that cannot be defined by sexual terms. She is not the "tasty young morsel" to be taken advantage of, but a woman who deserves respect, modesty, courtesy. If the nasty forest guard or Mejda represents the oppressive patriarchy who debase women, Fokir affirms Piya that uncorrupted human hearts still exists.

III NILIMA, ANOTHER OUTSIDER AND HER LIFE LONG STRUGGLE

Nilima, like Piya is also an outsider to the tide country. However her milieu is different from that of Piya, but she is an inborn rebel. While she was in college, she fell in love with one of the teachers Nirmal who was full of idealism and communist dream. Of course her family that was one of the richest and reputed families of the city would not accept their relationship. In the India 1950s, obviously it was not easy for any

woman to stand against the whole society, but Nilima was not the one to give up. Going against family, society, norms, she marries Nirmal and the ceremony is solemnized by reading of Blake, Mayakovsky and Jibanananda Das, a unique wedding contemporary society was not accustomed to. But this does not put an end to her struggle, in fact it was only the beginning. Due to some political tension, her husband had to leave Kolkata and settle in one of the islands of the tide country- Lusibari. Nilima accompanies him and also manages a job of school teacher for Nirmal using influence of her family. With western education, urban ways of life, it was not easy for her to adjust to the new ways of life. She gradually understands that she has to make a firm ground for herself to stand upon in order to get rid of the existential crisis. This urge along with the sense of obligation to the unfortunate impoverished population of the tide country heading catastrophe worked together to the foundation of Badabon Trust with strikingly modern infrastructure like hospital, school, guest house. Kanai remarks, "In their family, Nilima was legendary for her persistence- her doggedness and tenacity had built the Badabon Trust into what it was, an organization widely cited as a model for NGO's working in rural India." (Ghosh 19) Her struggle is her own, she does not get any support from her communist husband who lives in his own illusory world of idealism. From the very beginning, patriarchy society tried to choke her voice, but she is inflexible. Again she is childless, thus has failed to fulfil the 'essential duty' of a woman i.e. to give birth and bring up children. She has no child of her own, in stead has the hundred daughters she looks after in women's union.

Readers witness the predicament of women in the tide country through Nilima's eyes. It is horrifying to know that the women of the land are always ready to face their impending widowhood. When their men went fishing "it was the custom for their wives to change into the garments of widowhood." (Ghosh 80) All the symbols of marriage, the vermilion-sindur, the bangles or coloured saris are kept aside until the husbands came back. Their predicament at once reminds the reader of Synge's *Riders to The Sea* where also the women basically had nothing to do but to wait for the news of the demise of their dear ones. In most cases they are not lucky enough to find the corpse for proper burial. For the women in Aran Islands as well as in the tide country, the life is nothing but a ceaseless procession of death. The men meet an instant death whereas the women are left to die slowly day by day throughout the remaining life. It is however surprising that a radical communist like Nirmal refuses to acknowledge that these women with the same plight and life of abuse and exploitation forms a class- a sreni. "But Nirmal would not hear of it. Workers were a class, he said, but to speak of the workers' widows as a class was to introduce a false and unsustainable division." (Ghosh 81) Nilima questions, "But if they were not a class, what were they?" They are, in a sense, nonexistent. Neither society nor government takes their struggle into consideration. But their struggle for existence hopelessly goes on forever through generation after generation. Nilima does her best to improve their condition but she often feels sorry for there remains much "ills she was powerless to remedy." Nilima is not a daydreamer like her husband. She is realist, rational and pragmatic enough to perceive the world in its true light. She is well aware of the weaknesses and limitations that her gender imposes upon her but she also knows the way to overcome such impediments. She came to Lusibari leaving her own land family, friends but she earns a recognition for herself and her achievements contribute to alleviating the predicament of the whole folk of tide country women as well as men. Nilima tells her husband with tear-filled eyes, "All these years, you've sat back and judged me. But now it's there in front of you, in front of your eyes-this hospital. And if you ask me what I will do to protect it, let me tell you, I will fight for it like a mother fights to protect her children." (Ghosh 214) Nilima, unlike her husband has a lot of experiences of the world; these experiences provide her with the knowledge that patriarchy and its representatives are ever ready to clutch the woman in any off guard movement. Her entire life is devoted to serve the cause of women and by extension the entire humanity of the tide country.

IV KUSUM, THE STORM

Unlike Piya and Nilima, Kusum belongs to tide country but so much different from its usual representative. She is a storm, a Jhar as Nirmal describes. Her distinction from others are marked in her very introduction- "She had a clipped front tooth and her hair was cut short, making her something of an oddity among the girls of the island." (Ghosh 90) But the differentiation is not only in appearance, temperamentally to Kusum stands radically apart. Kanai calls up "What I remember is her tej...Even at that age she was very spirited." (Ghosh 131) As a teenage girl who knows nothing of the outside world, she travels to an unknown city to find her mother who fell victim to a woman-trafficking racket. She too, is not free from such dangers for Dilip who sold her mother off to a brothel is also in search of Kusum because, as Horen says, such young girls are highly in demand in prostitution business. Yet Kusum disregards Horen's plea who is even ready to leave his wife and children for sake of Kusum and travels to Bihar alone in search of her mother. Horen later tells Kanai, "I thought I was protecting Kusum, but she was, in her own way, much stronger than me: she did not need my protection or anyone's else" (Ghosh 363)

Kusum is a strong willed woman who can make her own way and she succeeds in her mission though with help of a man whom she later marries. After death of her husband she returns to the tide country with a

group of refugees from Bangladesh or East Pakistan and a new phase of struggle begins. At the background of rebellion of the dispossessed people of Morichjhapi, a love triangle is formed between Kusum, Nirmal and Horen. In Nirmal's word, "I felt myself torn between my wife and the woman who had become the muse I'd never had, between quiet persistence of everyday change and heady excitement of revolution between prose and poetry." (Ghosh 216) Kusum is that revolutionary spirit whose spark enlightens the path of those around her. Kusum chooses an illiterate rustic fisherman like Horen over Nirmal and offers her body and soul to him. She does not allow others to dominate her, rather she dominates them. Her whole life is characterised by rebellion and she dies a martyr in Morichjhapi massacre of 1979 fighting for and with her people. At every step she defies the societal norms and conventions. She would not submit to the pressure of either Government or society that could not provide her with basic needs of a worthy life. Neither patriarchy nor oppressive society can enchain her, she follows her own rule, makes her own decisions and creates her own routes among thousand jeopardy and menace. Of all women characters of *The Hungry Tide*, it is Kusum who mostly embodies the essential spirit of revolution.

V MOYNA AND HER STRIVE AGAINST FATE

Moyna, another significant woman character of the novel belongs to the tide country and she is wife of Fokir, the major male character. But this is not her only identity. She is a distinguished nurse of the hospital under Badabon Trust, one who has got promotion from barefoot nurse to full time trained nurse of the hospital by hard work and proficiency. Kanai, at her very first sight could perceive that, "she was not to be shy of pitting her will against the world." (Ghosh 130) She was determined from her childhood to avail herself of the education. Since there was no school in her own village, she had to walk kilometres away to another village. Nilima tells Kanai, "Moyna was both ambitious and bright...Through her own efforts, with no encouragement from her family, she had managed to give herself an education." (Ghosh 129) Patriarchy in form of her own conservative family had made every possible attempt to thwart her plans as by insisting her to marry an illiterate young man who made her living by catching crabs. But this could not stop her from fulfilling her ambition. Despite the reluctance of her husband Fokir, she made him to move to Lusibarias she joined nursing training there. Through his conversation with Moyna, Kanai could clearly understand that "the dream of becoming a nurse was no ordinary yearning; it was product of desire as richly and completely imagined as a novel or a poem." (Ghosh 135) Moyna shares the stormy attribute of her mother-in-law Kusum though their situations are different. But she can be as unyielding as Kusum firm in her self promise to achieve goal. Kanai's praise of Moyna, "she's ambitious, she's tough, she's going to go a long way" (Ghosh 196) is certainly not a hyperbole. Moyna is intelligent enough to sense Kanai's lecherous intentions and does not bite the bait-

Kanai babu, you're just making fool of me, aren't you? You want me to say yes and then you'll laugh in my face. You'll tell everybody what I said. I may be a village girl, Kanai babu, but I'm not so foolish to answer a question like that. I can see that you play this game with every woman who crosses your path. (Ghosh 258)

In spite of being a girl from impoverished country side, she can discern the true colour of city beaux like Kanai. Considering her background, upbringing, it seems amazing that she inholds prudence to figure out how to survive in today's world and as Kanai says, "and it isn't just that she wants to get by-she wants to do well, she wants to make a success of her life" (Ghosh 219)

VI WOMEN AS REPRESENTED IN MYTHS

Ghosh has made use of certain myths to reflect the cultural ethos of the tide country like Ganga myth, Bonbibir Johuranama. Examining carefully, we can find that even in those myths the women possess the revolutionary spirit and are struggling to deviate gender roles. The Bengali script that Kanai was going through during his train journey reads as follows

In our legends it is said that the Goddess Ganga's descent from heaven would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smearred locks...there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast knotted tangle. Once past the point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands tangled strand. (Ghosh 6)

Taken Shiva as an agent of patriarchy and Ganga as a representative of womenfolk, we can assume that patriarchal society is ever ready to oppress woman and confine them in domestic sphere and this confinement is necessary unless their collective potential would destabilize the steadfast framework of the society. Once the hold loosens, the hitherto repressed capabilities would flow into different directions culminating in profuse achievements. Ganga here becomes the symbol of all shackled women eager to find a way out of the oppression to communicate their potentialities. Ultimately she succeeds in breaking all confinements and creates her own track.

Bonbibibi on the other hand is a warrior. While other women are struggling to make an identity, to transgress gender roles, Bonbibibi seems to have succeeded in the process. Bonbibibi and her twin brother Shah

Jongoli were born to a pious Muslim family in Medina. Archangel Gabriel sent them for a divine mission to make “the country of eighteen tides-athhero bhatir desh” fit for human habitation as the place was occupied by demon king Dokkhin Roy. Bonbibi easily defeated Dokkhin Roy in a battle but she was merciful enough to give Dokkhin Roy half portion of the tide country to rule. Since then “Bonbibi rules over the jungle that the tigers, crocodiles and other animals do her bidding” (Ghosh 102) It appears that Bonbibi is the queen without the king. She reigns over the tide country by “the law of the forest which was that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded.” (Ghosh 105) Her twin brother Shah Jongoli is there to help her but he is of relatively lesser importance as Piya notices at the altar of Gorjontola, beside the female deity, there is a “smaller figure of a man.” Kingdom is Bonbibi’s own, Shah Jongoli can help her in ruling while needed. Bonbibi “the mother of mercy” rules over the tide country assuring her subjects that those who are good at heart will never be alone. She will always protect them. She is the combatant woman who can step outside the domestic sphere and take up arms whenever necessary. If woman can provide the earth with offspring by her fecundity to ensure perpetuation of the species, they can as well assume the role of a warrior to save it from evil forces. The mothers of mercy will always be there to protect their children.

VII CONCLUSION

The above discussion well brings out the women’s predicaments and their different ways to cope up with the situation. Piya, Nilima, Kusum, Moyna, all are victims of patriarchy. But they are not mere helpless victims. Even though the system tries hard to choke their voices, they cannot be fettered. Though their backgrounds, circumstances, milieus may be different, they seem to have a common goal. Defying traditionalism, they struggle hard to achieve equality. Though it cannot be denied that they have their own personal aims to fulfil, even then their individual attempts do suggest their identical dream of female utopia. Piya can leave her comfort zone, her family, friends, country to set off for a secluded journey that may be a part of her quest for self-realization; an urban, educated independent woman like Nilima can embrace the salty mud of tide country and devote her whole life for the welfare of people living there, an impoverished, apparently helpless country girl like Kusum can fight against government for securing the right of her own and her people; a simple village girl like Moyna can fight against her family to realize her dream. All of them are engaged in a personal mission, yet there is something common between them- all of them are in search of a purpose for their existence, looking for a worthy life. Perhaps they all dream of “a place where no one would exploit anyone and people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences....where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening.” (Ghosh 53) Thus women of *The Hungry Tide* stands apart from traditional portrayal. They may be vulnerable but they do not lack the courage to fight back. They are revolutionary women who struggle hard to pave the way for a brighter future for generations to come. This extraordinary delineation of the fighter women is one of Ghosh’s unique achievements.

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