

Amitav Ghosh's Flair Towards Women

G Raja Kumar¹

Abstract: Amitava Ghosh is the most contemporary novelist whose novel's deals with the most contemporary issues such as woman's perennial problems of existential crisis, problems of alienation, problems of restless, rootless and unsettled, problems of marginalization etc. All these issues resonate through his heart winning novels, instilling the pep in women for revolutionary effects.

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, ingeniously and in fact, they are the leading spirits, who experience intense agony in his fiction. They are distinct portrayals of a cultural construction emanating from extreme exploitation. He never presents his women as blatant radical feminists nor as the hackneyed images of Sita and Savithiri.

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, they are the characters of real life and in his novels he portrays the women characters in a realistic manner. But they are the people who suffer a great deal. Through the portrayal of his women characters, he aims to envisage a future where women's empowerment will lead to drastic changes in the larger social structures. This paper deals with the artistic portrayal of women characters in the selected novels of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and *the Glass Palace*

Keywords: *Alienation, Self Identity, Marginalization, Restlessness*

1. INTRODUCTION

Ghosh's women are personification of the spirit of endurance and acceptance. They are the characters who convert their weakness to a source of strength. They stand for their courage, honour, hope, compassion and sacrifice. Their tenacity of spirit lifts the other characters to the greater heights. 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

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. The revelation of the vital truths of the men dominated society and different ways of exploitation of women is thread bare before the readers' eyes.

Body of the Paper: Deeti is a striking character who undergoes suffering in her marital life and under the memsahib. She emerges as a sad, bemused, 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, in spite 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 property. Considering her loneliness her brother-in-law threatens to grab her and all her property. 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 up 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 prevent her daughter's future to be at stake. After her husband's death, Deeti is pressurized 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 fringe 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 to defy the predicaments, a rejuvenating spirit with indomitable attitude.

Through the portrayal of Deeti's character, Ghosh shows the utter realities of the conservative society, shameless attitude of men towards these helpless creatures, socio political shifts bringing about changes in women out of their sufferings.

The Glass Palace is epical 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. Ghosh explains how the three generations of women show their uniqueness among the men. The first generation women are Ma Cho, Dolly and Uma Dey. These women characters in the beginning are dependent upon men. But later they realized the type of life they are leading. Then these three characters began to depend upon their own strength. At last they prove that they are not inferior to men. These women show progress in both the family and the society. Through their achievement, subsequent two generations are able to rely on their own strength. The women in the novel seek their liberation in several ways.

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 quick action.

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 when situation demands rather than falling victims.

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). When her elder son Neel dies 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 requi-

site 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 sari in the newly introduced way. This earns her the appreciation of Queen Supalayat. 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 Supalayat 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 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 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.

Amitav Ghosh's works 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.

REFERENCES

- [1] Iyengar, K.R. Srinivas. *"Indian Writing in English"*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1994. Print.

- [2] Bhat, Yashoda & Yamuna Raja Rao. "*The Image of Women in Indian Literature*". New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1993. Print
- [3] Ghosh, Amitav. "*Sea of Poppie*". New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2008. Print.
- [4] Ghosh Amitav. "*The Glass Palace*". India: Harper Collins, 2000. Print.

* * *

¹*Asst. Prof. of English, Gudlavalleru Engg. College (Affiliated to JNTUK), Gudlavalleru , Krishna (Dt), AP 521356 (rajagundiga@gmail.com)*