

Representation of Women Characters in Amitav Ghosh's Select Novels

Satya Narayan

Research Scholar

Department of English & MEL

University of Lucknow, U.P.

Abstract: Amitav Ghosh is a prominent novelist of contemporary Indian English fiction. Indian English fiction writers depicted women and their experiences in patriarchal societies with a deep sympathetic understanding. Ghosh's women representation portrays sensitively and in fact they are the leading spirits in his fiction. He portrays cultural construction. Amitav Ghosh never presents his women characters as overt radical feminist nor as the stereotype images of Sita and Savitri. His women representation is real life and in a realistic manner. Amitav Ghosh through his women representation in novels has attempted to explore the emotional world of women that help the readers to understand the feminine sensibility as well as psychology. Through *The Shadow Lines* women characters are represented as courageous as men since they fight the challenges of widowhood, poverty injustice, in this novel Tha'mma's character was as a great revolutionary, and strong nationalist feeling. The concept of inequality used in Amitav Ghosh's novels, men are superior and women are inferior. The terrain of gender inequality in education has seen much change in recent decades. Amitav Ghosh reflected the conditions of women in his novels. Ghosh traces the evolution of the feminine world from the stereotypes to the feminists. His women characters are portrayed as a life giver and are the leading spirits of his fiction. He portrays women and their experience with sympathetic understanding. This paper studies the representation of women in selected novels of Amitav Ghosh like *The Shadow Lines*, and *The Glass Palace*. In these two novels Ghosh envisages a future where women empowerment will lead to the emancipator changes in the larger social issues. The novels depicts the life of three generation across the cultures and borders. Women are not born with just an umbilical cord tied to her mother. Amitav Ghosh's Women characters began their life as puppets whose string called culture and tradition are controlled by the patriarchs, and they slowly that they have life and come to being.

In this present paper, I would discuss philosophical elements, women's struggle against patriarchal society, gender discourse and status of women in the society.

Keywords: Representation, Patriarchal, Empowerment, Sympathetic, Terrain.

In his novels, Amitav Ghosh wants to portray women characters as leading spirits. Women neither fight against men with their feminine sensibility nor live as subjugated women in the male dominated society. But they try to assert their rights as human beings in the society with the help of education, employment and their revolutionary attitudes towards life. Amitav Ghosh through his women characters has attempted to explore the emotion of women that helps the readers to understand the feminine sensibility as well as psychology. Ghosh's women characters are unique as they do not come under the term 'stereotypes'. They fight for their various causes and eventually have become revolutionaries. Amitav Ghosh's women characters in his novels, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* are portrayed as revolutionaries. Amitav Ghosh portrays his women sensitively; in fact they are the leading spirits in his maximum fiction.

The Shadow Lines is a story of a middle class Indian family of Kolkata. The boy/narrator/protagonist character presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, giving each a well defined character. Narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma represents the idea of the idealism and the enthusiasm

with which the people worked towards nation building just after independence. Amitav Ghosh chiefly through his characters wants deliver to the most powerful message to readers that the futility of creating nation/states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided.

In *The Shadow Lines* Tha'mma was an important character. She was the narrator's grandmother. When Tha'mma was studying at College in Dhaka, she wanted to work for the terrorists – to run errands for them, to cook their food, to wash their clothes and to render some help-because the terrorists were working for freedom, but here she wants to help to terrorist to the perspective of martyrdom. Tha'mma was introduced to the terrorist movement among the nationalists in Bengal.

She tells her grandson the story that how one of her classmates was arrested during a police raid at their college. Tha'mma's classmate seemed an unlikely terrorist, shy and beard, but while being arrested he does not show his fear. Tha'mma adds that she had dreamt of him:

“If only she had known, if only she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him, she would have gone to Khulna with him too, and stood at his side, with a pistol in her hands, waiting for that English magistrate....” (TSL P. 43)

When the astonished narrator asks her/Tha'mma whether she would have killed the English magistrate, she replies-

“I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, Yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom. I would have done anything to be free” (TSL P. 43).

Though she was not a revolutionary in the literary sense, she nurtured a desire to help those who were fighting for Indian Independence.

Tha'mma was the guardian of her family and it is due to her watchfulness that the family enjoys a good life. She wants provide certain moral values to her family. She never accepted with her family not to make compromises with self-respect. She was a reactionary and conservative. Tha'mma thinks that anybody who does not live according to the old accepted principles of life is degraded. Tha'mma was the main motivating character in the novel. When her relative shows her the post-card, she has received from her uncle, Jethamosai, she becomes so emotional that tears starts rolling down her cheeks. She decides to contact her uncle, forgetting her differences with that family.

When Tha'mma enters Dhaka, she comes to know her birth place has become a part of another nation, Pakistan. The big political event – the Partition of 1947- makes Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan and divided her from her native city.

Dhaka was Tha'mma's place of birth, but her nationality was Indian. When Tha'mma was young girl, she had thought of fighting for freedom in East Bengal.

The national feelings still continue to inspire Tha'mma. She still identifies herself with the country in which she belongs.

During the time of Indo-Pakistan war Tha'mma was very patriotic. She gives away her chain with ruby pendent, she wears that chain as a memento of her late hubby, to the war fund because she has been inspired by patriotism. She tells to her grandson,

“I gave it away... I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us” (TSL P. 237).

Tha'mma's going to Dhaka was her sole plan and so she is responsible for the loss of her own blood relations. Despite the huge loss, she cannot cope up with the reality and so donates her gold chain to the war fund and she was very national supportive woman so donate her costly chain, Tha'mma is also ready to donate her blood in the war fund.

Through the character of Tha'mma, the novel delivers the most powerful message that the futility of creating nation, states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided. In spite of all that, she remains a fine revolutionary in the novel.

Though she is an old woman without strength, she fights for her country and she was bold woman character. She had blind love for her country makes her a revolutionary in the novel.

“Tha'mma is another pillar of this novel ... Ghosh depicts all the peculiarities of a suffering, braving middle class Indian. For all her extremes, she is a real life heroine”. (Tiwari p. 33).

After Tha'mma Ila was another important character in the novel. As a woman of modern civilization, Ila wants to be free of commitments, of relationships, of duties, free of traditions and of everything. She was stubborn to birth and lives in her own world. She is very positive, firm and determined to preserve her marital relations and she was open minded girl.

Ila was a typical drawing of a modern, beautiful, attractive and sensitive girl of modern era. She wears the western dresses and looks like a foreigner to her nature and character. She lives life in full measure, without caring about the Indian traditions and she not like the Indian culture. It makes her to delink from her people both in thought and culture because she has lived many countries in her early life. She finds that life in Kolkata is dull and boring because here was Indian culture. In order to relieve herself of that boredom she takes Robi and the narrator to a night club, in this night club she wants to dance. If she is in a mood to dance, she does not feel any compunction in dancing with a stranger, she starts her dance with a boy. She does not even care how her uncle Robi will feel and what they will think. When her uncle does not permit her to dance with a stranger, she cries out to see this,

“Do you see why I have chosen to live in London? ... it's only because I want to be free ... free of your bloody culture” (TSL p. 98).

Like Ila and Tha'mma, May is another revolutionary character in the novel. She is bold and practical with her statements. She was actually always conscious of her duties and faults. She was outright in expressing her emotions. As a British woman, her interpretation of Indian people, places and events of India is different. She does not understand about the statue of Queen Victoria belongs to Indian history and its people. But when she is confronted by a beggar, she gives money to her, so she was very kindly character. She also has the thought;

“it was an act of helplessness. She wasn't used to being helpless” (TSL 166).

This poverty and illness in India shocks May. Her idealism will not permit such injustice to exist, but she understands that she can do little for the poor, she was very supportive and a lot kind about the poor and orphan people, so she always wants support of such types of people.

May had a heart which was full of love for all living beings. She cannot see anybody writhing in pain, for example, while going on a drive with Tridib, she sees that a dog is writhing in pain then she can't control her and asks to Tridib to stop the car and asks him to relieve the dog of its pain. When Tridib says that they will not be able to do anything, then she feel shame and she scolds him.

“Can't you help a bit? She said. All you're good for is words. Can't you ever do anything?” (TSL 173).

She takes out her pen-knife and stabbed the dog because she can't bear dog's pain so the dog gets free from its pain. May also becomes a part of an Orchestra about which the narrator read in the Guardian. May admits that she is working with the Orchestra because she has to make a living somehow.

May Price went along with Tridib to bring Jethamoshai from Dhaka when there had been a communal riots going on then Tridib not allow her to go there, but May went there. While they were returning by a car,

Jethamoshai was brought in an auto rickshaw but when the rickshaw was attacked by frenzied rioters, May cries in horror that they are acting selfishly and saving themselves while endangering Jethamoshai and she want save him then Tridib gets down from the car to save Jethamoshai and Tridib is cut ear to ear by Muslim rioters. The riotous mob kills Tridib when he follows May to save the old man. His end is brutal and all blame's reason accepted by May. In an act to save others, Tridib dies.

May is on a penance ever since Tridib's death, she was unbearable to the death of Tridib. For a long time she held herself responsible for the death of Tridib, her heartily lover. She asks the narrator,

“Do you think I killed him?” (TSL p. 251).

She sleeps on floor to the memory of Tridib. She fasts because her hunger has finished, she works for earthquake relief. She collected money from streets with all her banners and posters for social welfare. She suffers his death like hell as like the nothing has left in this world for me. At the conclusion of the novel she realizes Tridib's sacrifice. She frees herself from the burden and guilty.

“He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it,
I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery” (TSL 251-252).

May was a virtuous, innocent, wise and pure woman. She was friend of all and has malice for none in her whole life. It makes her a revolutionary character in the novel. She helps others wherever she gets chance and has a positive attitude towards her life and never missed any chance to help of anyone.

Thus Amitav Ghosh presents his women characters as revolutionaries, and nationalist. They have become revolutionaries in their respective spheres and fields. Women having self-determination become synonymous with self-control and purity.

In the novels, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* women are characterized as active, rebellious and responsible human beings. They strive hard to cross all the obstacles in their personal life as well as in the society and try to come up in their life to the support of country in any way. They can survive the world by the tool of education, employment and their rebellious attitude towards life, and social activities. They not only assert their places in the society but they try to help others by their revolutionary attitude and achievement. Thus Amitav Ghosh creates his women characters as revolutionaries in the novels *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*.

Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Glass Palace* is the most excellent in which he blends history with fiction. In this novel Ghosh explains how the three generations of women show their uniqueness among men. Ma Cho, Dolly and Uma were first generation women characters. At the beginning these characters were dependent on men but later self dependent and at the last they improved in herself and proved superior than men. These women show progress of her family and society.

This novel depicts about the epic story of three generations Rajkumar Raha, Uma Dey and Saya John. These three significant families and their kin relatives move there and here to form their real identities in the massive world. The novelist has represented the character of Raj kumar who struggles for survival in the hostile world both some other women characters. It is also notable that the novel begins with Rajkumar, an orphan boy of eleven year old. Rajkumar gets a job of cleaning utensils at the food-stall ran by Ma Cho, half Chinese and half Indian business woman. Ma Cho tells him that it is

“All right. Get to work but remember you're not getting much more
than three meals and a place to sleep” (TGP p.6).

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

An important incident that occurs earlier in the novel sets the tone of the women characters. Raj Kumar, an eleven-year-old-orphan, the protagonist works as a helper for Ma Cho. Rajkumar 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’. (*The Glass Palace*, p. 57)

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

The role of Ma Cho reveals the struggle of a single woman through men. Ma Cho as woman being shows that her struggle is superior than men. She had no her family except her small food-stall so she leads her life alone. Ma Cho stand as a preserver of cultural and spiritual essence. Her character gives the strength of leading and way of life. As women being she was superior than men. Her life was self dependently

This novel portrays women as a life giver both Dolly and Uma Dey. Dolly is protagonist character of novel, her entire generation is mentioned in the novel. Dolly gives birth of Dinu and Neel. Dolly a nine- year old girl, she is looking after the younger princess transported along with them. Gradually from a child character she grows into an attractive young girl and sensitive. Her mind and body expand. Dolly was hurt, emotionally confused and by a psychological transference identifies herself with the first princess and says she is waiting for the baby’s arrival.

Another character *Uma*, wife of District Collector Dey, restless and intelligent, strikes up a close, unlikely friendship with Dolly. But *Uma* coaxes Dolly to marry with Rajkumar. In the end Dolly agrees to do so as Rajkumar 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 and help to economically.

Dolly nurses Dinu, a sensitive photographer, when he needs to help during his illness, perceiving her role as a mother more important than that of a wife. But the suffering of Dinu changed her attitude and she feels:

‘I couldn’t go back to the life I’d led before’ (*The Glass Palace*, p. 239).

Dolly was a representative woman character personification of the spirit of endurance and acceptance. Her weakness was her source of strength. She stands for courage, honour, hope, values, compassion, believe and sacrifice. Her tenacity of spirit lifts the other women characters. There is the feeling that the traditional emphasis on feminine virtues such as obedience, humility and patience only encourage women characters to give in to their oppression.

Dolly shows that a woman can fulfill herself in a loving and harmonious relationship with men and women. Uma Dey, the Madame collector, is attractive, charming, fashionable, lively and self-possessed. Uma Dey becomes an elegant hostess, a mere adjunct to the collector. She is a “role-filler” in the novel.

Amitav Ghosh has been admired and hugely respected Indian writer for his creative achievement and sublime attitude towards the development of women of Indian societies. He has provided such a kind of liberty to women characters to move the world of recognition and self identity. In the novel *The Glass Palace* the character of Uma struggles for survival in the hostile world. She married to Beni Prasad Dey, a Bengali intellectual man from Kolkata. Beni Prasad Dey joins his duty as a collector of Ratnagiri in 1905 and he never given freedom to his wife to do achievement regarding to women. Uma, who looks like an Indian in appearance, is simple and devoted for women and poor people. She plays a major role to unite Dolly and Rajkumar and completed marriage them. We also come to know that her life does not go on smoothly, her life was didactic and supportive of society. Uma suffers a lot of difficulties in her family life. There was a great difference between Uma and her husband, Beni Prasad Dey though they belong to the same nation, India. The collector, her husband was a foreign educated Bengali eminent scholar, who wants everything in unconventional way which was exactly opposite to Uma. The couple had lacks of mutual understanding in family life. Even if they resided under one roof for several years, they fail to understand each other couple life. She represents Indian traditional woman who is simple, virtuous and devotional girl, who was always ready as a revolutionary character and her husband desires to have only mental and intellectual connection with her, and he had not emotional and genuine love relationship between them. Uma finds herself to be lonely and detached in all the communal meetings of the collector. Even before death of Uma’s husband, Uma leaves him alone. The collector cannot tolerate her departure and finally commits suicide by drowning into the sea water, because he was narrow minded man, who like only his personal benefits. The situation enforces her to wear white sari as a way of Indian widow woman’s life. It was a social custom and way of life to follow such obligation in India. It clearly indicates that Uma was a

sufferer. Uma becomes the victim of the oppressive traditional way and exploited by the Indian patriarchal system. She married to her husband, a collector in her early age. She finds neither joy nor her husband convenient after her marriage, she oppressed by her husband. They had differences on the basis of culture's adaptation. Her husband is very much fascinated by the colonial culture and Uma represents the Indian culture and life.

It is through the character of Uma, Amitav Ghosh observes the sacrifices of the Indian freedom fighters and she was a good social activist with the revolutionary and patriotism. She represents every inspired patriot who gave their precious contribution in achieving independence for India and she was ideal for freedom fighters of India. She granted freedom as a result Uma visits several countries for awareness of women. It is true that Uma is free to lead her life in her own style in European countries. She dedicates her whole life after became widow to do service of nation. Shubha Tiwari says about her:

“With the Collectors death Uma's life takes an upward swing. She Becomes a globetrotter, a freedom fighter and a sort of celebrity in her own right. Expect for a passing remark that she mourned her husband's death for fifty years, there is hardly any real feel of her sorrow.”
(Amitav Ghosh: *A Critical Study*. P. 99)

Uma is an awakened spirit and obsessed by the ideas of freedom, nationalist, revolution to her country. Her observation was true that the white colonizers were not developers but exploiters and oppressors. The aim of Amitav Ghosh is very clear he wants to appreciate the marginalized and subaltern figures those who sacrificed the lives in Indian independent movement. In the novel Ghosh has explicated the marginality through his character Uma.

Anshuman A. Mondal writes about this book:

‘In this novel, Ghosh continues to engage directly with colonialism and its aftermath. It attempts to represent the human dimension of living through the violent upheavals brought about by the rise and fall of the British Empire, whilst tracing some of Burma's own current political problems back to the period of dislocation and defeat’.
(Mondal. P. 16)

Amitav Ghosh acknowledges that the reformation of the society from the evils like caste system, discrimination based on gender, ill-treatment of women, child marriages, poverty, exploitations, demonic tradition etc. is must. Through his novels Ghosh's humanistic approach gives voice to the forgotten and humble women characters. He wants to free the entire world from commotion of caste, race, gender, religion, untouchability, and geographical boundaries which are hurdles in the way of human development. It is also shown that how the sacrifices of the marginal characters and women characters are remained unknown in the pages of history.

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