

## The Role of Women Characters in Amitav Ghosh's Select Novels

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### 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 is portrayed 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 feminists nor as the stereotypical images of Sita and Savitri. His woman representation is real life and in a realistic manner. Amitav Ghosh through his woman 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, and injustice, in this novel their characters are of a great revolutionary and strong nationalist feeling. The concept of inequality used in Amitav Ghosh's novels is that men are superior to women. The terrain of gender inequality in education has seen many changes in recent decades. Amitav Ghosh reflected on the condition of women in his novels. Ghosh traces the evolution of the feminine world from the stereotypes to the feminists. His woman characters are portrayed as a life-giver and the leading spirit of his fiction. He portrays women and their experiences 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 woman empowerment will lead to changes in the larger social issues. The novels depict the life of three generations across the country. Women are not born with just an umbilical cord tied to their mother. Amitav Ghosh's woman characters began their life as puppets whose strings of culture and tradition are controlled by the patriarchs.

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

**Keywords:** Feminine sensibility, Colonial culture, Gender inequality, Nationalism, Marginality, Empowerment, Social activism, Revolutionaries.

## Introduction

In his novels, Amitav Ghosh wants to portray woman characters as leading spirits. Women neither fight against men with their feminine sensibility nor live as subjugated women in a male-dominated society. But they try to assert their rights as human beings in society with the help of education, employment, and their revolutionary attitude toward life. Amitav Ghosh through his woman characters has attempted to explore the emotion of women that helps the readers to understand feminine sensibility as well as psychology. Ghosh's woman characters are unique as they do not come under the term 'stereotypes. They fight for their various causes and eventually become revolutionaries. Amitav Ghosh's women characters in his novels, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* are portrayed as revolutionaries as Simone de Beauvoir argues "I am too intelligent, too demanding, and too resourceful for anyone to be able to take charge of me entirely. No one knows me or loves me completely. I have only myself" (Beauvoir 1958, p. 114). Amitav Ghosh portrays his women sensitively; they are the leading spirit in his maximum fiction.

## Revolutionary Enthusiasm of Women in *The Shadow Lines*

*The Shadow Lines* is a story of a middle-class Indian family in Kolkata. The boy/narrator/protagonist character presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, giving each a well-defined character the narrator's grandmother, they represent 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 to deliver the most powerful message to readers about the futility of creating nation/states, the absurdity of drawing lines arbitrarily dividing people when their memories remain undivided.

In *The Shadow Lines* Tha'mma is 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 terrorist in the perspective of martyrdom. Tha'mma was introduced to the terrorist movement among the nationalists in Bengal. She tells her grandson the story of how one of her classmates was arrested during a police raid at their college. Tha'mma's classmate seemed an unlikely terrorist, shy and bearded, 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....”(Ghosh 1988, 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” (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 to provide certain moral values to her family. 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 postcard, she has received from her uncle, Jethamosai, she becomes so emotional that tears start 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 that her birthplace has become a part of another nation, Pakistan. The big political event – the Partition of 1947- made Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan and alienated her from her native city.

Dhaka was Tha'mma's place of birth, but her nationality was Indian. When Tha'mma was a young girl, she had thought of fighting for freedom in East Bengal. The national feelings continue to inspire Tha'mma. She still identifies herself with the country in which she belongs. During the time of the Indo-Pakistan war, Tha'mma was very patriotic. She gives away her chain with the 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 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”. (p.237)

Tha'mma's going to Dhaka was her sole plan and so she is responsible for the loss of her 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 a very national supportive woman to donate her costly chain, Tha'mma is also ready to donate her blood to the war fund.

Through the character of Tha'mma, the novel delivers the most powerful message of the futility of creating a nation or, state, the absurdity of drawing lines that arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided. Despite 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 is a bold woman character. She has a blind love for her country which makes her a revolutionary in the novel. 'Tha'mma is another pillar of this novel ... Ghosh depicts all the peculiarities of suffering and braving middle-class Indians. For all her extremes, she is a real-life heroine. After Tha'mma, Ila was another important character in the novel. As a woman of modern civilization, Ila wants to be free from the commitment of relationships, duties, traditions, and everything. She was stubborn from birth and lived in her world. She is

very positive, firm, and determined to preserve her marital relationship and she is an open-minded girl.

Ila was a typical modern, beautiful, attractive, and sensitive girl of the modern era. She wears Western dresses and looks like a foreigner in nature and character. She lives life in full measure, without caring about the Indian traditions. It delights her from her people both in thought and culture because she has lived in many countries in her early life. She finds that life in Kolkata is dull because of Indian culture. To relieve herself of that boredom she takes Robi and the narrator to a night club, where she wants to dance. When she is in a mood to dance, she does not feel any hesitation in dancing with a stranger, she starts her dance with a boy. She does not even care about her uncle Robi's feelings. 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". (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 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 why 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, she is very kind. She also has the thought; "it was an act of helplessness. She wasn't used to being helpless". (p.166)

This poverty and illness in India shocks May. Her idealism does not permit such injustice to exist, but she understands that she can do little for the poor, she was very supportive and kind to the poor and orphan people, so she always wants to support such types of people. May had a heart that 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 a dog writhing in pain then she cannot control herself and asks Tridib to stop the car and asks him to relieve the dog of its pain. When Tridib says that they would not be able to do anything, she feels ashamed and scolds him. "Can't you help a bit? She said. All you're good for is words. Can't you ever do anything?". (p.173)

She takes out her pen knife and stabs the dog because she cannot bear the dog's pain. May also becomes a part of an Orchestra about which the narrator reads in the *Guardian*. May admits that she is working with the Orchestra because she has to make a living. May Price went along with Tridib to bring Jethamoshai from Dhaka when a communal riot was going on there. Then Tridib did not allow her to go there, but May went there. While they were returning by car, Jethamoshai was brought in an auto rickshaw but when the rickshaw was attacked by frenzied rioters, May cried in horror that they were acting selfishly and saving themselves while endangering Jethamoshai. Then Tridib gets down from the car to save Jethamoshai and Tridib is cut into pieces by Muslim rioters. The riotous mob kills Tridib when he follows May to save the old man. In an act to save others, Tridib dies. May has been on penance ever since Tridib's death, 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?”. (p.251)

She sleeps on the floor in the memory of Tridib. She fasts because her hunger has finished and she works for earthquake relief. She collected money from the streets with all her banners and posters for social welfare. She suffers his death like hell as if nothing was left in this world for her. After the novel, she realizes Tridib’s sacrifice. She frees herself from the burden and guilt. “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”. (p.252)

May was a virtuous, innocent, wise, and pure woman. She was a friend of all and had malice for none in her whole life. It makes her a revolutionary character in the novel. She helps others wherever she gets a chance has a positive attitude towards her life and never misses any chance to help anyone. Thus, Amitav Ghosh presents his woman characters as revolutionaries and nationalists. 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 overcome all the obstacles in their personal life as well as in society and try to come up in their life to the support of the country in any way. According to Margot Duley “The cultural and economic forces of industrialization and Western imperialism interacted with the existing social order in ways that often increased stratification along gender and class lines” (Duley 1986, p. 51) 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 society but they try to help others by their revolutionary attitude and achievement. Thus, Amitav Ghosh creates his woman characters as revolutionaries in the novels *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*.

### **The Glass Palace: A Historic Portrayal of Women ‘s Evolution in Society**

Amitav Ghosh’s novel, *The Glass Palace* is the novel in which he blends history with fiction. In this novel, Ghosh explains how the generations of women show their uniqueness. Ma Cho, Dolly, and Uma were first-generation women characters. In the beginning, these characters were dependent on men but later became self-dependent and at last, they improved and proved superior to men. These women show the progress of their family and society. This novel depicts the epic story of three generations Rajkumar Raha, Uma Dey, and Saya John. These three significant families and their kin relatives move here and there to form their real identities in the massive world. The novelist represents the character of Raj Kumar who struggles for survival in the hostile world. It is also notable that the novel begins with Rajkumar, an orphan boy of eleven years. Rajkumar gets a job cleaning utensils at the food stall run by Ma Cho, half Chinese and half-Indian businesswoman. 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”. (Ghosh 2000, p.6)

*The Glass Palace* is epical in scope covering three countries India, Burma, and Malaysia encompassing a whole century in turbulent times. It is an intricate novel where the narrative spans over three generations as well as *The Shadow Lines*. This novel is a saga of three families and their interconnections. He portrays woman 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 woman characters. Raj Kumar, an eleven-year-old orphan, the protagonist works as a helper for Ma Cho. Rajkumar gets even his first physical sensations through her, but Ma Cho resists herself by saying “Abruptly, she pushed him away, with the 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.” (p. 57) The situation is saved by the strength and sanity of the woman's character. This seems to be a regular pattern, in 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. Ma Cho as a woman shows that her struggle is superior to that of men. She had no family except her small food stall and she leads her life alone. Ma Cho stands as a preserver of cultural and spiritual essence. Her character gives her the strength to lead a satisfied life. Her life was self-dependent This novel portrays a woman as a life-giver. Dolly is the protagonist of the novel, her entire generation is mentioned in the novel. Dolly gives birth to Dinu and Neel. Dolly is a nine-year-old girl 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 is hurt, emotionally confused, and through a psychological transference identifies herself with the first princess and declares that 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 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 helps her economically. Dolly nurses Dinu, a sensitive photographer, when he needs help during his illness, perceiving her role as a mother to be more important than that of a wife. But the suffering of Dinu changed her attitude and she feels regretted as she says ‘I couldn't go back to the life I'd led before’ (p. 239).

Dolly was a representative woman character a personification of the spirit of endurance and acceptance. Her weakness was her source of strength. She stands for courage, honor, hope, values, compassion, belief, and sacrifice. Her tenacity of spirit lifts the other women's characters. There is a feeling that the traditional emphasis on feminine virtues such as obedience, humility, and patience encourages woman 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 a hugely respected Indian writer for his creative achievement and sublime attitude towards the

development of women in Indian societies. He has provided such a kind of liberty to woman characters to get recognized with self-identity. In the novel *The Glass Palace* Uma struggles for survival in a hostile world. She marries Beni Prasad Dey, a Bengali intellectual man from Kolkata. Beni Prasad Dey joined his duty as a collector of Ratnagiri in 1905 and he never gives freedom to his wife to do anything. Uma, who looks like an Indian is simple and devoted to women and poor people. She plays a major role in uniting Dolly and Rajkumar. We also come to know that her life does not go on smoothly. Uma suffers a lot in her family life. There was a great difference between Uma and her husband, Beni Prasad Dey though they belong to the same country. The collector, her husband was a foreign-educated Bengali eminent scholar, who wanted everything unconventionally which was exactly opposite to Uma. The couple lacks mutual understanding in family life. Even if they resided under one roof for several years, they failed to understand each other. She represents an Indian traditional woman who is simple, virtuous, and devotional, always ready as a revolutionary character and her husband desires to have only mental and intellectual connection with her. Uma finds herself to be lonely and detached in all the communal meetings of the collector. Even before the death of Uma's husband, Uma leaves him alone. The collector cannot tolerate her separation and finally commits suicide by drowning in the sea. He was a narrow-minded man, who liked only his benefits. The situation forces her to wear a white sari as a way of Indian widow. It was a social custom and way of life to follow such obligations in India. It indicates that Uma was a sufferer. Uma becomes the victim of the oppressive traditional way and is exploited by the Indian patriarchal system. She got married to her husband, a collector at an early age. She finds neither joy nor her husband. They had differences based on cultural 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 that Amitav Ghosh observes the sacrifice of the Indian freedom fighters and she was a good social activist with revolutionary and patriotic zeal. She represents every inspired patriot who gave their precious contribution to achieving independence for India and she was a role model for the freedom fighters of India. She was granted freedom and as a result, Uma visited several countries to spread among women. Uma is indeed free to lead her life in her style in European countries. She dedicates her whole life after becoming a widow to serve her nation. Shubha Tiwari says about her:

“With the Collector's 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 a passing remark that she mourned her husband's death for fifty years, there is hardly any real feel of her sorrow.”  
(Tiwari 2008, P. 99)

Uma is an awakened spirit and is obsessed with the idea of freedom, nationalism, and revolution in 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 who sacrificed their lives in the Indian independent movement. In the novel, Ghosh has explicated the marginality through his character Uma.

**Conclusion**

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

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