

## The Role of Women in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh – A Feminist Perspective and a Critical Elucidation

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### Abstract:

The critical reception on feminism in the novels of Amitav Ghosh marks a notable divergence of interests between the feminist criticism of Indian subcontinent and the western academy. Feminist criticism from Indian academics mostly concentrated on the novels of Amitav Ghosh such as *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *In an antique Land*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* that dealt with the questions of national identity and feminism in the sub continent. Ghosh repeats some of the national gestures of portraying women as emblematic figures signifying 'culture', 'tradition', 'nation' and authenticity. This is precisely a counter argument for the novel's gender politics. In all his other novels there is relatively little debate about the representation of gender and other issues of sexuality. But as a matter of academic speculation, women have become very significant presences in all his other works. Examining this aspect, James Clifford in the article 'The transit lounge of culture' says that we hear little from women in other novels, but it is only in *The Calcutta Chromosome* the women figures emerge as central organizing principle (Times Literary Supplement 3 May, 1991). *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* presented detailed and individualized women characters than Ila and grandmother of *The Shadowlines*.

The extant criticism on Ghosh's work has exposed significant socio cultural representations. One of the concerns is the representation of gender which has become the subject of much critical debate on feminism. The theme of *Shadowlines* is perceived for the inversion of passive male characters at the expense of active female characters. The seminar paper in all its satirical representation critiques on feminism from all the perspective of Gender. It reveals the complicit formulation of post national future within the framework of benign masculinity. Ghosh associates undesirable nationalism with feminism.

However, for my seminar presentation I have chosen the title called "**The role of women in the novels of Amitav Ghosh- A feminist perspective and a critical elucidation**" which makes an exploration of the status of woman in the novels of Ghosh who have faced problems and challenges of contemporary society. However I tried to interpret the nature of the seminar paper by observing it from the various cultural aspects of contemporary Indian society.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary Indian Literary scenario Amitav Ghosh is the only writer who reflects the truth of Indian reality. He bears numerous responsibilities in the world of literature. He executes with admirable aplomb as an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, teacher and slips into global responsibility for establishing peace as an ambassador. He has excelled the global literary standards set by the post colonial and post modern writers like *Salman Rushdie*, *Vikram Seth*, *Vikram Chandra*, *Sashi Tharoor*, *Arundhati Roy* etc. He has become the colossal central socio literary figure with a substantial body of work drawing the global attention. He has become the only negotiator to mediate the core social and cultural problems of India and other colonized nations. All his major works have enjoyed immense academic attention across the globe and it has invited and produced a great amount of literary criticism. He has created a wide readership and a strong critical endorsement that reflects the attention of serious academicians and scholars. All the post colonial and post modern predicaments are wrestled to demonstrate a high level of self consciousness which continues interrogate the social, philosophical, cultural issues of the world in all its relevance and freshness. His works have initiated the emergence of critique of nationalism and universalism. His intellectual insights, conceptual, theoretical and textual experiments have engaged and interpreted the complex colonial and post colonial situations. They have

established a peculiar paradox of reading and appreciation eloquently responding to the post colonial and post modern issues of evolution and transformation of the world. Making his debut with *The Circle of Reason* in 1986, he has produced the ground breaking novels till today with *River of Smoke* (2011) that interrogate the history of humanity with discursive discourses. His non fictional writings are equally challenging and stimulating offering philosophical and cultural elucidation on different themes such as fundamentalism, history of the novel, Egyptian culture and literature. Despite this vast amount of creative and critical output surprisingly there is a small amount of critical reception. But his works have become the most favoured areas of scholarly exploration for many of the young scholars and academicians. These explorations have become part of unpublished research that focused exclusively on the relevance of Amitav Ghosh to the contemporary times.

*Patriarchy*, which is the ruling social system almost all over the world, ordains that *woman's* place is the home; her role as a *wife* and *mother* is quite often synonymous with her total human existence. The term "*family*" derives from Latin "*Famulus*" which means a household slave and familial signifies the totality of slaves belonging to the one individual who is the male head, the limitation imposed on *woman* for her family function is not however confined to the West, despite the Latin Philological lineage. In India, in China, Greece and Rome, woman has always been relegated to background for her family roles and the task of civilization "has become more and more man's business." One therefore expects the presentation of *women* in literature, created and dominated by man, to be mere role-fulfilments.

In contrast to Europe, the Indian subcontinent has refused to evolve through successive stages of history and continued an archaic existence and this failure illustrated in the repeated political defeats, economic subjugation, marked sterility in the creative efforts in every field of human knowledge has led to a total ossification of the Hindu Psyche. The ancient modes and ideals instead of undergoing revision and transformation in consonance with the changing time have tended to dominate the ethos in decadent forms. Therefore, the ever-obedient, every-suffering sita who ended her life in self-immolation has remained the dominant feminine archetype.

Since the totalitarian expertise in destroying the identity, the very soul of human being is now a recognized phenomenon, it should not shock us to see that *women* steam-rolled and flattened into the family roles tend to be dehumanized in so far as they are invariably stripped of all the individualizing traits of a sentient being. Shouri Daniels describes the "*female incarnate*" thus: "*She has no shape or form. She is everything or nothing. She is fluid. Pour her into any mould and she takes it... Ideals and principles lie outside her nature*" (4). As she is the void, she becomes a being only in so far as she can be regarded as *an object* in relation to man who is of course the subject.

## 2. THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF CRITICAL ELUCIDATION IN GHOSH'S OEUVRE

In Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*, the Word "*antique*" which means "*ancient*" is deliberately used to *portray woman as "antique"* and in "*antiquity*," *woman* as metaphor for "*land*," is used. *Woman* as always passive and submissive like *land*.

Elaine Showalter in her theory of *feminist* criticism has talked about the analysis of *women* according to the three socio-cultural and psychological critical categories of *Feminine*, *Feminist* and *Female-aesthetic*. *Feminine* is the concept of *womanhood*, the traditional role of the woman, in relation to the *patriarchal society* where she is understood always in connection to the male. She has no identity of her own but is venerated as a mother in relation to the father, as a sister in relation to her brother, as a wife in relation to her husband and as a daughter in relation to her father.

According to Elaine Showalter, "In the Feminist phase or the winning of the vote, women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood" (2). *Feminist* is the concept of the theory that they are fighting for their rights, trying to break from the ideological form. *Feminist* was a stance or tone of women that strives for the recognition of their rights and the fight for their identity as individuals in the society.

According to Elaine Showalter, "In the Female phase women reject both imitation and protest-two forms of dependency and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art"(3). *Female* is the concept of the theory that conveys woman is an individual. The movement towards the understanding of woman as a female, as power, as an erotic symbol of desire is the recognition given to her maturity.

In the novel *In an Antique Land*, the presence of woman is not felt in most parts of the novel and if present, woman is always mentioned in relation to the male. The names of all the women characters are not mentioned. One of the women characters whose name is mentioned is Ashu-Ben Yiju's wife. Ben Yiju married Ashu who, according to Goitein, was 'probably beautiful.' Ashu is not mentioned anywhere else in the entire corpus of Ben Yiju's documents, although her children figure in it frequently. Ben Yiju did not once refer to her in his letters or jottings.

Busaina, Khamees's sister's introduction is physical. She is mentioned a tall and sweet looking. She is referred to have left her husband and moved back to Nashawy with her children. Although she had given her husband two fine, healthy children, the two of them had never really got on. They had quarrelled all the time and in the end things had come to such a pass that her husband had announced that he was going to marry again. She and her husband used to quarrel all day long because she had to have her way in everything. He did not accept this, as he might have wanted a submissive woman as his wife, who would never decide anything by herself and would always depend on her husband for everything and accept his decisions.

Khammes's wife did not have children, and having failed to father any children, he had taken a second wife, but with no result. His wife had walked off in a rage, shouting to the world that it was his fault that he was childless, not hers. He does not accept that it is because of his fault that he is childless as hinted by his first wife and goes on to take a second wife, but with no result. Amm Taha says that he uses Hoopoe's blood for a spell for women who cannot bear children. It signifies that it was considered that if a man could not father children it would only be because of his wife's fault.

Ben Yiju's daughter name is not mentioned whereas his son's name Surur is mentioned. This indicates that women were not considered important-even to mention their names. Ben Yiju's daughter is mentioned in his letters as "I have left a daughter, his sister." The wives of Imam are mentioned. They are identified as Imam's first wife and Imam's second wife. Sakkina, Shaikh Musa's wife, is portrayed as a shy woman. She was so shy to answer the author that Ahmed had to speak for her. She was very young and she was a fraction of her husband's age.

For many of the women characters their physical appearance and their clothes speak for them, as is the case with the three women in Sheikh Musa's house-one in the first bloom of her adolescence with a gentle, innocent face and a rosy complexion. She was pale, pretty, and self-possessed young woman, dressed in a long, printed skirt, the other was dark and thickest, and she was wearing black fustian and the author goes on to say that her clothes and her bearing spoke of a college, or at least a high school education. The author knocks at the door of Ustaz Sabry's house and a woman dressed in the severe black robes of an elderly widow. She is described as a thin lady with thin, fine-boned cheeks. The identity of these women is physical. Women are also portrayed as objects of entertainment. The girl dancer mentioned in Nashawy was young, dressed in a simple, printed cotton dress, with a long scarf tied around her waist whose dance was a source of entertainment to the people gathered.

Most of the women characters perform the duties of a servant. The two women in Shaikh Musa's house come into the room carrying a pair of trays loaded with food; Sakkina appears in the doorway and gives Hasan a tray with three glasses of tea on it. Shaikh Musa's wife ushers the guests into the guestroom, showing them the way with a kerosene lamp and goes back to bring some tea and food, later she gives the lamp a final scrub and opens the door to show another room. The women carry food for their men out to the fields. Imam's first wife brings in a tray of tea, and women walk towards the town balancing baskets of vegetables on their heads. These women are nameless and perform functions.

Abu-Ali would always berate his wife or roar abuse at her. In another context, a vendor says that he would rather divorce his wife than sell the fruits for a lesser price in the market. Here women have been portrayed as a commodity. The other women characters mentioned in the novel are Ahmed's mother, Nabeel's mother, Ismail's mother, Ali's mother, Amm Taha's first wife and his second wife. To conclude, Amitav Ghosh is being provocative, he is drawing attention to this antiquated attitude of the patriarchal society towards women.

The natural school of criticism that comes to the fore to analyse the themes of Amitav Ghosh's novels is *Feminist literary criticism*. It has circumscribed the contemporary classifications of *First World Feminism*, *second World Feminism*, *third world Feminism*, *Fourth world Feminism* and also *Dalit Feminism*. The radical expansion in the definitions of Feminism has covered extensive and variable

aspects in the lives of women. From the contemporary understanding, Feminism tries to analyze the social positions and representations of women in colonized countries and western locations. It has also raised number of conceptual, methodological problems involved in the study of representation of gender. Therefore, the conceptual clarity is required in interrogating these novels in the light of Feminism.

It is in the light of these perceptions of Feminism the themes of the novels of Amitav Ghosh like *Dancing in Cambodia at Large in Burma*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Imam and the Indian*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies 2008* should be analyzed. *Dancing in Cambodia at Large in Burma*, *In an Antique Land*, and *The Hungry Tide* thematically stand for South Asian Feminism as they take deal with the existential problems of immigrant women in the West. *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies* represent third World Feminism as they take us into the pre and Post-colonial times of India.

The changing social transmission of India is viewed from the Feminist perspective. *Sea of Poppies 2008* sets the tone for the Fourth world Feminism as it has emphasized the theme of Dalit's betrayal, exploitation, plight and emancipation. The women protagonists of Amitav Ghosh like Dolly, Piya, and Deeti and also Miss Paulette were trying to cement the prominence of women in a male dominated society. The observation of Deeti, in *Sexual/Textual politics* justifies the action executed by these women protagonists in these novels: The relationship of women like as mother, as wife, and as friend and also as sexual toys in the contemporary male dominated society. However, women protagonists in *Sea of Poppies*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Imam and the Indian* are the victims of ideological structures and as well as male dominated society

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