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## **Role of Women in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide***

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### **Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh, the Indian born writer, is now universally acknowledged as a postcolonial and postmodern writer. Apart from presenting the contemporary socio-political events of southeast Asia, another unique feature of Ghosh's novels is the way he presents his women characters. In novels like *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Hungry Tide*, the women characters are indeed exemplary. They seem to be fully conscious of their socio-political condition, and play significant roles not only to make their lives beautiful but also to enlighten and empower the entire community. They are desperate to make a mark, to create a separate identity for themselves, to create an example to be followed by the rest. The purpose of this paper is to show how the women transcend their abilities and challenge the gender roles of the society by their remarkable determination, indomitable spirit and astonishing endurance.

**Keywords:** Others, Subaltern, Patriarchy, Postcolonial, Empowerment

Amitav Ghosh in his novels has portrayed contemporary socio-political events, events which have significant impact on the world's history and geography, and therefore on world's population. His profound insight of human knowledge and human psychology enables him to portray the innermost happening of an individual. Ever since its publication in 2004, *The Hungry Tide* has gained critical attention of the literary critics primarily because of its presentation of the world's largest ecosystem which is threatened by rapid globalization, and for his concern for the poor hapless people, who are, to quote Antonio Gramsci, 'the subalterns' living in those areas, struggling strenuously against the oddities of their surroundings to earn their livelihoods. Apart from these issues, another remarkable feature of Amitav Ghosh's novel is his presentation of women characters, and indeed, the issue of female empowerment runs undercurrent in his novels. In almost all his novels, and in *The Hungry Tide* in particular, the women characters are indeed more active, more striking, more dominating and more stable than their male counterparts. It is the women who struggle, act, organize and build to make their lives better, to eke out meanings of their existences, and create a separate identity for themselves. They are the real champions, as they refuse to surrender to the adverse social and natural conditions. The novel is centered around four women characters- Nilima, Piyali, Kusum, and Moyna. In this paper, my focus will be to show how these four women play crucial roles and create their own identities in a world far away from modern civilization and heavily dominated by the patriarchy, and how they become exemplary by their outstanding commitment to the society.

Antonio Gramsci has coined the word 'subaltern' to 'identify the cultural hegemony that excludes and displaces specific people and social groups from the socio-economic institutions of society, in order to deny their agency and voices in colonial politics.' In his famous book, *Postcolonial Studies: An Introduction*, Promod K. Nayar has argued about postcolonial subalternization. It is a process, as Nayar argued, by which a postcolonial country has created its own subalterns. Soon after the independence, the upper caste people, the economically strong people, the dominant religious groups became the new elites and forced the women, the 'lower' castes, other religions to relegate to the margins, and the new elites dominate them politically and culturally. They are as cruel and as oppressive as the colonial rulers, and they ruthlessly suppress the voices of the 'others'. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* presents the lives of the people living on the Sundarbans. They are indeed poor, and continuously struggling against the adversities. As the soil is salty and unsuitable for agricultural activities, and as no other alternative source of income is unavailable, the people of the Sundarbans heavily rely on the mangrove forest and the surrounding rivers for their livelihood. And ironically, it is the mangrove forest which is both their preserver and destroyer. Apart from tropical cyclones which wreck havoc time to time on coastal areas of Bengal, the Sundarban is also the home of the royal-bengal-tiger and many deadly reptiles. The people of Sundarbans very often become an easy prey when they go to the forest to collect wood and honey. The novel also presents the horrific state of the refugees who had come from the east Bengal and settled on an island called Morichjhapi. Even though they wanted absolutely

nothing than a place of land to live from the government, the government responded harshly and violently killed those innocent settlers. Therefore Pramad K. Nayar has justly pointed out:

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), poorer people seeking lands to live and work in the sundarbans are killed in a massacre by the state (ironically, a regime run by the Marxism-communism inspired party). In post-independence India, any settlers (including refugees from Bangladesh) living on the island Morichjhapi (declared a tiger reserve by the Indian government), are deemed 'squatters'... Ghosh is here suggesting that nations and communities are not necessarily 'imagined' by elites alone: powerless, illiterate, and poor people also dream of them. (Nayar 106)

In such a world where the male members are the 'others', neglected by the state and dominated by the money-lenders, one can easily imagine the condition of the women there. They have no formal education and no access to the outer world. Like the male members of the society, they also work tirelessly. But when mishaps do happen they have no option but to accept the inevitable and blame their fates. Yet Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is not only a remarkable presentation of their struggle but also of how they create their own destiny by hard working and by virtue of their indomitable spirit. The four women characters- Nilima, Moyna, Piyali, and Kusum – struggle against their immediate socio-political background to create a separate space for themselves and therefore create their own identity. In male dominated society, they are the 'others', domesticated, marginalized and vulnerable, and interestingly it is their very knowledge about their condition which inspires them to be self-dependent, to make life meaningful and worth leaving. Though Nilima and Piyali are outsiders in a sense that they are not born and brought up in the tide country and therefore have not suffered as Kusum and Moyna have, yet they are also victims of their own circumstances, and eventually emerge as champions by defeating the adverse socio-political condition. Their paths may be different, but they are heading towards the same direction of self-realization and self-fulfillment.

Nilima Bose, the 67-year-old lady with 'a circular face', the lady who was awarded by 'one of the country's highest honours', is the central character. She was from a reputed and wealthy family, as her grandfather was one of the founding members of the congress party, and her father was a reputed barrister at the Calcutta High Court. She met with Nirmal at her college where the later was a professor of English literature. Nirmal's personality, coupled with his 'fiery lectures' and 'impassioned recitations', has a particular fan base. Nilima immediately fell in love with Nirmal, and she had the honesty and courage to announce her love before everyone. Though her family opposed, in 1949 they were married in presence of Nirmal's close friends. Thus, from the very beginning, Nilima showed the spirit of rebellion, someone who can stand against the oddities to assert her own free will.

Unfortunately, the young couple was soon in a spot of bother as the police detained Nirmal for two days for participating in a conference convened by the Socialist International in Calcutta. This unfortunate incident has a far-reaching impact on Nirmal. He became terribly upset and could not continue his job at the college, and was completely bed-ridden. Nilima was desperate, and on doctor's advice, she decided to take Nirmal out of the city and spend some

time away from the familiar circle. And by the grace of her father's fame, Nilima came to know that Hamilton estate's manager was looking for a teacher to run the Lusibari school. Thus "Nirmal and Nilima Bose first came to Lusibari in search of a safe heaven".

But they soon realized that they were not in a romantic fairy land, where the just married couple can pass their time dreaming idly, rather in a cursed land. Their first experience was horrible. In a way they were shocked to witness the poverty-ridden condition of Lusibari Island... Ghosh postulates, "The destitution of the tide country was such as to remind them of the terrible famine that had devastated Bengal in 1942-except that in Lusibari hunger and catastrophe were a way of life". (Ghosh 79)

The salty land does not yield them enough crops. So, the people of the tide country are forced to depend on other activities like farming, hunting, fishing, collecting honey and woods from the mangrove forest etc. And for all these activities, they are heavily dependent on the mangrove forest and the rivers surrounding the mangrove. And such is their tragic fate that it is the very nature and natural agents which cause their destruction. Ghosh notes:

Nor did the mangroves offer much of immediate value to human beings-yet thousands risked death in order to collect meagre quantities of honey, wax, firewood and sour fruit of kewra tree. No day seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile. (Ghosh 79)

The estate too was in a deplorable state. Although funds were regularly raised but it was not properly utilized. Therefore, they desperately wanted to find an answer to these challenges: "They had not expected a utopia but nor had they expected such destitution. Faced with this situation they saw what it really meant to ask a question such as 'what is to be done?'" (Ghosh 79)

As the young male members have no alternative source of income, they are compelled to enter into the dense forest, and very often lose their lives. Thus, widowhood is a burning problem in tide country. It means a life of dependence and years of abuse and exploitation. As a result of abject poverty, many of them become an easy victim of sex racketing, and find themselves in dingy world of prostitution. Therefore, Nilima was genuinely concerned for these widows and decided to do something for them. Then one day an idea suddenly struck her. As the Lusibari shopkeepers charged higher rates, the women very often went to Canning to buy groceries and other necessary things of daily usage. Nilima noticed that even after paying the ferry fares, the women were able to save a considerable amount of money, which they would not be able to if they bought those things from Lusibari. This small thing is just the spark needed to create a reputed institution. Eventually Nilima was able to unite the women of the Lusibari island and created a Mohila Sangathan. Within a few years, the union continued to grow, members increased, and with that service also expanded. And ultimately it became so large and provided so many services like-medical, paralegal, agriculture, education, -that it received Government recognition, and thus, the Badabon Development Trust was formed. The trust soon acquired some land in the interior of the island to build offices, hospital, workshops, and Guest house.

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Though during Kanai's first visit, the trust was still in its early days, and development seemed miles away, during his next visit Kanai is absolutely surprised by what the trust has done at Lusibari island and has become a model to be followed by others. Now the trust owns a hospital, an educational institution, a launch, and a guest-house. It also provides nursing training to the Lusibari women. Thus, the Badabon trust is continuously working hard to empower the women of the tide country. It is the leadership of Nilima, her doggedness, her sincerity, and her sacrifice which made the Badabon Trust exemplary. As Kanai comments: "...her doggedness and tenacity had built the Badabon Trust into what it was, an organization widely cited as a model for NGOs working in rural India". (Ghosh 19)

She values her trust more than her own life, and does not want to compromise with the future of the trust. This is the very reason for which she refused to help the settlers of Morichjhapi, an act which eventually caused her mental separation with her beloved husband, Nirmal. But Nilima, unlike her husband, was a pragmatic person and well experienced in governmental affairs. She had the intuition that the Government would not let the 'refugees' to settle in the island, and to support them means to jeopardize the future of the trust. Like a protecting mother, she protects her trust aggressively; "...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)

Thus, Nilima is an exemplary character, someone who has created a whole new world out of nothing. She has made an identity for herself, and is now widely known as 'Mashima', a figure for whom the people of the tide country have absolute faith and devotion, a name which symbolizes sincerity and dedication, an icon which signifies hard work and determination, and finally, hope and ultimate success.

Piyali Roy is another leading female character. She is a modern American, an outsider, one who has come to Sundarbans in a mission. She is a cetologist, and wants to study the dolphins that is found in great waterways of Sundarbans. But from the very beginning, her behavior conveys the message that she is a self-sufficient woman, and doesn't necessarily depend on others. Her very appearance reflects her dominating personality. As Kanai observes: "...she hefted her two huge backpacks herself, brushing aside the half-dozen porters who were hovering around her. There was a strength in her limbs that belied her diminutive size and wispy build; she swung the back-packs into the compartment with practiced ease and pushed her way through a crowd of milling passengers" (Ghosh 05). Even though she does not know Bengali language at all, she has the mental courage and physical endurance to conduct a survey on the world's most dangerous places, the Sundarbans.

Piyali's first experience at the tide country is far from being sweet, as she becomes a victim of corruption which is an integral part of our system. Seeing her alone and sensing a potential victim, the forest guard forced her to hire a launch of his own preference. The owner, Mejda is a dominating character, someone of whom others are scared off. Piyali, being an expert in her own field, soon realizes the blunder she has committed and when opportunity



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comes, she has the tenacity to leave the launch and settle on a country boat. Yet She is allowed to do so not before paying a high amount to the owner Mejda. Although her decision of choosing a country boat may seem childish, as a launch with an armed guard provides more security. But being an expert of her own field, she knows perfectly well that a local fisherman and a country boat provide best opportunity to follow the dolphins. A local fisherman has the best knowledge of the flora and fauna of Sundarbans and a small country boat can easily enter into the narrow water-ways of Sundarbans, and can silently follow them without disturbing them.

Piyali Roy is a sensitive soul. Her relationship with Fakir Mondal is certainly the sweetest thing of the entire novel. She seems to understand Fakir much better than Fakir's own wife does. Even though Piyali and Fakir do not understand each other's language, there is a sweet understanding and a mutual respect which bind them together. She is a scientist, a woman of logic and reason, and therefore understands the difference between causal flirting and genuine feeling, between a lascivious city gallant like Kanai and an innocent, uncorrupt people like Fakir. As she does not know the Bengali language, she cannot comprehend the meaning of Fakir's song. Yet the song touches her very much and she can feel the tune in her heart as if their two hearts are tied to the same string. She urges Fakir: "Louder. Sing Louder" (Ghosh 98). Suswagata Chowdhury rightly postulates, "If the nasty forest guard or Mejda represents the oppressive patriarchy who debase women, Fakir affirms Piyali that uncorrupted human hearts still exist".

Piyali Roy is also a sensible and responsible girl, one who does not forget to acknowledge her debts. After the accidental death of Fakir, Piyali leaves Lusibari island, and no one, not even Mashima has not expected to see her again: "...Piyali's valediction was not an unfamiliar one; Nilima had heard the same words often before, on the lips of many, well-meaning foreign visitors. None of them had ever been seen or heard from again, so it was not without reason that Nilima had assumed that the same would be true of Piyali. But now here she was, just as she had said." (Ghosh 396). But She is not an ordinary girl. She knows very well that she has promises to fulfill, and returns back to Lucibari to fulfill her commitments. She has not only raised funds to build a new house for Moyna and Tutul, but also attracted the attention of many conservatives and environmental groups. Now those groups are interested in conducting a project in the Sundarbans under the sponsorship of the Badabon trust which will immensely benefit the trust. Thus, as Suswagata Chowdhury rightly said, "She is not the 'tasty young morsel' to be taken advantage of, but a woman who deserves respect, modesty, courtesy."

Kusum, unlike Nilima and Piyali, is a native of the tide country, someone who possess first-hand experience of this land. In her childhood, she suffered a severe attack of typhoid and though survived narrowly, the fatal disease has left its impact on her poor physic, and is treated as invalids by others. In her childhood she has not only experienced hunger, poverty and exploitation but also has witnessed the most horrifying incident of her life. One day, when her father went to the opposite bank to collect woods, a man-eater pounced on him, cracked his

bones with canines and dragged his body inside the forest. All these things happened right before Kusum's eyes as she was standing on the other bank of the river, shouting, crying, praying all to no avail. This incident has radically changed her mentality. And instead of passive acceptance of her fate and her socio-economical condition, she showed tremendous resistance. She is a struggler, someone who struggles throughout her entire life against poverty, against her own misfortune, against the cruel society and finally against the mighty Government. She knows very well that they have to work hard and work alone as no body, not even the mythic goddess Bon Bibi is capable of saving them from their tragic fate. She says, "I called her too... But she never came... Bon Bibi. The day my father died. I saw it all, it happened in front of me, and I called her again and again." (Ghosh 107)

Women trafficking is a burning problem in poverty-stricken areas where hunger and poverty force the young girls to believe in a people like Dilip. Dilip is an agent, who regularly visits big cities and sells the young girls of the tide country in the brothels. Earlier he had done this with Kusum's mother, and now he has come to the island in pursuit of Kusum. Horen, the fisherman who had fair knowledge of Dilip's intention, had appeared as a savior and he helped Kusum to escape Lusibari. Kusum came to Dhanbad, met her mother there and later on married a nice caring man, Rajen. After a year she gave birth to her only son Fakir and then loses her husband. After the death of Rajen, Kusum had joined the procession of the refugees in pursuit of establishing a settlement in the tide country. Thus, with many others, Kusum lands to Morichjhapi in search of free land to build a settlement.

Kusum is a spirited woman. It is the beauty of her personality, the spark of her spirit that enamors two men -Horen Naskar, the uneducated fisherman and Nirmal Bose, the educated school teacher. But again it is Kusum who decides whom to reciprocate, and she offers her body and soul to Horen, the man who has suffered so much for her. She never allows anyone to dominate her rather she herself dominates others. Her entire life is a prolonged struggle. Yet she neither surrenders to the oppressive society nor to the mighty Government pressure which fails to provide her basic needs, and brutally kills him in a massacre. Thus, she is a martyr representing the hopes and aspirations of thousands of refugees who wanted nothing but a piece of barren land to live, but was ruthlessly killed in the violent massacre of Morichjhapi in 1979. Thus, as Kanai describes her, Kusum represents the spirit of 'Jhar' or storm something which comes suddenly but leaves a permanent presence. And Suswagata Chowdhury rightly postulates, "Of all the characters of *The Hungry Tide*, it is Kusum who mostly embodies the essential spirit of revolution."

Like Kusum, Moyna is also a native of the tide country. She is the wife of Fakir Mondal. But this is only her primary identity, as her another and certainly the most important identity is the that she is a trained nurse of the Badabon Trust's hospital. Moyna was a bright student, and against obstacles presented by the patriarchy, she has received education by virtue of her ambition and determination. As Nilima points out:

Through her own efforts, with no encouragement from her family, she had managed to give herself an education. There was no school in her village, so she had walked

everyday to another village kilometres away. She had done well in her final exams and had wanted to go on to college, in Canning or some other nearby town. (Ghosh 129)

Patriarchy tried in every possible ways to tame her free spirit by giving her early marriage with a flamboyant husband. But that could not chain her as she joins nursing training at Lusibari, and by her devotion and dedication, she has become a full-time trainee nurse from a barefoot nurse. She understands the value of education, and desperately wants her son to be educated. She even publicly chides her husband for spoiling her son's future, "Didn't I tell you to take him straight to school?" She said to Fokir, in a voice taut with fury. 'And instead, you brought him here?'" (Ghosh 264)

Moyna is also an intelligent girl who quickly recognizes that both Piyali and Fokir are of same type. That is why she asks Kanai to observe them in her absence. Moyna also avoids Kanai's illicit proposal by giving her a witty reply, "Kanai-babu, you're just making a fool of me, aren't you?... I may be a village girl, Kanai-babu, but I'm not so foolish as to answer a question like that. I can see that you play this game with every woman who crosses your path". (Ghosh 258/259)

She is ambitious, dedicated, responsible, disciplined, hardworking and dutiful. She is like a lotus, blossoming astonishingly from her own socio-political condition. Someone who 'wants to do well,. . . wants to make a success of her'. Thus, Moyna plays a crucial role for she not only makes her personal life beautiful, but also she is setting an example by her own dedication and determination for others to follow.

Ghosh's use of myths and folklores are also very important, for in those myths also the women symbolize the revolutionary spirit. The myth of The Ganga appears thus, "In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga's descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by trying it into his ash-smearred locks" (Ghosh 06).

Taming of the torrent of the Ganga by the Lord Shiva symbolizes the oppression of the women by the patriarchy. Patriarchy is always on the hunt to restrain women for it fears that the collective force of the women can disturb the apparent status quo of the society, and can make an end of its dominance. If the women were given enough opportunity and required freedom, their repressed capabilities would flow into different spheres of our society. Thus, The Ganga here represents those women who are restrained by the patriarchy and are eagerly waiting to break free and flow in different directions.

Bon-bibi, the savior for whom the people of the tide country has unquestioned faith, is also a woman figure. She symbolizes the mother-figure, someone who is always ready to fight to protect her children. And she has made an identity for herself and the people of Sundarbans believe that she will always protect her innocent child. Though her twin brother Shah Jangoli helps her, it is She who is more destructive and more powerful. Bon-bibi rules over the jungle that the tigers, crocodiles and other animals do her bidding. Thus Bon-bibi represents the protective mother figure, a warrior who is ready to fight with anyone to protect the innocents.

Thus, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, the women characters are truly amazing and play significant roles not only to make a separate identity for themselves but also to



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empower the women of the tide country in general. Each character has made personal sacrifices for the welfare of people living there. In a remote place like the Sundarbans where the conflict between man and nature has made life uncertain and fragile, the resistance showed by the women and their effort for the welfare of the society are truly praise worthy. They are the real champions, the ultimate heroines who inspired millions to shake off their obstacles and march forward to make life meaningful. They are the real fighters who fight hard to make a beautiful world for the future generations.

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