

Women as Revolutionaries in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*

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Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

The article proposes to study Ghosh's revolutionary women characters with special reference to *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh through his women characters has attempted to explore the emotional world of women that helps the readers to understand the feminine sensibility as well as psychology. His women characters are unique as they do not come under the term 'stereotypes'. In *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*, women are presented as courageous as men since they fight the challenges of widowhood, poverty and injustice. In the novel *The Shadow Lines*, Tha'mma is a revolutionary character. She has strong nationalist feelings. During the time of Indo-Pakistan war she becomes very patriotic. She condemns all those who choose to live beyond the border. Ila, a woman of modern civilization, has a different concept of freedom. She is stubborn and lives in her own world. She chooses to live in London, for she wants to be free of the rigidities of Indian tradition and culture. May is another

revolutionary character in the novel *The Shadow Lines*. In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum is a revolutionary woman fighting for the rights of Dalit refugees. She protests against the government until the last moment and sacrifices herself for the underprivileged sections of the society. Nilima, as a revolutionary, raises her voice against the corrupt prawn traders whose business thwarts the livelihood of local fishermen. Like Nilima, Piya also as a revolutionary works for the fisher men by joining hands with Nilima's Badabon trust. Thus in the novels *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh presents women as revolutionaries and makes them stand out as leading spirits.

Key words: Amitav Ghosh, women characters, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide*,

Amitav Ghosh's Fiction

Amitav Ghosh's fiction is characterized by themes that go side by side with post colonialism and it may be labeled as historical novels. His fiction reveals that the novelist's involvement with history is his prime obsession. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. He is a novelist who virtually bends his novels to the needs of history; they largely derive their purpose and shape from it. He shows great depth in dealing with history, myth and contemporary events.

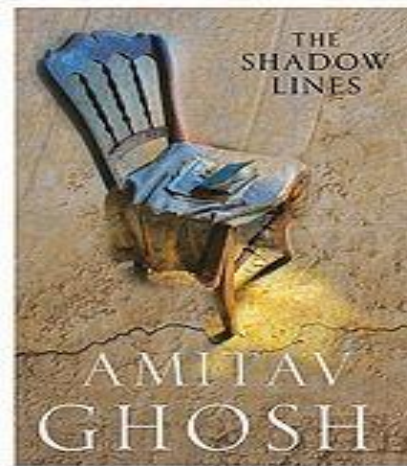
Women Characters in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction

In his novels, Amitav Ghosh portrays women as leading spirits. They 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 rebellious attitude towards life. Amitav Ghosh through his women characters has attempted to explore the emotional of women that helps the readers to understand the feminine sensibility as well as psychology. world His women characters are unique as they do not come under the term 'stereotypes'. They fight for various causes and eventually have become revolutionaries. Amitav Ghosh's women characters in his novels, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide* are portrayed as revolutionaries.

Amitav Ghosh portrays his women sensitively; in fact they are the leading spirits in his fiction. They are distinct portrayals of a cultural construction. Cultural

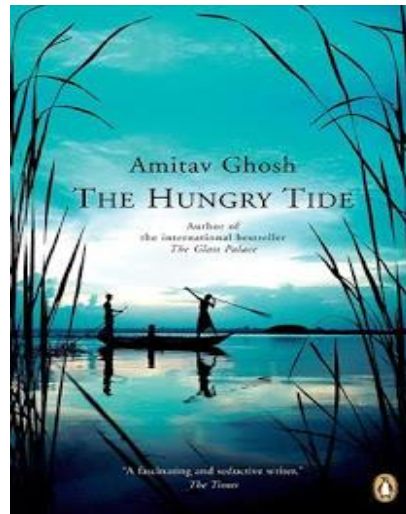
constructs also help to juxtapose feminine positions, and feministic interpretations can emerge even through absence and negation. He presents his women neither as overt radical feminists nor as the stereotypical images of Sita and Savitri.

(Jaishree 264)



The Story of *The Shadow Lines*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a story of a middle class Indian family based in Calcutta. The boy narrator presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, giving each a well defined character. Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother represents the idea of the idealism and the enthusiasm with which the people worked towards nation building just after independence. It is chiefly through her character that Ghosh delivers the most powerful message of the novel - the futility of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided. Ghosh gives adequate space to the British Price family and unlike most authors, he does not stereotype them.



The Story of *The Hungry Tide*

Amitav Ghosh's another novel *The Hungry Tide* tells the story of Indo-American cetologist Piyali Roy, who comes to the tide country of the Sundarbans in Bengal to study river dolphins. She is drawn into a curious love triangle involving the local fisherman Fokir, who helps her to locate dolphins in remote Garjantola pool; and Kanai Dutt, a Delhi dilettante, who is visiting his aunt, Nilima. Years earlier, Nilima's husband, the Marxist teacher Nirmal, had become involved in aiding and assisting a displaced refugee population who had settled on the Sundarbans island of Morichjhapi. Among these refugees was Kusum, mother of an infant Fokir. In another love triangle of sorts, Nirmal had been motivated to help the refugees out of love for Kusum, who was being assisted by Horen, a boatman. *The Hungry Tide* is surely concerned with more personal division between men and women. This novel is also marked with journeys, visits and human movements across time and space. It also captures the problems and concerns regarding borders such as nationality and gender.

Tha'mma in *The Shadow Lines*

In *The Shadow Lines* Tha'mma is a very important character. She is the grandmother of the narrator. "In her fierce moral standards, Spartan outlook of life, intolerance of any nonsense—real and imagined, she is as real as any patriarch or matriarch worth the name" (Dewani 15). While Tha'mma was studying at College in Dhaka, she had 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. Tha'mma had known the terrorist movement among the nationalists in Bengal.

The terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar recruited their cadres from among her fellow students to assassinate the British officials and police officers. She tells her grandson the story of how one of her classmates was arrested during a police raid in their college. He seemed an unlikely terrorist, shy and beard, but while being arrested he does not show his fear. She 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.... (SL 39)

When the astonished narrator asks her whether she would have killed the English magistrate, she replies, "Yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom. I would have done anything to be free" (SL 39). Though she does not become a revolutionary in the literary sense, she nurtured a desire to help those who were fighting for India's Independence.

Tha'mma as the Main Motivating Force in the Novel

Tha'mma is the guardian angel of her family and it is due to her watchfulness that the family enjoys a good life. She wants to give certain moral values to her family. She wants her family not to make compromises with self-respect. She is a conservative and reactionary. She thinks that anybody who does not live according to the old accepted principles of life is degraded. "Tha'mma's character is a tribute to so many unrecognized women in this country who are holding the world of their children and near and dear ones together by their toil and labour" (Tiwari, 34).

Tha'mma is the main motivating force in the novel. When her relative shows her the post-card, she has received from Jethamoshai, her uncle, she becomes so emotional that tears start rolling down her cheeks. She comes to know from the card that Mrinmoyee, one of Jethamoshai's sons is living in Calcutta with his family. She decides to contact him, forgetting her differences with that family. "It does not matter whether we recognize each other or not. We

are the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone and now at last, after all these years, perhaps we will be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred” (SL 129). Her uncle, Jethamoshai is still living in Dhaka, his own ancestral house. She plans to meet him and to bring him to India. She loves Dhaka and cherishes memory of her paternal home all her life. When she goes to Dhaka to fetch her uncle Jethamoshai, she becomes excited to see her birth place. But when she enters Dhaka, she searches her house in Dhaka:

My grandmother, thrown into a sudden panic, began to protest. This couldn't be it, she cried. It can't be our Lane, for where's Kana babu's sweet shop? That shop over there is selling hammers and hardware: where's the sweet shop gone? (SL 206).

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

Dhaka has been Tha'mma's place of birth, but her nationality is Indian. As a young girl, she had thought of fighting for freedom in East Bengal. But those very same people for whom she had been willing to sacrifice her life are enemies now in 1964. Her disillusionment increases when she has to mention 'Dhaka', East Pakistan, as her place of birth on the passport – form and then state Indian as her nationality. As a revolutionary, Tha'mma brings light to the line on the map that do not actually cut one part of the land off from the other or destroy cultural unity between the people. She raises the important question of boundaries between India and Pakistan and is surprised to learn that there are not any trenches or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or even just barren strips of land, like no-man's land.

Pakistan is carved out of India on the basis of two-nation theory which created ill-will between Hindus and Muslims. Both India and Pakistan reacts with identical sense of horror and outrage.

Ghosh demonstrates how national identity is created in an international context that demands that we conform to our nationality. Because India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are newfound nationalities that were previously united, Ghosh's text

dramatically demonstrates how quickly people are separated by the creation of borderlines. (Halloran 47)

Therefore, national feelings still continue to inspire Tha'mma. She still identifies herself with the country she belongs to. When the narrator's father explains to Tha'mma that there is nothing that divides East Pakistan and India, Tha'mma is further puzzled and asks that if there is no difference, both sides will be the same: "If there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same, it will be just like it used before" (SL 151). When Tha'mma persuades Jethamosai to go to India, he is not ready to leave his place.

Indo-Pak War

During the time of Indo-Pakistan war Tha'mma becomes very patriotic. She gives away her chain with ruby pendent, which she prizes above all things because she wears that chain as a memento of her late husband, 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" (SL 237). 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. Tha'mma is also ready to donate her blood for the war fund. "I must get to the hospital... I mustn't waste all this blood. I can donate it to the war fund" (SL 237).

A Fine Revolutionary

Through Tha'mma's character, 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, Tha'mma remains a fine revolutionary in the novel. She says "I would have done anything to be free" (SL 39). Though she is an old woman without strength, she fights for her country. Her 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 33).

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Ila – Another Character in *The Shadow Lines*

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

Ila is a typical drawing of a modern, beautiful, attractive girl. She wears the western dresses and looks like a foreigner. She lives life in full measure, without caring about the Indian traditions. It makes her to delink from her people both in thought and culture. She finds that life in Calcutta is dull and boring. In order to relieve herself of that boredom she takes Robi and the narrator to a night club. If she is in a mood to dance, she does not feel any compunction in dancing with a stranger. She does not even care how her uncle Robi will feel. When her uncle does not permit her to dance with a stranger, she cries out, "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" (SL 88).

Ila is very strongly concerned with the welfare of the people. It makes her to affiliate with the Anti-Nazi League group. The members of that group are also very fond of her and will talk of her as their own upper class Asian Marxist. They see her as a link with the Fabians. Ila works in an organization called Save the Children Fund and is fighting for Indian Immigrants in London. She lives in London in a frugal manner in a tiny room in a house which she has to share with five other students. She has to cook and clean and do all kind of things though she has a dozen of servants at house to do all the things for her and works for Indians in England.

May: Another Revolutionary in the Novel

Like Ila and Tha'mma, May is another revolutionary in the novel. She is bold and practical in her statements. She is actually conscious of her duties and faults. She is outright in expressing her emotions. As a British woman, her interpretation of people, places and events of India is different. She does not understand that 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 also has the thought; "it was an act of helplessness. She wasn't used to being helpless" (SL 166). This

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poverty and illness in India shocks her. Her idealism will not permit such injustice to exist, but she understands that she can do little for the poor.

May has a heart 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. She asks 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, she scolds him. “Can’t you help a bit? She said. All you’re good for is words. Can’t you ever do anything?” (SL 173) She takes out her pen-knife and stabbed the dog. So the dog gets free from its pain. Tridib accepts that she does the right thing and that she need not be apologetic about the inconvenience she causes. She also becomes a part of an Orchestra about which the narrator read in the Guardian. She admits that she is working with the Orchestra because she has to make a living somehow. Then she is however actively engaged in the work of relief agencies. She is also working on a project for providing houses for the survivors of an earthquake in Central America.

May Price went along with Tridib to bring Jethamoshai from Dhaka when there had been a communal riots going on. While they were returning in a car, Jethamoshai was brought in an auto rickshaw. When the rickshaw was attacked by frenzied rioters, May cries in horror that they are acting selfishly and saving themselves while endangering Jethamoshai. Tridib gets down from the car to save Jethamoshai and he 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. In an act to save others, he dies.

May is on a penance ever since Tridib’s death. For a long time she held herself responsible for the death of Tridib. She asks the narrator, “Do you think I killed him?” (SL 251). She sleeps on floor. She fasts. She works for earthquake relief. She collects money from streets with all her banners and posters for social welfare. She suffers his death like hell. She is literally on a self-torturing spree. At the end of the novel she realises the meaning of Tridib’s sacrifice. She frees herself from the burden of 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” (SL 251-252). To Tiwari,

May is a girl with an extra edge. Her sense of justice, right and wrong is developed. In a very simple explanation to Tridib's death, I wish to say that May's desire to save the weak worked as a catalyst on Tridib's mind when he got out of the Mercedes in Dhaka among rioters to save the old, invalid Jethamoshai. (28)

May is a virtuous, innocent and pure woman. She is friend to all and has malice for none. It makes her a revolutionary in the novel. She helps others wherever she gets chance and has a positive attitude towards her life. "May embodies the qualities of a savior, nurturer and a protector – she is politically active in a positive way... one of the few characters who takes responsibility for her action" (Multani 165).

Impact of Women Characters in *The Hungry Tide*

All the three main women characters – Tha'mma, Ila and May - have played very important roles in *The Shadow Lines*. Even the male characters also have been influenced by these female characters in this novel. Likewise in *The Hungry Tide* also Amitav Ghosh presents women as revolutionaries. Mainly Kusum, Nilima and Piya come under the term revolutionaries because they fight for the betterment of human society in the novel.

Life of the Refugees in *The Hungry Tide*

In the novel *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh shows the condition of the refugees who have flooded into the state of west Bengal. The dalit refugees, being penniless and backward, threaten to be a bigger burden on Bengal's meagre resources. Therefore they are dealt with severity. The representative leaders of the refugees have been promised some land in Sundarbans for the rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees, when the communists acquire people's mandate in upcoming elections. But when they come to power they do not put their words into practice. Believing their words to be true they start to migrate from Dandakaranya to West Bengal. In their migration, some refugees find their way to Morichjhapi, one of the islands of Sundarbans. They settle there and put their effort and work hard to reconstruct their world on their own accord. They clear the land for agriculture and begin to fish and farm.

A Woman Refugee Character Kusum

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Among the refugees, there is a woman called Kusum. Though her life represents the fate of migrant marginal community, she makes herself a revolutionary and fights for the sake of the refugees. Born in Sundarbans, she was orphaned and left under the care of Nilima's Trust. When fate chased her, she left Lucibari for Dhanbad, then in Bihar. In Dhanbad, she married Rajen, a station vendor and she gave birth to a son, Fokir. After Rajen was killed in a train accident, she came to settle down in Morichjhapi along with other refugees, putting her faith in the basic goodness of the people who symbolise government. But the government declares that the refugees have violated the Forest Acts and have occupied a territory reserved for Royal Bengal Tigers and thereby disturbs the habitat of the species and endangering the ecological balance of the region. When they confront their opposition, the police open fire which is leading to the death of many islanders. Kusum, an Indian deciding to fight for the cause of the refugees, feels aghast at the irrationality of the nation state, which is willing to butcher people to save animals.

Hunger does not leave Kusum a weak person. She decides to protest the government until the last moment. She not only earns the bread for her family but participates in a risky adventure against the government. It makes her to unify with a place and the psychic unity with the needy. It becomes her hub of freedom. This self-assertion leads her to the tide country and makes her to stretch out her helping hands to the refugees. "... the author forces us to perceive what otherwise our chauvinism refuses to admit: that every man has a bit of the woman in him just as every woman has a bit of the man in her" (Roya 82)

According to Kusum, home stands out to be that place from which one cannot separate oneself. During the Morichjhapi massacre, the police attacked the defiant settlers with a heavy hand and Kusum is killed in the encounter. Thus Kusum lives and dies for the upliftment of the refugees in the tide country. She never draws back in her decision and in her work for the settlers. She fights for them till the last moment in her life. Eventhough she is a victim of the Morichjhapi massacre, her life reveals woman's active role in the society. She also shows woman's participation, involvement and revolutionary attitude towards the oppressed society.

Nilima Working for the Better Life of the People

Like Kusum, Nilima also serves to the people of Lusibari through her Badabon Trust. She is the wife of Nirmal in the novel. Even though she is very old and wants to be a revolutionary in her life. As a revolutionary she works for the better life of the people who are living in the tide country, Lusibari. She says, “I am not capable of dealing with the whole world’s problems. For me the challenges of making a few little things a little better in one small place is enough. That place for me is Lusibari” (HT 387). She does not take the whole tide country for her revolutionary attitude; instead she chooses the island of Lusibari. In the process she is stern and strict.

The services of the Trust initiate a process of transformation in Lusibari. Nilima starts a "barefoot nurse" program to provide medical assistance to the people. The nurses trained in basic hygiene, nutrition, first-aid, midwifery and other things educate the villagers. The training helps them to fight the adverse conditions of the tide country. Then she starts a well-equipped hospital to provide medical aid on nominal charges. The hospital leads to the growth of a small service industry – tea shops, guest houses and stands for cycle vans. Thus, indirectly the hospital provides employment to a large number of the inhabitants of Lusibari. So her social service and welfare projects help the poor to earn with dignity. The support system for women which Nilima has created over the years is also her achievement.

Piya, the Dolphin Scientist, Becomes a Social Activist

Piya is another important character in the novel, *The Hungry Tide*. Piyali Roy, an Indo-American cetologist comes to the tide country of the Sundarbans in Bengal to study river dolphins. As a cetologist, she studies the Gangetic dolphins. During her research she is saved by a fisher man, Fokir from her death by giving his life. That incident totally changes her attitude towards life and also she realises the bitter condition of the people who are living in the tide country. At the same time she becomes responsible to save Fokir’s family. Thus at the end of the novel Piya also turns her life to help the people who are living in Lusibari. She realizes the sufferings of these fishermen and man’s cruelty to the natural habitat of Orcaella. Realising the condition of refugees after partition and Bangladesh war, she sympathises with them in their existential dilemmas, and political and cultural dislocations.

The report on Piya's dolphin sighting sparks a lot of interest and several environments groups assure funds to her. She also seeks the sponsorship of the Badabon trust for consultation with the local fishermen for her project work. She rents the upper floor of the Guest House to set up a data bank, a small office where Moyna could work after her duty at the hospital and also to teach the language of the tide country to Piya so that she can mingle with the people. Piya's perseverance and courage thus help her to accomplish her task. As the profit from the project would be shared between the trust and Piya, Moyna and the fishermen can also get some financial help. Piya says to Nilima: "If I was to take on a project here, I'd want it to be under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, so it could be done in consultation with the fishermen who live in these parts. And the Trust would benefit too of course. We'd share the funding" (HT 424).

Piya thus makes a space for herself and also gives the people their due space. At the end of the novel, she also identifies Nilima's house as her home saying that "... for me, home is where the Orcaella are: so there's no reason why this couldn't be it" (HT 427). The idea of home for Piya is not constructed by territorial boundary but by love and sympathy. Both Piya and Nilima join hands with each other and work for the upliftment of the people in the tide country as revolutionaries in the novel.

Women Characters as Revolutionaries

Thus Amitav Ghosh presents his women characters as revolutionaries. They have become revolutionaries in their respective spheres. They also have the courage to fight for the upliftment of the people. Women having self-determination become synonymous with purity and self-control. "... Nirmal, Nilima, Kanai, Moyna, Piya all endeavour to work towards an ideal which they feel would help them contribute constructively towards civilization" (Mahanta 115).

In the novels, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide* 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. They can survive the world by the tool of education, employment and their rebellious attitude towards life. They not only assert their places in the society but they try to help others by their revolutionary attitude. Thus

Amitav Ghosh creates his women characters as revolutionaries in the novels *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*.

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