

# Women as a Social Reformer in The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh is a contemporary Indian Diaspora writer. In his novels women plays vital role in stabilizing the family as well as the society. Life of Indian women is solely based on the back ground of the family, culture, religion and the society in which they were brought up. The major historical events have changed the outlook of women from time immemorial. The role of women changes, according to the need and demand of the society. Each culture creates a unique context in which various roles and identities of women are determined. Women play a multifaceted role like mother, wife, daughter, care taker and even bread winner of the family. Though Amitav Ghosh women are not prosperous in their married life, they take leading role and prominent position in the society.

Writers of various periods reflect the role of women characters of their period. The contemporary writers recognized the womanhood quite clearly; Raja Rao recreates the image of women in his novel *The Serpent and the Rope* as, “Women is the earth, air, ether sound, the knowing in the knowledge; women is fire, movement, clear and rapid as the mountain stream ; women is that which seeks against that which is sought” (357).

Women are portrayed as the preserver of home and protector of culture, but at the same time women suffer and struggle, rebel and accept the reality. Amidst all this she struggles to keep-up her own identity. These are the outward portrayal of women. The shift to a portrayal of the inner psyche of women started with Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande “who probed into the behavioral patterns, focusing on the factors that account for their unconventional actions” (P Shailaja and G Manoj 7).

**Key Words:** womanhood, social workers, Profession, Career, Struggle, patriarchal

## Introduction

Women are the leading spirits in the works of Amitav Ghosh. Women character depicts the cultural construction of the society. Amitav Ghosh has brought out the real struggle of women characters at various social statuses; he has pictured an ideal society with a cooperative work of dreamers, social workers and economist. Ghosh portrays women as a one who vitalizes and stabilizes the family.

The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of ‘socialization’, since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. (Peter Barry, 122)

The novelist has made an attempt to explore the emotional world of women through the major characters like Piya, Nilima, Kusum and Moyna in *The Hungry Tide*. All these women characters served the purpose of women protagonist and are independent in their own terms.

Ghosh develops women who are strong, who can express themselves, do things, travel and come to their own decision and live independently. They are out of the purposive control of men. They pursue ideals, which they as individuals value. Malathi and Prema have aptly commented that “They are symbol of growth, progress and forward movement” (6).

Ghosh’s post humanist values are also apparent in his feminist treatment of the main women characters in his novels. His women never get suppressed by the patriarchal society, the will power sprouts within them and sails along with the fate, with never give up attitude, they fight against all odds in the society.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the character Piya is a cytologist by profession, brought up in United States is an independent traveler who cannot speak her mother tongue, Bengali. But she never considers that as a hindrance, as her profession demands independent travelling, she initially travelled with the forest guards with whom she picked up a quarrel, the guards never hesitated to leave her in the middle of the river. As a young lady she was prepared to face such hurdles. Later she was rescued by Fokir a tribal fisher man with whom she feels comfortable to travel and she never hesitates to stay along with Fokir in the boat throughout the night. Though she could not understand his language, she could exploit his knowledge about the tide country and its inhabitants. Though she is Western by birth; she remains essentially Indian in sensibility.

She carries out her research on marine mammals especially about Irrawaddy Dolphins. Out of her own interest she visits Sunderban to study the behavior of Oracella, as she wants to explore the marine. Though she has language barrier the tenacious spirit of Piyali to explore the hidden secrets about the marine mammals never stopped. She defines her life through her career and says her home is where Oracella is; she stands as a representative of the present generation.

Nilima, the Mashima of Lusbari hails from an aristocratic family with a good educational background. Nirmal was a professor in Calcutta University and Nilima his student falls in love with him and get married against the wish of her parents. Later both Nilima and Nirmal settle in Lusbari an estate established by Sir Daniel Hamilton, which is under the possession of his nephew, James Hamilton who lives in Scotland. Nilima’s father handled some of the affairs of the Hamilton estate. With the help of her father both of them proceeded to Lusbari, where Nirmal is supposed to work as a teacher in Lusbari School. Due to her ardent love for her husband, she moves along with him and settles in the tide country. In spite of struggling even for the basic amenities she overcomes all the odds with a strong will power. In due course Nilima engages herself in the social service, by setting up a mission hospital with the aid of the government.

As days pass on contradiction of ideas arises between the two, as marriage and disappointments have become an integral part in the life of women characters. Nirmal is highly imaginative and aspires even for impossible things, where as Nilima is very practical in her life. Nilima is an embodiment of endurance and she disciplines her life in such a way from which she does not want to deviate either willingly or unwillingly and she also succeeds in it. Nirmal's life reflects the ebb and tide of repression and projection. Nilima never hesitates to tell Nirmal, that he is not practical and his dream could never be made real.

'Nirmal you have no idea of what it takes to do anything practical,' she said 'you live in a dream world – a haze of poetry and fuzzy ideas about revolution. To build something is not the same as dreaming of it: building is always a matter of well-chosen compromises.' (214)

Nirmal's mistaken assessment on Nilima leads to repression, but with her strong will power, she pushes down the repression by projecting the best part of her. She refuses to give even a moment to think of something that drains her energy and peace of mind, especially when Nirmal says,

You have joined the ruler; you have begun to think like them. That is what comes of doing the sort of 'social work' you have been doing all these years. You have lost sight of important thing (120).

This particular statement of Nirmal disturbs Nilima quite often but she dismisses this very thought. Though this attitude of indifference slows down her action she carefully avoids the thought which disturbs her peace. She as a modern woman with her personality intact with due rationality and responsibility, leads a more dignified life and sets herself as a role model for others to follow. She uses regression to identify the true nature of people. As a dutiful wife she also fulfills the last wish of her husband and hands over the book written by her husband addressed to Kanai, nephew of Nilima. She says, "I always did my best to do my duty by Nirmal it is very important to me that his last wishes are not dishonoured. I don't know why he wanted you to have the book I don't know what is in it but that is how it must be" (120). She firmly believes that causing indifference in life is the law of nature and indifference is the strategy of life in the process of adaption.

As far as Nilima is concerned, there is no distinction between the private and public life. At one point when Kanai, Nilima's nephew, entered her room, books and files lay everywhere making no difference from an office. It is this interest and involvement that makes Nilima to forget the absence of Nirmal. Nilima with her full dedication developed the Island. As for as Nilima is concerned there is no private life for her,

No clothes or personal effects were anywhere to be seen while books and files lay stacked everywhere – under the bed on the floor and even in the a well of the mosquito net. The room was sparsely utilitarian in appearance, with very few furnishings other than file cabinets and bookcases.....it would have been easy to mistake it for an extension of the Trust's office (116).

Even after her husband's death, Nilima was very firm in her decision, being at her desk keeps her engaged body and soul. She had coped with Nirmal's death and gracefully she channelized herself into work. She is a kind of person who stays indifferent to the odd events of life. Sailaja and Manija have aptly commented that "Ghosh's major women characters get rid of their dependency, needs and break the pattern of sensuality and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally with men." (13)

Though Nilima is childless she adopts her profession and nurtures to the extent that it has become her own breath. Whenever there is repression; she gets consolation by involving herself in the service.

The union Nilima had founded, on the other hand, continued to grow, drawing in more and more members and offering an ever-increasing number of services – medical, paralegal, agriculture. At a certain point the movement grew so large that it had to be reorganized, and that was when the Badabon Development Trust was formed (81).

The novelist gives strength and will power to his women characters with traditional flavor. These characters are more polished and matured enough to overcome the patriarchal problem at home. Ghosh's women live a life of fulfillment and dignity through their actions. They contributed stability to the civilized society. Following the traditional land mark developed by his forerunners like Tagore and R K Narayan, Ghosh presents women characters with a strong will power and has identified the individuality with high esteem. Women characters act independently at the time of crisis both in the family and society. Women are the symbol of growth, progress and forward movement in Ghosh's novel. The fusion of psychological and sociological trauma can be seen as a common factor among Ghosh's women characters.

Amitav Ghosh as a well known humanist has penned against all kind of oppression in his novels. He vehemently disagrees with the idea of domination of man, either it be political or social. Shobana Ramasamy says, "Most of the women characters are shown as determining the major decisions of their own lives. They are given a freedom of choice and they take the initiative in their intimate relationship" (97).

Amitav Ghosh has brought out the real struggle of women characters at various social statuses. Ghosh with his imaginary vision constructs a new society, with a new cultural consciousness. The novelist portrays the experience of women in a tide country, through the character of Nilima and Kusum who understand the real need of their society and are ready to approach the concerned authorities to get the necessary assistance. Ghosh has proved through these characters that women are much more determined in progress towards their desired goal. They come across all the problems caused by the opposite gender and tower successfully to raise their voice against all the odds in the society.

Kusum, the tribal women and mother of Fokir, holds a captivating grip on the narration. The aspiration for the psychic unity with the place and her community becomes her hub of freedom. The assertiveness and the selfless nature of Kusum make her to stretch her helping hand to refugees and tribal. She takes all the possible efforts to safeguard the people of her kind. At one critical point she approaches Nilima to get the medical assistance through her trust, but Nilima, being aware of the consequence refuses to help Kusum, since the act of assisting the refugees would be against the wish of the government.

Though Nilima marries Nirmal neglecting her family members, she is not satisfied in her married life. When Kusum comes across in Nirmal's life, Nirmal could not resist his feelings and woos Kusum. When Kusum comes to Lusibari to seek medical help from Nilima for the settlers, Nilima refuses to help Kusum on practical ground, but Nirmal compels her to make necessary arrangements and he protests with Nilima to help Kusum. Though Nilima dismisses his request and appeal, it brings down her spirit both mentally and physically. All the women characters in this novel have a challenging task to overcome the patriarchal society. Kusum's mother is another victim, after the death of her husband, an agent assures her a job, whom she trusts, but she was deceived by him and sold to a brothel, where she died in an accident, when she tried to escape from them.

Ghosh's women characters never get suppressed by the patriarchal society. The will power sprouts within them and sail along with the fate, with the never give up attitude; fighting against all the odds. Ghosh recognizes the intelligence, resilience and courage of these women. The resistance to the patriarchal society by these women character shows Ghosh's revolutionary attitude towards women and thereby he strongly impose the need for change. He also strongly believes that a society can be enhanced by strengthening women.

Amitav Ghosh not only elaborates the problems caused by man to women, at the other end he makes his men as redeemer, one who saves women from the spell of the society and gives another chance of life. Through this action of men, Ghosh makes the society a balanced one.

Ghosh's women are not so ambitious, they are happy with what they have and all are self content in their life. Nilima is not as ambitious as her husband; she leads a very practical life and desires what is within the possible limit. Moyna, wife of Fokir, is also content with her restricted life, she is self-confident and self-satisfied person; she has perfect understanding of the world. At one point, even Kanai is shocked at Moyna's attitude, maturity and endurance. The character Moyna becomes a source of inspiration and introspection for many. As she proceeds towards the hospital, he could sense that mere sight of the hospital gives her joy and she is full of pride about her involvement in the hospital. Her husband Fokir is an illiterate but Moyna neither bothers about his ignorance nor gives him up just because he is an illiterate. All her worries are about her son, whom she wants to be educated. Even Kanai says, "Just imagine how it had must be to be with someone like Fokir while also trying to provide for a family and keep a roof over your head. If you consider her circumstances ..... She wants to make a success of her life." (219) Since Moyna is an educated, she could manage a balanced life between her profession and her uneducated husband; she unlike other tribal is ambitious and remains as a symbol of self respect in the novel. Moyna's matured behavior and motherly care reflects the hyper-reality of the post modern world.

Ghosh's women characters are well determined in their life. Piya, though impressed by Fokir's knowledge and ignorance, is aware of her goal and maintains her balance. When Fokir sings a song she feels 'a river of words would not be able to tell her exactly what made the song sound as it is right then in the place'. (99) A sense of fragmentation set her aloof from the feelings of passion. She suppresses her desire to stay along with Fokir considering the fact that her research is more important than her inner longing, she willingly pushes down all her anxiety into unconscious. She affirms that "it was the exclusion of the intimate involvements that made place into a field and the line marked between the two was marked by taboo, she could not cross, except at the risk of betraying her vacation" (112).

Ghosh's women characters overcome their dependent nature and suppress the patterns of sexuality and sensuality and take the position of free and equal human beings in line with a man. These women are called as winners of life and live with dignity through their actions. They stabilize the social and family life upholding the civilization.

Ghosh develops women who are strong and are out of the purposive control of men. As revealed by P.Sailaja and G.Manija "Ghosh's women characters get rid of their dependency needs break the pattern of sensuality and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally along with men" (13). They pursue ideals, which they as individuals value. "His women are symbols of growth, progress and forward movement" (Malathi and Prema,6).

Even after the death of Fokir, Piya does not want to return back to her place, she decides to continue her work in Lusbari. Nilima after the death of Nirmal she decides to dedicate her life for the people on island. For Moyna ecstasy of life lies in her constant struggle to qualify herself as a nurse and emerge as an independent individual. And Nilima on the other hand establishes her name after the trust hospital and she says, "I want you to remember something; I will fight for it like a mother fights to protect her children.... The hospitals future, its welfare... they mean everything to me...." (214).

Kusum, mother of Fokir, is engrossed with full of misery as she losses her husband and fight till the end of her breathe for the rights of the tribal on the island. She accepts every part of the misery with her stretching arms; she fights confidently and with a clear chosen goal in her mind. When Kanai discusses with Piya about Kusum he says: "Kusum was spirited, tough, and full of fun and laughter." (218). It was astonishing for Horen, care taker of Kusum to believe that it was Kusum who protects him. He says: "I thought I was protecting Kusum but she was in her own way much stronger than me" (363). Kusum with all her dynamic attitude towards life becomes a source of inspiration for both Horen and Nirmal. She is portrayed as a woman of courage and also she has the capability to get along with any kind of social norms. Both Nirmal and Kusum work to execute the cultural legitimacy of Daniel Hamilton's Utopian society, the founder of Morichjhapi.

Amitav Ghosh celebrates the assertive and dynamic attitude of women towards life, and portrays them as a source of inspiration for others to follow. P Sahaliaja and G. Manoja, has aptly commented that "the empowering elite section was the process of converting the traditional past to modernity that percolated as a new sensibility about women's duty and responsibilities" (11).

At times colonial women's modernity strengthens the mind and the will power propels them to serve the purpose. Nilima says "I am not capable of dealing with the whole world's problem. For me the challenge of making a few little things better in one small place is enough. That place for me is Lusibari" (387). There is tremendous sense of individuality, resources and resistance in the face of each character. His women are rational, practical and active with determined goal. Their journey towards the inner

freedom cannot be hindered by any external forces. They lay the foundation for the individual and autonomy in the antagonistic male chauvinistic society. Ghosh focuses the resistance of male domination by women in his novels.

Ghosh's women are more Indian in tradition, no matter the extent of mental turmoil they undergo; they stay with their family with clear motive and action. Through this action Ghosh establishes his women character as remarkable representatives of Indian culture and tradition. His women express their deep love for their husband; though they suffer immense pain due to their incongruous behavior.

Women in Ghosh novels are the leading spirits and portrayals of a distinct cultural construction. His novels touch all walks of life and characters are typical Indian. The novel depicts the life of women both living in middle and old age.

In *The Hungry Tide*, women characters serve as a spinal card. The main theme goes around Nilima, Kusum and Piya. The author has focused on the state of mind of displaced woman. Kusum reflects the story of women in refugee camp. Right from the beginning of her life she has been exposed to the stern patriarchal society where women is seen as a sexual object but it is because of her mental ability, she came across all the social evils. The will power of Kusum stands high that even when starved she fought till the end of her life for the sake of her fellow refugees. Nilima's arrival to the Island is a kind of redeem for the Island. She acts wisely even at critical situation. Her decision not to help Kusum whom she knows right from her childhood though hard to believe is justifiable. She was stubborn in her decision that she did not even consider the recommendation of Nirmal. It doesn't mean that she is against the refugees but infact she understands the law and she does not act against the government and invite trouble to her trust. Though her intention is to reform the life of settlers but not against the will of the government, for which she is even ready to act against her husband. Moyna is the best example of today's women; nothing stopped her education and service in the hospital. She accepts her uneducated husband and nothing distracted her even after the death of her husband. Though Piya is a foreigner she acts more like an Indian, the character Piya reflects the courageous modern Indian woman. In spite of several diversions, her focus is only on her project, but after completing the project she joins hand with Nilima and takes care of Fokir's family. All the women characters in this novel played a role as a social reformer.

It is through Nilima's Badabon trust, the living standard of the people improved, hence she is affectionately called as Mashima (aunt) which is a compliment for her untiring effort to reform the social status of Lusbari. She becomes a prominent person as a reformer and caretaker of the Island.

Amitav Ghosh's women have the potential to overcome the difficult situations forced upon both by the social and political system of our country. Women are the first one to be affected by the political turmoil in the society. Women have proved that they not only overcome the problems caused by the society, but also they have the ability to reform the society to a greater extent. All the women characters in the novel were suppressed but all of them emerged as reformers after their suppression. To conclude Ghosh's women are the leading spirit of the Indian society.

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