

HUMAN TRAITS OF THE SUBALTERNS : A STUDY ON THE SELECT NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH

¹DR. S. Parvin Banu

Assistant Professor (Senior Grade), Department Of English,
Chikkanna Govt. Arts College, Tiruppur

²R. Gayathri

Research Scholar, Department Of English,
Chikkanna Govt. Arts College, Tiruppur

ABSTRACT

Love is the guiding spirit and force for the survival of the world. The Universal Love teaches universal brotherhood and brings the whole world under one roof of humanity. It results in a peaceful and warless world and fraternity among the nations. Mutual love leads to a good family, thereby strengthening the relationship. This paper carries out the theme of human traits of the subalterns, such as love and sacrifice, recurrent in Amitav Ghosh's novels such as "The Shadow Lines", "The Hungry Tide," and "Sea of Poppies." It deals with how love leads to the sacrifice of one's own life for the sake of others, which elevates and dignifies the love of mankind, and how love overcomes the obstacles and stumble blocks in their way.

Key Words : Love, sacrifice, guilty, death, save, travel, rescue, rage, cyclone, , slaves and labourers

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the theme of human traits of the subalterns such as love and sacrifice recurrent in Amitav Ghosh's novels. Though this theme is in the main plot or subplot of the novels, it forms the centre and moving force to bring the catastrophe of the novels. In this analytical view, the three novels of Ghosh such as "The Shadow Lines", "The Hungry Tide" and "Sea of Poppies" are dealt with. The term subaltern means the victims of Capitalism, Colonialism, Imperialism, and men in power politically, geographically, and physically and dominant people in their own tradition. In the words of Gayatri Spivak, the subalterns are those who don't give orders; they only receive orders. In the words of Antonio Gramsci, the subalterns are the victims of cultural hegemony and colonial politics. The human traits of the subaltern characters in the above mentioned novels are analysed deeply in this paper.

The Sahithya Academy winner (1989), Amitav Ghosh was born on July 11, 1956 in Calcutta. He had his education at the All-Boys Doon School, where he edited the Doon School Weekly. He got his degrees from St. Stephen's College (University of Delhi) and Delhi School of Economics. Ghosh grew up in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, India and Iran. He is

an ardent novelist who has a history as his prime obsessive background. His notable fictions are *The Shadow Lines*, *Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Glass Palace*, and the *Ibis* trilogy set in the nineteenth century – *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). *The Shadow Lines* gained the prestigious Sahitya Academy award and the Anand Puraskar. Amitav Ghosh received the Padma Shri award in 2007. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2009. He was named a Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellow in 2015.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research attempts to interrogate and critically reflect on the representation of human traits of the subalterns by analysing the select novels of Amitav Ghosh using Salman Rusdie's theory of Imaginary Homelands and Gayathri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

The methods of Data collection would be gathering the required secondary sources from various libraries, journals, and online resources. The researcher also proposes to get into the groves of research works related to the field of Post-Colonial fiction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of the primary and secondary sources and places the central research problem in perspective. *The Hungry Tide* is a story about a tide country that has records of the history of natural calamities, human deaths, refugees as settlers, their mass eviction, the utopian dream of an Imperialist, conflict between man and animal for survival in sharing the land, the daring life of fishermen on the island, etc.

Sea of Poppies, which was published in 2008, is the first masterpiece of the *Ibis* trilogy, in which the crew's purpose is to fight China's vicious nineteenth-century Opium Wars. The story is set prior to the First Opium War (1839–42). *Sea of Poppies* is meticulously researched, with the opium trade and the opium wars as a background. It explores in detail the East India Company-run opium factory at Ghazipur, the workers whose lives depend on it, and its produce.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* deals with the truth that the lines that divide the world into nations are mere shadow lines. It is an undercurrent of emotions and feelings that unite the whole human race despite man-made discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, region, colour etc. The narrator, the grandson of Thamma, travels into the past, describes an incident that occurred before his birth to bring home the truth that the present is the product of the past. The characters Jethamoshai, Thamma, Tridib, and Mayadebi are identified as the subalterns who suffer due to partition lines, which are mere shadow lines. For a greater extent, a step ahead, Jethamoshai and Tridib are massacred due to communal riots in Dhaka when they try to take Jethamoshai to Calcutta for the rest of his life. The novel revolves around this main theme.

Salman Rusdie's theory of *Imaginary Homelands* and Gayathri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* provide the theoretical dimension to this research article.

RESEARCH GAP

This research finding article unveils the unexplored human traits of the subalterns in any other research bodies. The epicureanistic traits of Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* and Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* are distinctive and are never acknowledged. They lead life as it comes. Tridib imagines, idles, eats, plays cards, and finally loves May Price. Kanai also lives an epicureanistic life, living happily without any commitments like family in his life.

It explores the traits of love and sacrifice of the subaltern characters, which are recurrent in his three novels, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies*. Tridib's love for May Price in *The Shadow Lines*, Fakir's love for Piyali Roy, and Nirmal's love for Kusum in *The Hungry Tide* have made them sacrifice their lives. Kalua's love for Deeti in *Sea of Poppies* lets him suffer death punishment, but fortunately he escapes and fights with his opponent. All these subaltern characters are the victims of Capitalistic, Imperialist, and hegemonic men who are in power politically, geographically, and physically. Though the man can find out the medicinal cure even for the deadly diseases and can find out the ways to reach Mars, he cannot find out the cure for the deadliest mindset of the hegemonic people who rule and control over the downtrodden and weak.

ANALYSIS

The Shadow Lines deals with the family of the narrator in Dhaka and Calcutta and their acquaintance with a family of English men in London. It begins with the epicurean cousin of the narrator, Tridib, who provides him with the world of imagination to travel long before he leaves him in Calcutta. As the narrator grows up, he finds himself indulged in history; his old grandmother's family dispute; their relationship with an English family of Lionel Tresawson that brought Tridib and his parents to London; their English friends, whose daughter's (May Price's) love for Tridib ends in tragedy.

May Price worked in an orchestra to make a living. She regularly had a communication with Tridib, and their friendship later developed into platonic love. Tridib saw May Price when she was a baby. After nineteen years, she received greetings from Tridib, in which he stated that he remembered her well. When she was trying to get over an adolescent crush on Trombonist, a school boy who had told her bluntly that he had no time for her, she received Tridib's card. On seeing Tridib's note, she had the consolation that there was someone to befriend her.

Tridib is a man who lives in his imagination. He has seen May Price since she was a baby. He recollects that and sends her letters often as a pen friend. He even loves May Price in his imagination. But he feels shy about expressing his love for her. But still, he whispers.

“You’re my love, my own, true love, my love-across-the-seas; what do I have to do to keep you with me?”(*The Shadow Lines* P. 175)

When Tridib accompanies May Price and Thamma to Dhaka, which has now become a part of Bangladesh, to rescue his maternal grand uncle and make him settle with his family, the old man Jethmoshai is hedged by the frenzy of rioters. May Price gets out of the car in order to save Jethmoshai. As soon as May Price reaches the old man, Tridib follows her to save her and the old man from the mob. But the furious mob kills him in a rage in return.

Eventually, he sacrifices his life to save their lives. But still, May Price feels guilty that it has happened only because of her hasty reaction; Tridib has had to sacrifice his life.

Tridib imagines, idles, eats, plays cards, and finally loves May Price, losing his life for the sake of his love. Though he is called by Thamma a wastrel, he dignifies his love through the sacrifice of his own life. The power of love in him for May Price transfers his state of life as a recluse into a meaningful sacrifice.

The *Hungry Tide* is centred on the character of Piyali Roy, an Indian American cetologist. She is an expert in the field of analysing marine mammals, their habitat, and the behaviour of freshwater dolphins in the great waterways of Asia—the Indus, the Mekong, the Irrawaddy, and the Ganges. She employs Kanai Dutt, a practical man of modern India, an expert in six languages, and a translator for her work in the Sundarbans, and Fokir, an uneducated boatman who makes his living by fishing crabs and is a subaltern character whose inborn knowledge of the tide country contrasts with Piya’s scientific and technical ways. It is Fokir who saves Piya from drowning, as the boat she is travelling in overturns. Fortunately, her equipment and papers are safe. Piya immediately gets rid of the guard and the boatman and decides to engage Fokir’s service, even though they do not share a common language. They communicate through gestures.

Kanai, on the other hand, always wants to be in enjoyment and happiness. He never has any aim in his life. He does not want to be committed in a wedlock. But he has love for Piya, which is not accepted by her.

An unspoken bond develops between the two, Fokir and Piya. Piya, however, wants no emotional involvement at this stage, at the expense of her research. There are, however, instances when he looks after her comfort on his small, narrow boat and makes efforts to relax her after a hard, gruelling day that Fokir starts intoning a mournful song so soulfully that Piya is mesmerised. Their

physical contact and warmth are a source of great solace for Piya. An unspoken bond develops between the two, but Piya is not yet ready to acknowledge that there is anything else than empathy she has for Fokir till the day cyclone strikes the Sundarbans and Fokir dies while trying to shield Piya from the fury of the storm lashing the mangrove forest they have sought shelter in.

When they struggle in the storm, Piya swings her legs on the branch of the tree and turns to take up her place quickly. When she faces the tree, the sari is looped by them around the trunk of the tree, and Fokir ties the sari into a knot. They scarcely had time to do this and came back to the place before the storm was upon them and the air was full of "hurtling projectiles." But some change had passed by then. Fokir has died while shielding her body from the raging storm. She tries to relieve herself from his grasp and tries to pull him around once so that she is the one to shelter him. But his body is obstinate, and she cannot set herself free from it, especially now that it has the weight of the wind behind it.

Ghosh clearly points out their bond, which they do not express to each other. It is expressed only through his sacrifice. But Piya cannot save Fokir's life. She is completely shattered by his demise.

Piya feels a sense of guilt and responsibility towards Fokir and his family. She stays with Moyna in Lusibari during the period of mourning and then leaves for Kolkata, where she drums up support for ecology and environmental conservation as well as funds for the upkeep of Moyna and Tutul's education. Piya also involves Nilima, her Badoban Trust, and the people of Lusibari in her research project on the Irrawaddy dolphin, which she aptly names after Fokir.

Fokir sacrifices his life to save his love, Piya, from being struck by the cyclone. In turn, Piya sacrifices her whole dedicated life for the wellbeing of Fokir's family and Fokir's society, as well as for environmental conservation in Lusibari.

This novel also carries Nirmal's love for Kusum, Fokir's mother, and Horen's love for Kusum. In his support and response to Kusum's struggles and revolution to help the refugees who have come to settle at Morichjhapi during the exodus due to the partition conflict, Nirmal is massacred in the riot. The sacrifices of Nirmal for Kusum and Fokir for Piya are the notable human traits of love and sacrifice in this novel.

The first volume of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis trilogy*, *Sea of Poppies*, initiates the tumultuous journey of a crew of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts, across the Indian Ocean to the Mauritius Islands. Among several characters on board the slave ship *Ibis* is Deeti, a simple, uneducated housewife from a village on the eastern side of Bihar. In due course, she becomes the spokesperson and leader of the migrants aboard.

Deeti is married to a crippled opium addict, Hukam Singh. It is only through the recommendation of his uncle Bhyro Singh that Hukam Singh has landed a job in the Ghazipur Opium Factory because Bhyro Singh is a retired subedar from the East India Company's army. Deeti scrutinises the fact that on her wedding night, her mother-in-law drugged her with opium so that Chandan Singh, her brother-in-law, could seduce her and consummate the marriage in place of her impotent husband. Chandan Singh is the real father of Kabutri, Deeti's daughter. When her husband, Hukam Singh, dies, Deeti sends her daughter, Kabutri, to stay with her relatives. Deeti is certain to end her life in a Sati ritual (on the funeral pyre of her husband). It is the only way in the face of threats of more rapes by Chandan Singh, her brother-in-law.

An untouchable caste ox man, Kalua from the nearby village, is the cart ox man to pick up Hukam from his house to the Ghazipur Opium Factory, and he helps Deeti bring back her husband from the factory when he is ill. As he is an untouchable slave, he is forced to mate with a mare. But he is saved from the humiliation by the hiss of a snake, which is made by Deeti, who hides herself among the poppies when she happens to cross the field to fetch water. She helps him dress up and regain his consciousness. Subsequently, she is drawn towards him.

When Deeti is forced to die in the Sati ritual, Kalua comes to rescue her, as he is indebted to her for her timely help. The couple escapes and gets united. It is unacceptable to the high-caste men in the village. In order to flee Deeti's in-laws, Deeti and Kalua become indentured labourers on a schooner, Ibis. When she boards the ship, Deeti learns to her horror that Bhyro Singh, her late husband's uncle, is now the subedar of the migrant labour on the Ibis. She tries to avoid his gaze, and she feels protected by the colossal presence of Kalua, whom she has married now. Both of them travel under assumed names, Aditi and Madhu, respectively.

Having recognised Deeti as Hukam Singh's wife, Bhyro Singh bids his time till Munia and Jodu are caught flirting on the quarter-deck one evening. When Deeti descends down to the store room where Munia is confined, she hears a loud voice speaking to the silahdar.

In a show of defiance, she asks him,

"What does this mean?.....Why did you want to see me alone?" (*Sea of Poppies* P.475)

Bhyro Singh asks her in turn,

"How long did you think you could hide from me, Kabutri-ki-ma? (*Sea of Poppies* P.476)

He insults her with prickly words, saying that he is a whore who has brought insults to her family. He laughs with derision that he will kill Kalua, the scavenging piece of filth, and he wants her to be his mistress and asks her to abort the child of Kalua. Deeti spits on him in disgust, and Bhyro Singh reveals how she was impregnated by his brother-in-law. Kalua comes to her rescue.

Bhyro Singh appeals to the captain against Kalua for murdering one of the guards. The captain awards Kalua with sixty strokes, to be given by the Subedar the next day. When Bhyro Singh whips Kalua, he cannot tolerate the impact of the whip and lashes. He infuriates and uncoils the ties and strangles Bhyro Singh to death. The captain gets infuriated with the murder of Bhyro Singh and is ready to punish Kalua. The guards are given time to perform the subedar's last rites, and Kalua's execution is fixed for the day.

Deeti prays for a miracle. Her prayer is answered, and, through the planning of Paulette and Baboo Nob Kissin, Kalua makes good on his escape that stormy night in a longboat along with Serang Ali, Neel, Ah Fatt, and Jodu.

Kalua's readiness to save Deeti from Sati at the cost of his life if he is caught and his killing of Bhyro Singh to save her again show his spirit of love for Deeti. Fortunately, he escapes death wisely with the help of Deeti and other labourers.

SUMMING UP

Love rules the roost. Of course, the theme of love is recurrent and impressive in all three novels. Therefore, love results in sacrifice. Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* and Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* are the subalterns who sacrifice their lives for the sake of love. Kalua in *Sea of Poppies* is a subaltern character who only escapes death, fortunately, when he tries to save Deeti. He overcomes the obstacles and stumble blocks in his way only because of his love. Hence, this article sums up how the human traits of the subalterns, such as love, lead to the sacrifice of one's own life for the sake of the other, which elevates and dignifies the love of mankind, and how love overcomes the obstacles and stumble blocks in their way.

WORKS CITED

- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2005.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2008.
- Dhawan, R.K., ed. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1999.
- Tiwari, Shubha. *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic publishers, 2008. P. 99. Print
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1988. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. London: Picador, 1982.
- Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Cahoone, Lawrence, ed. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*. USA: Blackwell Publising Limited. 2003.