



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## AMITAV GHOSH'S DEETI: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

RANITA BAIN

M Phil Research Scholar,  
Department of English, West Bengal State University



RANITA BAIN

### ABSTRACT

The writings of Amitav Ghosh are generally seen as exercises that extend beyond genres which apparently frame them. His *Sea of Poppies*, the first part of his ambitious Ibis trilogy, is not just multidimensional and dense in texture; it is simultaneously a movement that offers to reorient the contours of the Indian English novel in a significant way. The novel was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2008. It is based on historical setting of colonial rule in India and to fulfill its need of supply of opium to China. Women are the leading spirits in the works of Amitav Ghosh. Women characters depict the cultural construction of the society. Amitav Ghosh has brought out the real struggle of women characters at various social statuses. In my paper I will be dealing chiefly with the character of Deeti, who is not presented as a stereotypical character like Sati-Savitri, but as a woman of real life.

**Keywords:** feminism, motherhood, patriarchy, binary oppositions.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

It is traditionally thought that women have instincts that make them selfless nurturers. Such assumptions, in turn, shape social practices that make women automatically responsible as caregivers. Feminist theorists argue that such myths, constructed by the patriarchy, undergird social practices that eventually restrict women. Although contemporary feminists have widely vocalized these issues, it is important to recognize that the first formulations on this issue predate twenty-first-century feminism. The French writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) argued that women are repeatedly told from infancy that they are "made" for childbearing. While the "splendours of maternity" are forever being sung to her, the drawbacks of her situation—menstruation, illnesses, and even the boredom of household drudgery—are all justified by this "marvellous privilege" she has to bring children into the world. Beauvoir pointed out

that such pervasive socialization shapes women's desire to "choose" motherhood. In *Sea of Poppies* Amitav Ghosh has shown that Deeti, in spite of being married to an impotent man, tries to find satisfaction and fulfillment in life by being *Kabutari-ki-ma*. But when fate offers her an opportunity to be more than just *Kabutari-ki-ma* she immediately grasps it. Deeti is able to move forward in life leaving behind her daughter. Amitav Ghosh so tactfully managed the events of the novel that she never seems to us as a bad mother. It reminds us of Simone de Beauvoir's famous line—"women who most fully experience some form of subjectivity are the best mothers". Deeti has done the best she can do for her daughter by leaving her at her brother's home. *Kabutari* is also shown as happy playing with her cousins.

In the first chapter of the novel it is told that due to colour of her eyes, Deeti is called as

"chudaliya, dainiya as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off"(Ghosh 5). Thus she is not a passive sufferer. She knows how to fight her tormentors. She is the captain of her own soul, and a person willing to face and resolve any conflict – and, a woman who refuse to see herself as a victim of man-made biological circumstances – She is able to separate herself as a warrior from those 'ordinary' people, male or female, who are willing to drift with the current and bend with every breeze.

Deeti begins to doubt about her husband after he starts ignoring her just after her first night and she becomes pregnant. Her mother-in-law says that she is like Draupadi. She becomes sure that her mother in law knows everything about the father of her child and to reveal out the truth from her mother-in-law, she starts giving her opium. One day under the influence of opium in a state of unconsciousness, she confesses that her daughter's father is her brother in law:

As for Deeti , the more she ministered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoys – for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? And surely this could not be the only such substance upon the earth? (Ghosh 38)

Power is generally associated with masculinity. But here, the Author gives Deeti a village woman of 1838 living in northern Bihar, some sort of power over her mother-in-law, and not only that he also gives her the intellect to understand how opium is used by the British Empire to dominate and subjugate its colonies.

While her opium addict husband is in his death bed, she is physically assaulted by her brother in law "Your husband and I are brothers after all, of the same flesh and blood. Where is the shame? Why

should you waste your looks and your youth on a man who cannot enjoy them? Besides, the time is short while your husband is still alive- if you conceive a son while he is still living, he will be his father's rightful heir." (Ghosh 157). Unable to tolerate the behavior of her brother-in-law she warns him: "Listen to my words: I will burn on my husband's pyre, rather than give myself to you (Ghosh 158). Through these words of Deeti, Ghosh expresses the assertive nature of Deeti to restore the dignity of womanhood. Malathi and Prema has commented that 'Ghosh develops women who are strong, who can express themselves, do things, travel, come to their own decision.

Deeti's family is forced to cultivate poppy in their land by the sahibs as " the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home , forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asa'mi* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn't accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: "(Ghosh 30) . Because of such economic exploitation, a housewife like Deeti is forced to work in the field after serving her house hold duties. Not only the poor farmers even the beautiful creatures of nature are also shown to have adverse effect of this forced poppy cultivation. As Deeti notices " The sap seemed to have a pacifying effect even on the butterflies, which flapped their wings in oddly erratic patterns, as though they could not remember how to fly'(Ghosh 28). Starhawk recognizes connections between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies. It is also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism, and neocolonialism.

Deeti becomes leader of *grimityas on Ibis*. She is called "*bhaugi*" by men and women on the ship because she possesses the solution of their problems. She is confident and ready to fight for anyone in trouble. Thus on the *Ibis* the shackles of patriarchy becomes loose and Deeti is able to express herself. The ship becomes the whole world

in a miniature form, where people from different parts of the world come together and interact, and transform themselves in the process. Myra Marx Ferree defines the phenomenon as "... this is only a top-down phenomenon that is happening to people rather than also a grassroots process in which individuals and groups are actively engaged, and that there is nothing gendered about it" (3). Deeti becomes an example of "women be free to define themselves, instead of having their identity defined for them time and again, by their culture and their men" (Faludi 82). Ghosh has tried to show that socio political changes bring drastic changes in women to come out of their sufferings. Through the portrayal of Deeti's character, Ghosh shows the socio political shifts bringing about changes in women out of their sufferings. 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. P Sailaja and Manija had aptly revealed, in poetcrit, jan. 2007, that 'Ghosh's major women characters get rid of their dependence and break the pattern of sensuality and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally with men.'

According to Helen Cixous the underlying binary oppositions (like Man/Woman) are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the 'feminine' side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance. The biological opposition male/female, in other words, is used to construct a series of negative 'feminine' values which then are imposed on and confused with the 'female'. For Cixous, who at this point is heavily indebted to Jacques Derrida's work, Western philosophy and literary thought is and has always been caught up in this endless series of hierarchical binary oppositions, which always in the end come back to the fundamental 'couple' of male/female. Her examples show that it does not much matter which 'couple' one chooses to highlight: the hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as the underlying paradigm. Such binaries are also present in *Sea of poppies*. The meaning of Deeti's name is 'brightness': where as the meaning of

Kalua's name is 'darkness'. Kalua is shown as a man possessing great physical strength " Kalua was a man of unusual height and powerful build: in any fair , festival or mela , he could always be spotted towering above the crowd-even the jugglers on stilts were usually not so tall as he"(Ghosh 53). Deeti is not shown as possessing physical strength, but her mental strength to speak up against the wrong, to fight for a cause is shown in great detail " Deeti was not especially inclined to intervene, but when it became clear that no one else was going to say anything, what could she do but speak up ? Wait! she told the two boys . This isn't right, what they are telling you to do. The three Silahdars rounded on her angrily: You stay out of this: it's none of your business. But of course it is, she retorted"(Ghosh 414). Thus though the male/female, positive/negative binaries are there in the novel, but Amitav Ghosh reverses it to some extent .Deeti is shown as having qualities which are superior and much more essential for survival.

According to the feminist critics, the women who are created by men primarily represent stereotypes or generalization of actual women. That is, the feminist critic may assume that the images of women in literature created by men represent a fiction of women constructed by the patriarchy. These women, in other words, are not actual women, but are instead versions of women created by men to be what men think women actually are, and according to Peter Barry by analyzing the roles in which men place those fictional women, we can examine the "cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuates cultural inequality" Amitav Ghosh was writing in 2008, about a woman living in northern Bihar in 1838. So, technically his Deeti cannot be the image of an actual woman belonging to that time period. He merely got the hints for characters like her in official records like Sir George Grierson's *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency, 1883*, and J.W.S MacArthur's *Notes on an Opium Factory* (Thacker, Spink. Calcutta, 1865). His creation of Deeti may not seem an actual woman, as suggested by the feminist critics, but she is not a stereotypical character. Ghosh's Deeti is a full human being with all her frailty and her strength.

**Works Cited**

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995. Print.
- Choudhury, Bivash. Ed. *Amitav Ghosh Critical Essay*, New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Ltd, 2009. Print.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *New French Feminisms*. Ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. New York: Schocken, 1981. Print.
- De Beauvoir, Simon, *The Second Sex*, Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier. New York: Vintage Books, 2009. Print.
- Faludi, Susan, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Woman*. New York: Crown, 1991. Print.
- Ferree, Myra Marx. "Globalisation and Feminism: Opportunities and Obstacles for Activism in the Global Arena". *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights*. Eds. Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp. New York: New York UP, 2006. Print
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2008. Print.
- Malathi and Prema, "Portrayal of Women in the Select Novels of Amitav Ghosh" *TJELLS*. Web. 7 Mar 2015.
- P Sailaja and Manoj "Equality and Difference: Areading of Amitav Ghosh's Women". Poetcrit, 2007 . Print.
- Starhawk. *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* . Gabriola Island: New Society Publisher, 2002. Print.
-