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## EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVELS-*THE SHADOW LINES* AND *THE GLASS PALACE*

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**Abstract:** The worship of Indian writers in English is never complete without the name of Amitav Ghosh. The novelist from the land of the Kali reserves a special role for his women characters in his works. The anthropologist traces the evolution of the feminine world from the stereotypes to the feminists. His women are portrayed as the life givers and are the leading spirit of his fiction. He portrays women and their experience with sympathetic understanding. This paper studies the portrayal of women in the novels of Amitav Ghosh- *The Glass Palace* and *the Shadow Lines*. These novels of Ghosh envisage a future where women empowerment will lead to the emancipator changes in the larger social issues. Both the novels depict the life of three generations across the borderland cultures. Man is born free, but not woman. She is not born with just an umbilical cord tied to her mother. But with lot of chains that eschews her from any individuality. Ghosh's women begin their life as puppets whose strings called culture and tradition are controlled by the patriarchs. But they slowly realize that they have life and come to being.

**Keywords:** Women Evolution, Women Empowerment

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Glass Palace*, a saga of three families, is epical in scope covering three countries –India, Burma and Malaya compressing the most turbulent of times in their history. The social and cultural complexities, feminine psyche and consciousness is brought out through family relationships.

An important incident that occurs early in the novel sets the tone of the women characters. The character of Ma Cho reveals the struggle of a single woman who suffers to gain a status in life. Amitav Ghosh mentions the details of Ma Cho only in the first part of *The Glass Palace*. Ma Cho is an half-Indian and half-Burmese. She has no family, so she leads her life alone. She has her own small food-stall. She was in her mid -thirties, more Burmese than Indian in appearance. Ma Cho leads her life very independently without depending on others. But still she suffers from society's manacles. She is sexually exploited by some of her customers like Saya John. Rajkumar, an eleven-year-old-orphan, works as her helper views Ma Cho at nights through the wooden creaks, and learns about the female anatomy and sex. He even gets his first physical sensations through her. But Ma Cho resists him by saying:

*Abruptly, she pushed him away, with a help of disgust. What am i doing with this boy, this child, this half-wit kaala? Elbowing him aside, she clambered up her ladder and vanished into her room. (Ghosh, The Glass Palace, 57)*

The situation is the same with the women of even the royal family. The princess of Mandalay was sexually exploited by the servant Sawant in Outram house. The condition of women in the rubber plantation and teak is even worse. Rajkumar Raha the successful businessman and a father of two teen aged sons and a beautiful wife Dolly exploit the women in his plantation. He even denies giving his name to the son born of such relationship. The exploited plantation women, the mother of Ila go never makes an appearance. Even Uma Dey becomes the victim of Rajkumar. Jaya the great niece of Uma once finds Uma in the clutches of Rajkumar, who were above their sixties at that time. May Price, a woman from the western world in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* become the victim of the Indian unnamed narrator. The women irrespective of age, class, borders and culture face the problem of sexual exploitation and insecurity in the patriarchal world.

The women are also denied of being self, individuality or an identity in the patriarchal world. Uma Dey, the Madame collector, is attractive, charming, lively and self-possessed. She becomes an elegant hostess, a mere adjunct to the collector. She is a "role-filler". She starts to re-assess the entire meaning of her life being jolted out of her unquestioning acceptance. But the wifely virtues that she could offer him as a typical Indian wife had no use for. Cambridge had taught

him to want more: to make sure that nothing was held in abeyance, to bargain for a woman's soul with a coin of kindness and patience. The thought of this terrified her. This was subjection beyond decency, beyond her imagination. She is even coaxed by Benyprasad Dey, more a collector than a husband, about her unlikely friendship with the royal family in confinement and especially with Dolly. Uma wishes not to be flattened into a role, invariably stripped of all individualizing traits of a sentient being. She wills for a companionship based on understanding and love, and for autonomy of self. But she is denied the requisite space. She finds it difficult to cope with this atmosphere of "constrained enactment". Dolly, the wife of Rajkumar strives hard to live up to her family to maintain the good name the family has earned in the community. For Dolly Sein, life can be viewed as one filled with fulfillment in the role of a nurturer and homemaker. Dolly is the archetypal, earth mother capable of bringing a semblance of order even to the chaos of Outram House. Dolly is an outstanding example of adaptability to the vicissitudes of life, a typical Indian wife. As Meenakshi Mukherjee says,

Social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than a man, and generally a woman's identity tends to be defined by herself as well as by others, in terms of relationship with men – as a daughter, as a wife, and as a mother. (98)

Dolly shows that a woman willfully fulfills herself in a loving and harmonious relationship with others. What governs her is the act of giving, going out of oneself, a deep concern for the other, which is a point of profound significance for the women like Dolly. Marriage being a sacrament in the Indian context is the only suitable career open to woman according to Dolly. She also sees it as a security for her orphan life. If she was not to marry Rajkumar and live single, she would have to face a life similar to that of Ma Cho's and May Price's. As return to her self-denial she was not even paid with the loyalty of her husband towards her.

Ghosh's women are seeded with the feminist attitude, which is nurtured by the social issues they face and the patriarchal dominance that suffocate them. They act as independent entities, growing and developing according to their own inclinations and finding social acceptance, defining their own space, determining their own lives, fighting their own battles, enjoying the fruits of victory and never fearing to taste the bitterness of defeat. Thamma in *The Shadow Lines* evolves into a freedom fighter from an old widow and a retired school teacher who dreams of borders filled with trenches, canons, soldiers and blood. She donates her only ruby pendant, the treasured gift from her husband. May Price becomes a social worker and collects funds in the street corners and from her concerts for the flood relief fund for the UN. Uma Dey is desperate to find recognition as the „independent other“. Even within the narrow confines of her life as the wife of the collector, she manages to assert herself by draping her saree in the newly introduced way that earns her the appreciation of Queen Supalayati. She is outraged by

Rajkumar's infidelity to Dolly. She shares with the modern women the desire for mental freedom. Later, she has to struggle to release herself from the bondage imposed by the oppressive traditional society upon the young Hindu widow. Her situation is an argument in favour of property rights for women. Owing to her inheritance, she becomes a woman of substance, travelling abroad, quite the equal of many respectable and cultured Western women in similar circumstances.

While woman as leader in the old fashion is represented by the archetypal "terrible mother," Queen Supalayal with her mask like face and mauve lips is no ordinary woman. Though accustomed to authority, she suffered captivity and humiliation over freedom and goes on to live along with her daughters to twenty years of exile, for love of her ineffectual and scholarly husband Thebaw. Thebaw never shows off his anger against the British. But Supalayal accepts for the marriage of her daughter with a servant as her revenge against the British which results in the suicide of Beny Prasad. Jaya, Uma's great-niece, a widow, living alone in middle and old age with her son in America, explores Ratnagiri and Myanmar in order to understand the past. She is the woman who goes in search of roots. Interestingly, she gets the opportunity of studying the work of the enterprising Parsee woman photographer who shot the wedding photographs of Rajkumar and Dolly. Women's intellectual and professional fulfillment is depicted in Jaya who is a lecturer and researcher, and in Dinu's wife, Daw Thin Aye, the reputed novelist. Theater's language is so refined that the Burmese police official in charge of censoring her manuscript is under the impression that her grammar is faulty. This evolution of modern women reaches its culmination with Aung San Suu Kyi who had been confiding to her house for twenty years. She is the doyen of the world of feminism.

#### CONCLUSION:

The women in this novel try to seek different levels of liberation. Each negotiates with her milieu to arrive at justifiable resolutions and each attempt is an accomplishment in itself. Amitav Ghosh's fiction portrays the two images of women: women as a life-giver, sustainer and continuer of the race as against women in search of an identity. In the tradition of Raja Rao and others he creates woman with an imaginative grace. Ghosh's major women characters get rid of their dependency needs, break the pattern of sexuality and sensuality and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally along with men. They are symbols of growth, progress and forward movement.

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