

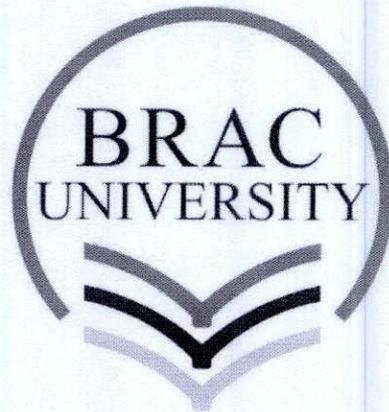
**Identifying Women's Position: Exploring Time, Space and Sexuality in Amitav Ghosh's  
Novels**

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Novels**

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*This paper is dedicated to,*

*Shamima Nazneen*

*I would have never understood women if it were not for you...*

*I would have never understood love, friendship and trust without you in my life...*

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## Abstract

This paper aims to go on a journey along with the female characters in Amitav Ghosh's novels. The different destinations in the journey will be first and foremost a woman's position in historical context, her role in the making of history and how her life is affected by it. As we move ahead in the journey we will explore the terrain/space which a woman occupies in a nation/world. Finally we will end our journey by entering the domain of exploring a woman's sexuality.

The works of Amitav Ghosh which have been chosen to be a part of this journey are as follows: *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2005) and *Sea of Poppies* (2008),

This paper is divided into an introduction followed by three chapters, and finally the conclusion. In the first chapter I will talk about how history affects the female characters. In the second chapter, we will try to see what space a woman occupies in the society for herself. In the final chapter, we will see how women's sexuality is being portrayed by the author within the historical and national space confined upon them.

Having studied the fictional portrayal of the female characters in the books and relating them to real life incidents I would like to draw a conclusion as to where the women, particularly of India stand today in wake of the historical, spatial and sexual identity limitations they face.

## Introduction

Salman Rushdie in the introduction to "*Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing 1947-1997*" mentions that:

The prose writing - both fiction and non-fiction created in this period by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages of Indian...this new, and still burgeoning 'Indo-Anglican' literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has ever made to the world of books (10).

Amitav Ghosh's works are part of this body of Indo-Anglican literature. His work highlights various themes such as Diaspora, language, tradition etc set against historical backdrop. They involve both fictions and non-fictions. However his fictions' are not completely based on imaginary characters and incidents. They are realistic fiction. In these books he merges historical events with imaginary characters. His "essential interest is in people and their lives, histories and predicaments. There is not room for this in formal anthropology, which is more interested in abstractions and generalizations"(Hawley 6). Crossing over national boundaries, borders, language barriers etc form an important theme of Ghosh's work. When interviewed regarding this Ghosh responded "I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to 'given' or taken-for-granted. This is why I distrust also the lines that people draw between fiction and non-fiction. I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded"(Hawley 9).

A major part of Ghosh's work is related to those sections of society who are voiceless, overlooked by history and crushed by the powerful and by time.

For example: the refugees of the Morichjhapi incident who were massacred but find no mention in the history of either India or the world. Ghosh tries to give voice to this lost population in *The Hungry Tide*.

Ghosh mentions that "when an American writes a historical novel he or she can generally rely on the historians to have done the research. I didn't have this luxury available to me. I had to do much of the primary research while telling a story" (Hawley 12). Thus studying Ghosh's works one can trace history which is neither altered by a colonial burden nor a nationalist one as he writes stories from a very interlinked point of view where the narration transcends any particular country and time period. He rewrites history.

This paper aims to see where Ghosh places women in context to history, their sexual desires and national space. For this purpose the emphasis will be placed on the writer's following books: *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*.

*The Glass Palace* is the story of the Burma's last King who was sent to exile after being defeated by the British and involves the stories of various people whose lives get interwoven with this particular historical event. The story like most of Ghosh's books shuns any particular national boundary and covers Burma, Singapore, America and India. This book can be used to explore the ideas of nationalism, the effect of involuntary dispossession from the roots, the sexual arousal and also the individual identity of women which most of the times gets overshadowed by her family burden. Like other works of Ghosh the story traces "how do families blend and merge and separate over time?"(Hawley 121).

*The Hungry Tide* narrates the story of group of people whose lives get involved to an historical event (the Morichjhapi massacre). The book can be used to understand the

relationships between a man and a woman." Piya and Fokir are kept apart by language and class and by the social institution of marriage; Nirmal and Nilima live side by side for years but are unknown to each other, divided by different dreams for their lives, and by a lack of respect for the other's way of embracing life "(Hawley 132-33). Religious folklores mentioned in the story about Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai: these two mythical characters form *The Shadow lines* – the 'imagined' borders dividing in this case good and evil land. The characters cross over between the territory of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai in the book which signifies Ghosh's idea of transcending borders. Ghosh sketches out strong female characters that are ambitious and do not fear to come out of the Goddess like image which have been traditionally assigned to Indian women. Take for instance, when Nilima has to decide between helping the refugees or being on the good side of the Government, she sides with the Government as she does not want to endanger the works of her lifetime.

The story of *The Shadow Lines* works mainly in three different time lines - the World War II period, the 1960s dealing with the narrator's childhood and the 1980s when the narrator visits London. The setting involves various locations from Calcutta to Delhi to London to Dhaka. One can see that again Ghosh transcends national boundary narrating the stories of people living in various locations and how their lives are connected to a particular event. The name of the book itself signifies the borders which do not exist physically but are present dividing people and it is these virtual borders which Ghosh wants to cross over. The character of Ila and Tham'ma are very important to understand the position women occupy in a national space and their idea of nationalism. The question arises that even if the characters transcend national boundary and become part of a cosmopolitan society do the female characters get to blend into the society as much as the male ones? Ania Spyra in her article "Is Cosmopolitanism Not for Women?"

Migration in Qurratulain Hyder's *Sita Betrayed* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*” says that even though Ila tries to escape the “traditional roles ascribed to women by culture, they remain caught in the hierarchical binaries of active/passive, mind/body” (3).

*Sea of Poppies* narrates the story of various groups of people from different strata of the society coming together for a voyage on a ship (Ibis). This story can be used to see the relationship between tradition and history, suppressed sexual desire transcending cultural boundaries, traditions being applied to suppress women. The Ibis symbolizes Ghosh's idea of a place without boundaries and it is our job to understand what place the women occupy in this small model of a cosmopolitan society.

From the above mentioned texts we can trace the footsteps of women right from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (as seen in *Sea of Poppies*) to the present day (as seen in *The Hungry Tide*). I intend to understand the influence of history in shaping up their present, their suppressed sexual desires, their position in the cosmopolitan society and their idea about nationalism and existence of ‘imaginary borders’ in their life. Using the parameters of time, space and sexuality I would like to identify the position which women particularly of the Indian sub-continent occupy and comment how these parameters act either as liberating or binding force in their life.

## Chapter One

### Women's Journey through History, Role in History and Their Identity Formation

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted over the past”( Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Century Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*). In literature, authors give life to their characters but since Amitav Ghosh is an anthropologist along with a writer and since he writes realistic fictions he sketches out characters within the parameters of realism as he is bounded by the historical events within which he narrates his story. So the question arises if the female characters in Ghosh's books namely *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* make their own history or is it a history which is being imposed upon them by the patriarchal society?

Partha Chatterjee in his article “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India” talks about the dichotomy of ‘Ghar-Bahir’ (Home-World) and explains how it was thought during the colonial period in India that:

The world is a treacherous terrain in the pursuit of material interests, where practical consideration reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in this essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation (624).

The world outside the home was considered to be corrupted by the intrusion of the Europeans – a place where people were subjected to continuous humiliation. It was also considered by the nationalists to be the place where the war of independence would be fought by

the subjugated by learning “from the west the modern sciences and arts of the material world”(Chatterjee 624).

During this period, the patriarchal Indian society felt that the inner core must be kept completely out of the reach of the polluted outside. Thus we can see how men represented the outside world where the nationalist movement and modernization was taking place and the women represented the inner core which was completely segregated from the outside world which drastically contributed to the factors responsible for them to lag behind their male counterparts.

This is how the identity of Indian women has been established over time. It is reflected in every aspect of their lives ranging from clothing to eating habits etc. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when education became an important aspect in the lives of women new criterions were introduced to curtail their freedom.

They could go to schools, travel in public conveyances...and in time even take up employment outside the home. But the spiritual signs of her femininity were now clearly marked- in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor, and her religiosity. The specific markers were obtained from diverse sources and in terms of their origin each has its specific history. The dress of the *bhadramahila*, for example, went through a whole phase of experimentation before what was known as the *brahmika* became accepted as standard for middle class women (Chatterjee 629).

The time period in which the female characters in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* are living can be considered the beginning of the timeline which we will focus on. The story is based

prior to the Opium Wars between Britain and China so the events mentioned in the book can be estimated to take place during the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century or beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Deeti represents a class of woman from this period that was barely able to meet its financial ends and yet could/did not let lose their traditional values. The thing to note here is that history and traditions go hand in hand. Deeti's life revolves around "laying out a freshly- washed dhoti and kameez for Hukam Singh, her husband, and preparing the rotis and achar he would eat at midday...after she'd bathed and changed, Deeti would do a proper puja, with flowers and offerings" (3). Her life revolves around her household chores: "With scarcely a pause for a mouthful of roti, Deeti stepped outside, on to the flat threshold of beaten earth that divided the mud-walled dwelling from the poppy fields beyond"(5). Here, we see that she manages her home and also takes care of the field. She is customized in such a way that she cannot see beyond this.

Kumkum Sangari in her article "*The 'Amenities of Domestic Life': Questions on Labour*", says :

[...] patriarchies build personal relationships into exploitation, operate inside the sphere of relationship of love, nurture and sexuality, are indeed inseparable for them. It is not surprising then, that women themselves find it difficult or impossible either to separate the personal from the structural or to see themselves outside the orbits of such relationships. Nor it is surprising that most domestic ideologies prescribe, elevate and idealize those personal relations of mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law into which unpaid domestic labour and services are packaged (5)

Deeti has internalized the ideology that performing all these household chores and also the labor in the field is part of her relationship with her husband and she has to perform these as

part of her duties towards her in-laws. Even after eloping with Kalua and marrying him, she still cannot get out of the traditional boundary which has been installed within her from her birth. She tries to instigate similar traditions within Munia, a young girl who travels alongside her in the Ibis (ship).

These invisible cultural barriers are not limited only to the women of South Asia. Similar traditions also form a part of the European culture and most of them curtail the freedom of women. "Paulette had grown accustomed to daily baths and frequent dips in the Hooghly: it was hard for her to get through a day without being refreshed at least once by the touch of cool, fresh water "(124) but the European traditions do not permit her to do so. A similar comparison can be drawn between Paulette and the character of Adela Quested from *A Passage to India*. Even though Adela wants to interact with the 'real Indians', she is constantly being told by her European counterparts to lead her life in a particular way and not get too involved with the local population.

"As if one could avoid seeing them," sighed Mrs Lesley.

"I've avoided," said Miss Quested. "Excepting my servant, I've scarcely spoken to an Indian since landing."

"Oh, lucky you."

"But I want to see tem"(Forster 24).

Both Paulette and Adela are stuck in a dichotomy different from that of the Indian women. In their case though they enjoy comparatively more freedom than the Indian women, here is a different dichotomy which govern their lives – in case of Adela the European society

wants to involve only their race as part of her inner world and the Indians would comprise her outer world from which she needs to be protected. In the case of Paulette, European traditions are part of her inner world which needs to be hold on to and the influence of Indian traditions is part of her outer world from which she should be protected.

Even though Deeti works more than her husband who spends most of his earnings taking opium, he is still considered the head of the family. When he is in his deathbed her woes are further elevated as her brother in law “would lean so close as to brush her breasts with his knees and elbows. His advances became so aggressive that Deeti took to hiding a small knife in the folds of her sari, fearing that he might attack her right on her husband’s bed”(157). Chandan Singh justifies this by saying:

Your husband and I are brothers after all, of the same flesh and blood...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” (157).

Here we can see the traditional customs of owning property is being used as an excuse to exploit a woman.

Upon the death of her husband, her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh, tried to forcibly arrange her Sati rites for his own benefit. Dorothy Stein in her article “Burning Widows, Burning Brides: The Perils of Daughterhood in India” throws light on the emergence of this custom:

The ritual of Sati...is an ancient one, having been reported by Greek travelers to north India in the fourth Century B.C. Nor it was unknown in other cultures. It seems to have originated with fighting men trying to prevent the enemy from capturing any of their

goods and chattels. Since it was a practice of kings and warriors, it was endowed with a social prestige what it never lost; indeed, the practice spread to the Brahman caste...Since it was associated with high rank, the performance of a sati became of itself a claim of social status (466).

Stein further explains that by the nineteenth century the custom became so prevalent that people belonging to any caste did not feel that they should be disassociated from the glory that the ritual brought. Though the number of women committing Sati were few in all the caste but scattered throughout the country especially in Bengal. The important aspect here is that initially warriors initiated this custom 'to prevent the enemy from capturing any of their goods and chattels' (466). Here we can see the commoditization of females from an historical period itself.

The tradition of jumping into the fire has been associated with women from the earliest times in India. In the Mahabharata, the instance of Sati jumping into the fire to avenge her husband's insult and in the Ramayana, the instance where Sita jumps into the fire to prove her chastity are classic examples. "Thus its practice, as evidenced in ancient and medieval India, can be understood as reflective, more generally, of a specific manifestation of a social process that has as its underlying basis deeply ingrained patriarchal constructions of power and misogynous attitude."(Sutherland 1595).

The reason for Deeti being forced to burn herself alive is not a religious one. The actual reason it during that time a woman committing the custom was glorified and given a lot of gifts which were placed near her pyre. Thus, Chandan Singh uses a traditional custom which started for a different reason and molds it accordingly for his own financial gains. The similarity though is that in both cases, there is commoditization of females.

However, we should also consider that not only the Indian traditions were prominent in curtailing the freedom of the women but indirectly even the liberalizing traditions of the British has it part in increasing their woes. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi in their article "Gender and Imperialism in British India" talks about how initially the British Raj did not interfere with the Indian Law, however, in 1772 the Governor of Bengal passed the Law that only the Brahman written law should be the only law procedure for all Hindus because :

[...]the Hindu concept of law conflicted with the Western concept. Most Hindu law, apart from that of the Brahmins was unwritten and based on custom, which varied both over time and across cultural, regional and caste boundaries. In contrast, Western law was written and based on binding force of Parliament, applying uniformly to everyone and interpreted more rigidly as precedent developed (WS-73).

This interference by the British led to the lower caste women to also be subjected to the strict strictures of the Brahman law, for example: divorce was no longer permitted, remarriage was so longer allowed even among infant widows etc. Here we see the negative side of the phase when efforts are being made to merge the history and traditions of two different cultures.

Deeti is the sole female supporter and bread earner of the house. In the book, *Where Did All the Men Go?* Joan P. Mencher and Anne Okongwu explains the difference between female supported and female headed families. A family is female headed if the woman in the house fulfils either one or more of these criterions, if she is the "(1) Authority of power, (2) sources of economic support, (3) decision making, and in some instances (4) control over and possession of minor children in case of divorce or death" (205).

In the case of Deeti, she is “the main supporter of a household, but her infirm husband...retain decision making power, and dominate the household in other ways”(Mencher 204).Deeti herself identifies her husband as the head of the household.

In *Where Did All the Men Go?*, there is an example from 1961 which is more or less similar to Deeti’s case:

Patti bore three daughters, who were married off before her husband died, but had no sons. After her husband’s death, she managed the land that she inherited from him with the help of a very trusted tenant who farmed the land....Being a Brahman, she could not work in the fields herself...her step-son was constantly trying to take the remaining land away from Patti by a variety of legal maneuvers...Patti sold her land and took a house near a different daughter ...because she could no longer bear the treatment of her stepson who lived near her village house (216).

So we can see that times have changed, methods to exploit women have changed from religious tactics (Sati) to academic tactics (legal maneuvers) but history is repeating itself and hindering the growth of women. The questions which arise from the above observations - how long will history and tradition keep influencing the lives of women and keep dominating them? How long will it be before women can break free from the clutches of the norms which have been historically forced upon them?

Mencher and Okongwu gives four conditions which might allow this emergence, if there is:

1. The Demand for female labor in the society’s major productive activities:

2. The compatibility of these activities with simultaneous childcare responsibilities:
3. The compensation received by women for their participation in production- both (a) in absolute level, and (b) as a relative proportion of the compensation of the men of their class: and
4. The level and availability of alternate sources of incomes aside from the women's own earnings, such as welfare, children's contributions, etc (16).

In *The Glass Palace* Amitav Ghosh cooks a tasty pickle where he adds real historical events, historical personalities and imaginary characters. A huge chunk of Indo-Burmese history is being covered in this book. Our main focus in the paper will be upon the growth and journey of the important female characters of the book.

Queen Supayalat has been portrayed as a very strong character by the author. For example, she is shown to go on a killing spree murdering all the possible heirs to the Throne of Burma to secure the throne for Thebaw, her husband. It is important to note here that this incident of planning and massacring eighty-ninety potential heir to the throne of Burma by Queen Supayalat is taken from history of Burma. The blame for the Anglo-Burmese war which finally led to the fall of the Burmese empire is put on her as she is shown to be the one who did not want to give up to the British demands. "The Queen had prevailed and the Burmese court had refused to yield to the British ultimatum" (22).

Even in her exile she is shown to be hanging on to her traditions. She seems to embody story within herself:

Once or twice a year the Queen would ride out with her daughters, her face a white mask, stern and unmoving, her lips stained a deep, deathly mauve by her cheroots...but she never seemed to notice anyone or anything, sitting as straight as a rod, her face stern and unmoving (77).

When we talk about Nationalist movements we talk mainly about the political war which was fought. However, even without knowing, the Queen fights a Nationalist battle against the British regime in a small but significant manner:

Visitors were expected to walk in and seat themselves on low chairs around Her Highness, with no words of greetings being uttered on either side. This was the Queen's way of preserving the spirit of Mandalay protocol: since the representatives of the British were adamant in their refusal to perform the shiko, she in turn made a point of not acknowledging their entry in her presence (106).

No matter how small it might seem but here we can see that a fallen Queen is still standing against the powerful British Empire in her own way. Her quest to not let go of history and traditions gives her this strength to defy the mighty British.

Suruchi Thapar-Björkert in her article "Nationalist Memories: Interviewing Indian Middle Class Nationalist Women" gives a similar example. While interviewing Smt. Vijay Devi Rathore, the respondent narrated an incident where the female prisoners living in the Farukkabad Gaol were monitored by an English woman gaoler who even checked their sanitary napkins. The prisoners finally questioned "have we committed a dacoity (robbery) that you are searching us?"(36).

This incident sheds light on the nature of the respondent's consciousness, which here transcends her own feelings of shame and self-blame even though, given her conservative upbringing, she could have easily suffered from humiliation and feeling of dishonor at having her intimate parts inspected. Her expression of anger also reflects the politicization her consciousness was experiencing and shows how her narration politicized the incident which affected her as a woman (38).

One can see that a queen and a prisoner share similar feelings and they are contributing to the formation of nationalist history even though they might not be aware of it.

Uma is portrayed as a woman who wants to be someone more than just a traditional wife. She has a clear view of what she wants in life and she is ready to risk everything she has of achieve it. She breaks her marriage once she feels discontented in it. She travels from Rangoon to London to America and back to India. This broadens her horizon. "Through these people Uma had begun to understand that a woman like herself could contribute a great deal to India's struggle from Overseas" (191). She is criticized for this:

You have so many opinions. Uma – about things of which you know nothing. For weeks now I've heard you criticizing everything you see: the state of Burma, The treatment of women, the condition of India, the atrocities of the Empire. But what have you yourself ever done that qualifies you to hold these opinions? Have you ever built anything? Given a single person a job? Improved anyone's life in any way? (248).

This comment by Rajkumar can be seen as part of his intrinsic ideology which makes him see Uma as a threat to his masculinity. Uma symbolizes a rebel from the "Ghar-Bahir" dichotomy. In the nationalists sense Uma has crossed the boundary of the home and been

polluted by the negative energy of the outside. So we can see the negative vibes which women have to face when they cross over the traditional identity which have historically assigned to them.

On her part, Uma does not believe in living history but making it which she finally achieves by becoming an important member of the Indian Independence League. However traditions do not leave her back completely. The fact that she was a widow might have been one of the main reasons that blocked the entry of another man in her life – “because they knew that I was a widow, I think the men looked to me to be a kind of ideal woman, a symbol of purity – and to tell you the truth, I didn’t much mind” (224).

As for Dolly, she wants live in a monastery – to led a life of meditation etc but she could never get out of the traditional norms of family. Tradition imposes upon her a responsibility that she has to take care of her children at least till they are well settled in their lives. Susan Rakoczy in the article “Religion and Violence: The suffering of Women” talks about:

Women are more than half the human race, how is it possible for so many to cooperate, in their own subjugation? This has happened because women have been psychologically shaped so as to internalize the idea of their own inferiority...Ties if kinship, responsibilities of their children and the home, need of physical and economic protection (30).

While breaking free of the historical traditional norms gave Uma a sense of independence and freedom, incorporating it into her life only made Dolly a recluse and mechanical. Dolly like Deeti (*Sea of Poppies*) is victim of the patriarchal ideology and women like her do not even realize that. “Patriarchies build personal relationships into exploitation, operate inside the sphere

of relationship of love, nurture and sexuality, are indeed inseparable for them. It is not surprising then, that women themselves find it difficult or impossible either to separate the personal from the structural or to see themselves outside the orbits of such relationships”(Sangari 5). Dolly cannot get out of the patriarchal web initially because she feels that she needs to fulfill her duty towards her husband and then because she feels that she needs to complete her duty towards her son Dinu.

Through Ghosh’s books we can see what Chatterjee meant. In Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* which is set in a period between the early 1900s to the late 1900s the unnamed narrator’s grandmother, Tham’ma is an educated woman. “She had taught in a girls’ high school since 1936...But over the next two decades the school had grown into a large, successful institution...For the last six years before she retired,...[she]had been its headmistress”(Ghosh 115).

Partha Chatterjee, in his essay, “Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: The Contest in India” explains how a traditional character sketch had been drawn for the traditional Indian women in contrast to that of European women and with time a third category of women who went outside home to work:

New norm for organizing family life and determining the right conduct for women in the conditions of the modern world could now be deduced with ease. Adjustments would have to be made in the external world of material activity, and men would bear the brunt of this task (626).

Tham’ma is part of this group of women who went outside their homes to work but were still ideologically within the norms of the society. Hence, she sees Ila’s lifestyle of living

independently in England in a negative manner: "It's not freedom she wants, said my grandmother...She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases: that's all that any whore would want. She'll find it easily enough over there, that's what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free" (Ghosh 79). A section of people can also comment that her disapproval of Ila's way of live is her anguish on herself for not being to able to enjoy the freedom Ila does.

Like Chatterjee mentions in his essay about the new breed of Indian women who were given freedom by the society but still had a lot of burden to carry. Similarly, Tham'ma "could go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programs, and in time even take up employment outside the home. But the spiritual signs of her feminity were now clearly marked- in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor, her religiosity"(Chatterjee 629).

Tham'ma represents a group of women on whom tradition have a deep influence. She is educated, independent and yet her perspective seems very limited. She forms an opinion about someone by just looking at the surface rather than moving into depth and analyzing:

She had a deep horror of the young men who spent their time at the street-corner addas and tea-stalls around there. All fail-case, she would sniff;...Seeing Tridib there a few times was enough to persuade her that he spent all his time at those addas, gossiping: it seemed to fit with the rest of him (Ghosh 7).

She has valiant ideas as described by the narrator of *The Shadow Lines*:

Ever since she heard those stories, she had wanted to do something for the terrorists, work for them in a small way, steal a little bit of their glory for herself. She would have been content to run errands for them, to cook their food, wash their clothes, anything.

But, of course, they worked secretly; she didn't know how to get in touch with them, and even if she had it would have been twice as hard for her to get in, because she was a girl, a woman. (39)

However, she could never put these ideas into action. The time period and traditions of her era did not allow her the freedom to materialize her ideas. However if we compare her character with the character of Uma (*The Glass Palace*) we see that she had the power to explore and contribute to the freedom of the country which Tham'ma could never do. One thing should be kept in mind though that Tham'ma did not have the financial power which Uma had.

Amitav Ghosh plays with the characteristics of his characters. He allots the traditional characteristics of Indian woman to May Price in *The Shadow Lines*. May is shown to love India, she dedicates her life to a man, Tridib and completely forgoes vanity. On the other hand Ila is shown to run away and try to escape the Indian Traditions: "do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free...Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you."(Ghosh 89).

Similarly Paulette even though being a foreigner is given Indian characteristics in *Sea of Poppies*. So we can see that Ghosh does not establish a linear pattern to define his female characters. The female characters in his books are like the ingredients in a pickle. Each have distinct taste and yet each compliment each other in making the pickle complete.

The time period of *The Hungry Tide* is the current phase of the timeline i.e. it represents the contemporary world. Each of the four prominent female characters life seems to revolve around an historical event which has left or finally leave a deep impact in their lives. In most of the earlier examples we have seen that usually the older characters are more traditional. However

in this book, Nilima, who is the oldest female character is shown to be the most ambitious character in the book. She shatters the traditional view of treating Indian women as Goddesses. She is not ready to compromise and let go of her lifelong dreams for the sake of supporting a group of refugees who are finally massacred. She is the dominant person in the household and the decision maker. She breaks away from the traditional view of women being demure and portrays an ambitious and authoritative personality. Her decision of not helping the people of Morichjhapi somehow ruins her family life as her husband gets more reclusive after the massacre:

I simply cannot allow the Trust to get involved in this. There's too much at stake for us. You're not involved in the day-to-day business of running the hospital, so you have no idea of how hard we've had to work to stay on the right side of the government. If the politicians turn against us, we're finished. I can't take that chance (214).

As a result she gets more and more involved with her work than her family life. So we can see how her past shapes her present.

Kusum is another character whom one cannot define in terms of modern or traditional. She has an unfortunate childhood as her parents meet unfortunate ends – her father being killed by a man-eater and her mother being tricked into prostitution. She escapes to the town to run away from Dilip, the man who sold of her mother and now was after her. Here she meets the Rajan whom she marries but her happiness is short – lived as he is run over by a train. She is not educated but her view about life far exceeds that of a matured, educated person:

'Saar,' she said...'the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements... "This island has to be

saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by the people all around the world.”... Who are these people I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them... No human being could think this is a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (Ghosh 262)

She becomes a part of a forgotten history which finds no mention in the history of the world or that of India. The reason being the Government of India tried its best to cover up the massacre as it would have spilled mud on its image and dirtied it. In case of Nilima, history affects her life but in the case of Kusum she became a part of history which eventually kills her but she dies content; dying for a cause she believes in.

A lot of similarities can be drawn between Piyali Roy and Moyna even though their lives are miles apart. Piya is a cetologist who comes to Lusibari to do her research about a rare river dolphin. She is of Indian parentage but stubbornly American. Moyna, on the other hand, is a local who works as a nurse and want something better in life maybe to become a doctor or to educate her son so that he can have a better future than her husband.

Piya has had a bad childhood due to the quarrels between her parents and she might have taken up the job of a scientist so that the research work kept her away from her home especially after the death of her mother. She gets Moyna's husband Fokir involved in her research work by hiring him as her boatman. Towards the end of the story we see that the tide carry them to Garjontola which coincidentally also happens to be the last place Fokir's mother Kusum traveled to before being massacred in the Morichjhapi incident. Fokir loses his life in an attempt to save

Piya. The common proverb that history repeats itself is apt here. The incident makes Piya come back to India and settle in Lusibari as she feels that she is responsible for Moyna and her son, Tutul. Here we see how the past shapes up the present.

In this chapter it is evident that history and tradition play a very important role in shaping the life of the female characters. They are either trying to hold on to it or let go of it. On one hand, we have characters like Moyna, Nilima and Uma who are trying to change the traditional identity which has been forced upon the Indian women through the passage of history. On the other hand, there are characters like Tham'ma, Dolly, Deeti who are stuck within the dichotomy of 'Ghar-Bahir'. Times have changed but new factors form part of the shadow lines which divide women's inner and outside world. Piyali Roy succeeds in merging history with present times and becomes part of a cosmopolitan society which Ila fails to do due to inability to merge her Indian identity with her London based identity.

## Chapter two

## Exploring Women's Ideas of Nationalism, Their Place in A Nation Space and Locating Their Homes

In the book *Gender and Nation*, author Yuval Davis talks about how 'gender' and 'nation' are interrelated. Her work focuses on Britain and Israel but she tries to make a generalized conclusion which focuses on both the developed and the developing countries. She focuses on how post colonial ideology and nationalism just empowers males of the society, whereas women are considered to be the carrier of culture placing a burden upon them.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" mentions:

The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. The rite was not practiced universally and was not caste or class fixed. The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as the case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men (33).

Partha Chatterjee's article "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India" talks about how it was thought that:

The world is the external, the domain of the material: the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It was also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and the woman is its representation. And so one gets an

Between the deterritorialization of the world's spaces and the myth of origin, between the nation-state and the plural affiliations of multinational corporations – this is the milieu of today's Diasporas... On the one hand, it is global, so that Diasporas are emblem of transnational movement. On the other hand, a particular "Diaspora community" more often than not forms itself according to the territorial boundaries of nation-states (141).

If today's world is a cosmopolitan society incorporating people of different cultures and classes under one roof then we may ask why is Ila not able to adopt herself either in India or in London? The two important female characters of the novel, Ila and the narrator's grandmother are shown to be poles apart in their ideology of their space in a nation. While the grandmother is radical about a free nation-state of India, Ila on the other hand, wants to escape from the cultural and traditional burdens of India and accept the freedom of a nation-less state.

If we look at the character of Ila in *The Shadow Lines*, she has lived most of her life in London and she thinks that London is refuge against the oppression of the Indian society. She would write to her cousins back at home about the many affairs and friends she had in school, which were all made up stories to cover up for her lonely, segregated life. The narrator ponders on how "Ila who in Calcutta was surrounded by so many relatives and cars and servants that she would never have had to walk so much as the length of the street...had to walk alone because Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian." (76).

Here we can see how Ila was the worst victim of the Diaspora condition. She could neither stay in India nor could she find happiness abroad. She had to frame stories so that her cousins back at home would not make fun of her. Her character is similar to the character of Piyali Roy in *The Hungry Tide*. Piyali too has been living in America from the time she was one

year old. She too claims to be an American rather than an Indian. She comes to the Sundarbans to do a survey of marine animals with no intention of living in the country. However by the end of the story – “‘you know, Nilima,’ she said at last, ‘for me, home is where the Orcaella are: so there’s no reason why this couldn’t be it.’”(Ghosh 400). The difference as to why one of these characters has a comparatively less complicated life is that while Ila is strictly believes that India is bad and London is good , Piyali tries to see good and bad in both India and America. She does not limit her idea of home just in America but anywhere where her work takes her,

Ila on the other hand, strictly believes that London is her home even though London keeps rejecting her. As a child she is not being able to connect to London due to racial conflicts and an adult when her husband has an extramarital affair. Ila keeps ignoring these facts as she cannot see beyond London. Ila is continuously trying to fit into London but the reason she is not able to fit into this cosmopolitan society is that she is not ready to be a part of it. She can only be part of a cosmopolitan society if she considers herself a global citizen and think beyond the norms of one country being better than the other.

Thus Ghosh brings forth various ideas which instigate in us various ideas about being part of a nation and having a space of our own. Through the two characters, Tham'ma and Ila (*The Shadow Lines*) Ghosh gives a third ideology of nation-state which the unnamed narrator of the book follows: he neither supports the radical views of Tham'ma or the nation – less view of Ila but a view where there is space of improvement, a space which is not static but constantly incorporating newer views. Thus he tries to trace an event which he as a child experienced but there was no mention of it in any sources – local or foreign. He with his ideology wants to trace and expose these events to other people as he knew this occupies an important place in his life

and the lives which were affected during the riot. Thus Ila and Tham'ma unconsciously help in the growth of the narrator.

Just like the narrator of *The Shadow Lines*, Kusum in *The Hungry Tide* along with other refugees try to create a space for them to live in. These refugees were once part of Bangladesh but during the war their villages were burnt down to ashes. They crossed over to India but there they were taken to a settlement camp by the police. However, these people could not live there so they went in search of a new place and here they heard of Morichjhapi, an empty island. Kusum joins them as she feels that she is related to these people by language, "we were joined in our bones; the dreams they had dreamt were no different from my own" (165). Here Ghosh develops the third form of ideology of a free state neither part of India nor Bangladesh.

These revolutionary ideas inspire Nirmal to contribute to the cause of the refugees in Morichjhapi. Thus we can see that Nirmal realizes how alienated he had been throughout his life and now all of a sudden he feels that he could make himself useful and see the world in a new light through the eyes of an uneducated woman, Kusum with revolutionary ideas. Just like Uma had removed the picture of Queen Victoria hanging on her wall after hearing the comment of Dolly in *The Glass Palace*, here we can see that Ghosh develops the idea that the ideology of a free nation/space can exist among people of any strata of the society regardless of their educational qualifications.

The aforementioned examples in the book *The Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide* and *The Glass Palace* demonstrates how the female characters are either succeeding or failing in creating new kind of space for themselves and also gives insight about their ideas about nationalism.

Ghosh explores a transcontinental nationalism in *Sea of Poppies*. The book explores Ghosh's basic idea about breaking of any boundaries. Anita Roy in her review of *Sea of Poppies* writes:

The book is a lyrical exposition of social hierarchies- the sharp divisions of caste and race – and what happens to those who, by division or circumstance, transgress. Deeti breaks caste by marrying the low caste wrestler, Kalua. Paulette, by upbringing rather than by birth, is an Indian- more comfortable speaking Bengali than English...And for all the Indians on board, The Black Water, the kala – pani, is a Rubicon, the crossing of which cleanses or robs them, of their past and their caste (200)

This ibis (ship) symbolizes a cosmopolitan space where people of different ethnic groups, caste and class come together willingly or due to circumstances. Deeti in this space transcends her religious, moral patriarchal values and confronts with her past. Paulette draped in the sari represents her true self of that of an Indian. The ibis gives her the space to be herself. Even if this journey is temporary but help the characters to create a space for themselves.

## Chapter Three

### Exploring female sexuality: its boons and burdens

Sexual encounters form an important part of literary works and in most of Ghosh's books there are strong references of them. Our aim is to look at how sexuality and sexual encounters act as a restricting or liberating force in the lives of women and how they affect widening or limiting their space.

In *Sea of Poppies* we see that Ghosh has given several references of sexual encounters. These references act as symbols of freedom, male domination, innocence, etc. At the beginning of the novel itself we see the incident where a woman is tricked into marriage with an impotent man by her own brother. Later to hide their son's incapability her in-laws consummate her in a drugged condition by her brother in law: "her mother-in-law had every intention of ensuring that whatever had happened on her wedding night would be repeated; that she would be drugged and held down, to be raped again by the unknown accomplice" (37).

When we read at first the incident of Deeti being raped, it seems to be an atrocity done towards Deeti. However, upon further reading, this incident is also the first time in life when a woman brought up in a conservative family during the 19th century India takes action against the act of violence committed towards her. In the article "Rape and Rape Laws: Sexism in Society and Law", Camille E. Le Grand talks about how rape crushes a female's individuality and self-esteem and the law makers' capability even in the present day to give the justice which the rape victims deserve :

The fear of rape not only inhibits the freedom of women, it also exaggerates the dependency of women upon men. The law concerning forcible rape and the way it

functions both influences and is influenced by the relationship between men and women in our society. (919)

“The fear of rape not only inhibits the freedom of women, it also exaggerate the dependency of women upon men”; (919) but in the case of Deeti, there is no one to depend on as she knows that her husband is also an accomplice in the crimes being done upon her. As a result Deeti takes it upon her shoulder to avenge the rape done to her:

Next morning Deeti mixed a little trace of opium into her mother-in law’s sweetened milk...her contentment was enough to dispel whatever misgivings Deeti may have had: from that day on she began to slip traces of the drug into everything she served her mother-in-law’(18).

There is an indication that her mother-in-law died due to the prolonged effect of being intoxicated with opium. This is how Deeti takes her revenge.

Deeti is shown as an object of desire. She is constantly being physically abused by Chandan Singh, her brother- in-law, even when her husband is on his death bed. “But once past the door, he paid no attention to his brother and had eyes only for Deeti: even as he was entering he would brush his hand against her thigh” (157). This is done on the pretext that her husband dies without leaving a male heir to the property, Deeti would be thrown out of her own house.

As we trace Deeti’s journey in the novel two contrasting conclusions can be drawn. One can criticize Ghosh for using Deeti as an object who is molded into various roles according to the story of the novel he is writing. Judith A. Kirkpatrick explains in her article, “From Male Text to Female Community: Concha Espina's *La esfinge maragata*” how the male writers portray their female characters:

[...]he creates stories about the mysterious young woman, turning her into a “character” in his fictions and changing her role to fit his fantasies. She is an innocent young girl, a woman of the world, or a sacrificial victim depending upon the “novel” in his head (262).

Secondly, a contrasting conclusion which can be drawn is that through these incidents in Deeti’s life, particularly the time when she is continuously harassed by her brother-in-law, Ghosh gives insight into how wrong Partha Chatterjee must have been when he explained in his article “Colonialism, Nationalism, Colonized Women : The context of India” that during this period in India it was thought that the outside world was impure and thus the domain of the male while the inside is pure and so the women should be confined within it to protect them from the treacherous harshness of the outer world. Ghosh criticises the idea of a woman is safe from the treacherous outside world within the boundary of her household.

While the above examples focus mainly on the abusive nature of sexual encounters Ghosh shifts his focus to other aspects of intimate encounters:

It was when she was dropping the langot over him that her eyes were drawn, despite herself, to focus on his nakedness...She had never before, in a state of consciousness, been so close to this part of a man’s body and now she herself staring, both in fear and curiosity, seeing again that image of herself on her wedding night...Her family and her village were looking over her shoulder, watching as she sat with her hand resting intimately upon the most untouchable part of this man (59).

In this extract we see that Deeti is drawn towards Kalua. She does not think of her family but about her own repressed desires. This act of sexual encounter symbolizes the freedom which Deeti had never experienced in her life. So what had prevented her for so long to explore her

sexual freedom? Donald L. Mosher in his article "Threat to Sexual Freedom: Moralistic Intolerance Instills a Spiral of Silence" sheds light upon religion or moral values and their conflict with sexual freedom:

Moralistic intolerance threatens sexual freedom. Sex-negative ideologies, characterized as Normative and Jehovanist, regard sexuality as dirty- producing moral corruption and creating social disorder...Although they flout the rule of reason, unjust social laws remain as a heritage of antisexual ideologies...they remain confused about their moral grounds, cowed into a spiral of silence (492).

So we can see how moral values force Deeti to live within the confinement of her household and not to explore her freedom. However, finally when she sees Kalua she foregoes these patriarchal values and holds his manhood. However, it is only after the death of her husband that she finally breaks free from the clutches of these moralistic values and marries Kalua.

So, while in the beginning we saw that sexual encounters symbolize repression of women; Ghosh also gives examples where these encounters act as weapons for women which they could make use of and subjugate even the great Zamindars with. Here he discusses dancers and sex workers who in many cases had complete control over the landlords. He gives instance of a fictional dancer, Elokeshi, who has succeeded in controlling the present Halder of Raskhali using her charms to such an extent that when he is disposed of his position and taken into captivity by the British he holds himself guilty that because of his conducts he might have mired Elokeshi into shame. She "was not considered a great beauty: her face was too round, the bridge

of her nose too flat, and her lips too puffy to be pleasing to the conventional eye...but it was not so much her looks as her spirit that had drawn Neel to her”(43).

Lata Singh in her essay “Visibilising the ‘Other’ in History: Courtesans and the Revolt” says that how these courtesans even after being “ a significant section of women’s history, especially of those on the margins – considered the “other” woman in the construction of middle class woman remain invisible”(1677). Elokeshi represents

The common women, considered to be coarse, vulgar, loud, morally degraded and sexually promiscuous. Having greater access to the public sphere, these women are relatively independent, outside rigid formations and not so clearly contained by caste, class, gender or a demarcated space and so considered threatening. Bringing these women as subjects into history would unsettle the middle class “respectable” discourse (1677).

We can relate this to Partha Chatterjee’s dichotomy of “Ghar-Bahir” once again. Since these groups of women (courtesans) could not be controlled within the parameters which were not prescribed for the middle class women, they were considered to be threatening; in other words they were powerful in their own rights and Elokeshi exerts this power on Neel Ratan Singh.

Ghosh gives insight into a different form of intimacy where despite no physical contact a woman can draw a man towards her to the extent that he is ready to dedicate his entire life for her. Nob Kissan Baboo “understood that his feeling for his aunt was but a profane version of what she herself felt for the divine lover of her visions; he understood also that only her tutelage could cure him of his bondage to his earthly desires”(162).

Ghosh shows that not only through physical attraction as in the case of Elokeshi but also in the form of platonic love a woman can exert her control over a man consciously or unconsciously. “Never once did Taramony permit him to touch her in an unchaste way- yet he would find himself trembling in her presence; at times his body would go into a kind of seizure, leaving him drenched in shame” ( ?? ).

The idea about sexual freedom brings upon the concept of repression which the patriarchal society introduces to dominate women. The informal punishment chosen for Munia for ‘whoring herself to a lascar’ was to be gang raped. When Deeti goes to her rescue she is also subjected to an attempt of rape by her uncle-in-law, Bhyro Singh – her crime being running away with a man who saved her from the funeral pyres of a Sati ceremony and marrying him. “Your jora? said Bhyro Singh. You can forget about that scavenging piece of filth. He’ll be dead before the year’s out” (476).

During this incident Deeti comes to know that she was not just raped on her wedding night by her brother-in-law but was actually gang raped in which both Chandan Singh and her uncle-in-law, Bhyro Singh were involved: “He smiled again: Who do you think it was who held your legs open on your wedding night? Did you think that green twig of a launda, your brother in law, could have done it on his own?” (477).

Then again, the incident when Paulette and Jodu meet after a long time and hug each other is an important one. Jodu’s mother has brought up Paulette after her mother’s death as her own child.

He buried his face in her shoulder and she felt a tremor running up the sinews of his back. Suddenly alarmed she pulled his nearly-naked body still closer, trying to warm him

with his arms. His loincloth was still wet and she could feel the dampness seeping through the fold of her dress (148).

The argument which arises here is that if the depiction of the meeting between Paulette and Jodu in such a sexually explicit way was necessary or not. However one can interpret this incident in a different light. This incident of body contact symbolizes warmth, care, friendship, family bonds between two childhood friends. Beth Younger in her article "Pleasure, Pain and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature" talks about how young females turn towards young adult novels as they "provide multitudinous representation of young girls as sexual beings. More subtly, these texts reveal that young female bodies are important sites of cultural contestation" (45). Thus a section of readers will commend Ghosh for exploring different facets of female sexuality.

On the other hand, when Paulette realizes that they are being watched over by Zachary she gets conscious and in her mind she realizes the reality of the situation as to how will she justify a white woman to be in the arms of a boatman: "A stream of exonerating lies tumbled through her head: that she had fainted because of the stench of the 'tween-deck, that she had stumbled in the darkness: but none of these would be as convincing, she knew, as to say that Jodu had assaulted her and taken her unawares- and that she could never do."(149)

There is a strong hint of racism induced here; the idea does ring in Paulette's head that she can just save herself by putting the blame upon Jodu though she soon discards it. Finally, the incident brings out the fact that even the white women were subjected to justify their actions to the white men just like women of the colonized nations.

In Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* there are various references to sexual encounters. Ghosh portrays the character of Ma Cho as a symbol of desire:

During the day Ma Cho was a harried and frantic termagant...But by night...a certain languor entered her movements. She would cup her breasts and air them, fanning herself with her hands: she would run her fingers through the cleft of her chest, past the pout of her belly, down to her legs and thighs. Watching her from below, Rajkumar's hand would snake slowly past the knot of his longyi, down to his groin (8)

Saya John, a businessman from Singapore visits her every time he is in Burma and indulges in sexual activity with her. It is indicated that she is in love with him but she does not allow this love and physical indulgence to give her the false illusion that he might marry her someday:

She pushed him away with one of her sudden gestures of exasperation. You don't understand you thick-headed kalaa. He's a Christian. Every time he comes to visit me, he has to go to his church next morning to... ask forgiveness. Do you think I would want to marry a man like that?(10).

Ghosh then explores sexuality as a symbol of union."He unrolled his cotton langot and dried her blood with it, swabbing it from her thighs...the sunburst of her blood was flecked with the opacity of his semen. They stared at the vivid cloth in silent amazement: this was their handiwork, the banner of their union" (86).

The same incident can be seen as a symbol of sexual awakening. The First Princess catches Dolly and Sawant, their coachman in compromising positions. The reaction is that of anger 'in the heat of her anger she was transformed from a twelve year old girl into a woman'.

She forbids both of them from ever indulging in such activities. At first the readers feel that the princess does it because she wants to uphold the traditional values. However it is later revealed that the Princess gets impregnated by the same man and marries him. So we can analyze her anger to be due to her jealousy and also her awakening of sexual desires for Sawant.

Then Ghosh explores the terrain of how lack of sexual activities between a husband and a wife can result in illegitimate relationships. When Uma finds out that Ilongo is the illegitimate child of Rajkumar she confronts Ilongo's mother as to why she indulged in a sexual relationship with a married man. Ilongo's mother explained to her that she had asked the same question of Rajkumar as to why he is having sex with her when he has a wife who looks like a princess: "He told me that his wife had turned away from the world; that she'd lost interest in her home her family, in him..." (236)

It is later revealed that Dolly is aware of this but she still does not confront Rajkumar as she finds herself guilty for not giving time to her husband 'Uma, you're very angry with Rajkumar and I suspect I know why, but you should not judge him too harshly, you know, you must remember that I too bear some of the guilt' (248).

Ghosh highlights the question if lack of marital sex justifies a husband/wife to indulge in extra marital affairs. Ghosh then explores how a single physical encounter leaves a deep impact in the life of a person, no matter how tiny it might be. Bela is shown to develop a liking for her brother's batman, Kishan Singh. One night she slips into his room and they have a tiny conversation. At the end, 'he pulled her to her feet and led her to the door. Just as she was about to slip out, he stopped her. 'Wait.' With a hand under her chin, he kissed her, very briefly, but full on the lips.' (297) Bela does not get married throughout her life and keeps Kishan Singh in

her memory till the end of her life: “But when Bela lit the dhoop sticks, there were always four bunches, not three. Without ever being told, Jaya knew that the extra one was for Kishan Singh: he too was among their dead.” (486)

Finally, Ghosh explores physical desire as a way for Alison to discover the love of her life.

She slid off the rock and stood neck deep in the water beside him. Taking his hand, she led him back through the pool, exactly the way he had come, to the other bank. They walked hand in hand, fully clothes and dripping wet, up the path that led to the ruined chandis. She took him through the clearing, up to a stone floor where a bed of moss lay on the laterite. Then she reached for his hand and pulled him down. (352)

This is the first time Alison has physical encounter in her life. Dinu considers this as a symbol that they are in love with each other. However, Alison is doubtful as days pass and she feels that Dinu is too involved in his photography to pay attention to her. It is only when her and Arjun’s body came in contact with each other she felt:

As though they were both absent, two strangers, whose bodies were discharging a function’ (374). ‘It was only against the contrast of this cohabiting of absences that she could apprehend the meaning of what it meant to be fully present – eye, mind and touch united in absolute oneness, each beheld by the other, each beholding (374).

This is how she realizes what love means and how different lust and love are – without love sexual intercourse to her is just a function but with love sexual encounters meant “to be fully present – eye, mind and touch united in absolute oneness”.

Thus we see how Ghosh explores women's space in his novels through their sexuality, desires and abuses. Women's sexuality sometimes becomes restricting and humiliating for them, whereas at times it can liberate and empower them. Their sexual selves determine their personal positions, having an impact on their lives and place in the society. In case of Deeti her brief sexual encounter with Kalua brings out all the feelings of liberation which she had repressed within herself. Elokeshi uses her sexual prowess to exert her control over even the zamindar. For Bela one kiss with Kishan Singh in her adolescence makes her love him throughout her life. For physical scene between Paulette and Jodu can be seen as a symbol of brother-sister bonding. At the same time Deeti is being constantly harassed sexually. Elokeshi is cut out from the category of 'bhadramahila'. Paulette has to explain her actions even in her own mind about hugging Jodu. One can notice that a lot of times the sexual factors which act as liberating factors for the women, helping them to assert their position in the world overlap with the factors which dominate their freedom.

## Conclusion

Since Ghosh's "essential interest is in people and their lives, histories and predicaments" (Hawley 6), the paper intended not only explore the fictional characters in his books but relate them to the realities prevalent in the society.

In the first chapter the emphasis was on how Ghosh portrays his female characters' relationship with history and traditions. The aim was to identify how history and traditions shape up the identity of females not only for a particular era but also for the future. It is seen that history and traditions go hand in hand. Partha Chatterjee's article "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India" becomes very helpful in understanding how the identity of Indian women formed during the colonial period. The dichotomy of "Home-World" defined the women's identity. While Deeti internalized this dichotomy and became subjugated by the norms of the patriarchal society, Tham'ma becomes part of a new class of educated middle class women who despite having freedom were still controlled by newer spiritual signs set up by the society.

One can see that traditional concepts like Sati were used by the patriarchal society for their own gains. Land owning laws were used even in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to exploit women and even today they serve the same purpose. Times have changed and similarly methods to exploit women have changed from religious tactics (Sati) to academic tactics (legal maneuvers)

Ghosh shows how females were part of the nationalists fight against the British. Uma is portrayed as a political activist while Supayalat and Tham'ma have strong nationalist feelings. It is important to note how the patriarchal society tries to exert its control upon women criticizing them as they try to break free from the traditional identity they are associated with; the case

being Uma who is criticized by Rajkumar for having her own opinion and not relenting and following his ones. We see how “patriarchies build personal relationships into exploitation, operate inside the sphere of relationship of love, nurture and sexuality”(Sangari 5). Emotional exploitation has been used historically to make females dependent upon males and prevent them from achieving their goals. With the passing of time, it is evident that women are breaking free from the Goddess like image which has been forced upon them historically. Nilima chooses her career over her husband and emotions.

The second chapter deals with the space which women occupy in society. Like Ghosh's idea about merging of boundaries it becomes evident that all the three parameters which were used as the base for each chapter merge with each other leading to the ultimate goal where a comment can be made about the position of women. One cannot separate women's space in society from her history in the society.

Partha Chatterjee's explanation of a “ghar-bahir” dichotomy makes easier to understand how the Indian society pushed women in the name of tradition and confined them within the parameter of the household while the British in the name of freeing women from these traditions established their rule over the country. So during the British era or even after it, it was the woman who suffered trying to find a space for herself as both the British and the nationalists saw them as symbols to exert their hold over the country.

Ghosh brings in the concept of cosmopolitanism – people giving up any one particular identity and becoming a global citizen. He shows how some fall victim of this and cannot accept themselves the way they are. The only reason Piya could succeed in becoming part of a cosmopolitan society was because she could merge her American and Indian identities while Ila

falls victim because she constantly criticizes her Indian background and blindly supports her London based identity.

Ghosh believes in transcending boundaries. Boundaries symbolize the shadow lines for him and he “think[s] these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded”(Hawley 9). One can notice that the ship (ibis) which Ghosh writes about in *Sea of Poppies* symbolizes this very idea of Ghosh of having a cosmopolitan space where people of different ethnic groups, caste and class come together willingly or due to circumstances. In the ship Deeti transcends her religious, moral and patriarchy instigated values and confronts with her past. Paulette draped in the sari represents her true self of that of an Indian. The ibis gives her the space to be herself.

Finally, in the third chapter we see how sexuality acts both as a hindering and liberating force for women. Ghosh explores territories such as marital rape and here again it is evident how tradition is being used to justify a crime as grotesque as rape. While Deeti is raped owing to her sexuality, it is also her sexual arousal which gives her the courage to break free from the oppression cultural ideologies. Elokeshi uses her sexual prowess and controls even the great zamindar but we see how society sees her in a negative way. The reason for this can be the fact that courtesans like her have shunned the limitations of the household and crossed over to the outside world which was traditionally considered strictly a domain of the males. They act as threat to male supremacy and hence new parameters are induced in the “ghar-bahir” dichotomy which sees them in low light. The author also sees sexuality as a medium for expression of love and bonding. Thus we see how Ghosh explores women’s space in his novels through their sexualality, desires and abuses.

It becomes difficult to comment on the position of women because we see in the paper that there is no linearity in the development of women. Ghosh mirrors the reality of the society where a certain section of women are transcending the limitations of time, space and sexuality while others are still stuck in the trichotomy. However, it can be commented that a woman's position which improve in the society only if there is improvement in all these three spheres of her life and also if they is ready to see the world as a cosmopolitan society and shun any kind of boundaries, be it of language, culture, nation etc.

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