



Economic Revival and Empowerment of Women - Nilima as an Agent of Metamorphosis in the Hungry Tide

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to prove that the women of today undergo self transformation breaking barriers to attain their goal bringing forth societal transformation. Achieving economic independence is the priority and that is dealt with special reference to Nilima in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*. Nilima, one of the major characters stands as an evidence to Ghosh's anti patriarchal sentiments and pro feminist attitude demonstrated through her portrayal as a confident and a revolutionary woman. The paper further attempts to trace the efforts put forth by Nilima to constitute a trust titled Badabon Trust in expanding phases, fighting the masculine power, suavely negotiating with superstitious mindset of the tribes etc. and to establish the trust as a model NGO working for rural India. Nilima, a self made woman evolves as a facilitator not only building a hospital but equipping it with electric supply, and providing economic self-sufficiency to the tribal women and to the inhabitants of Lusibari. Nilima's main objective is to manoeuvre the natural resources to revive the socio economical conditions of women and make them self sufficient and independent to live their lives with dignity, respect and freedom.

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Introduction

Women need to be part of the political, social and economic transformations taking place across the world. Unless these processes involve women, women will merely become "recipients" of change rather than "agents" of change.

RumbidzaiKandawasvika-Nhundu

It is a universal phenomenon that there are promulgations spoken and written all over the world for women's empowerment paving way for the versatile development of a nation. Surprisingly we find that women's empowerment is only at the fragment level even in the Western Countries that boast about women's equality in the socio, political and economical scenario. In the words of Simon de Beauvoir, women get their empowerment only when she is freed from 'economic oppression' (Beauvoir: 55).

Economic status is the most important factor which would pronounce the prominence of a person in today's society. It is much more significant for a woman to be economically independent because her personal autonomy and freedom in decision making greatly depends on her materialistic income. also fetches her respect and dignity in the modern society irrespective of the gender difference. It also fetches her respect and dignity in the modern society irrespective of the gender difference.

Amitav Ghosh is a writer who has brought in dynamic changes in his novels creating women characters, as educated and economically independent who can make their decisions pertaining to private as well as public life. Shifting of images of women in Indian Scenario has taken the centre stage in the novels of Amitav Ghosh.

In the novel *The Hungry Tide* the reader comes across women characters, though ordinary beings but standing up as the most admirable, sheer for their courage and their willingness to emerge as independent women. One such character is Nilima, a

bold woman who stands resolute and determinant in getting married to the man of her choice- a first step she takes to break the familial norms, rigid and conservative.

A bold woman who stands resolute and determinant in getting married to the man of her choice- a first step she takes to break the familial norms, rigid and conservative She trusts her husband despite knowing that her marital life would be complicated and at times she has to suffer due to the strangeness of the place they have decided to live in at Lusibari. This condition prompts her later to strive hard to rebel, revolutionise and create a forum for herself to question the existence of her status and also of other women in her area, ridden of basic comforts and instead surrounded with life threatening troubles. She clearly comprehends the essentiality of evolving as a woman, working for economic liberation from the forces deferring women's rights and equality. As quoted by a feminist Jessica Valentine, "Feminism is all about financial freedom..."

Amitav Ghosh believes that women are equipped with amazing leadership qualities and if responsibilities are bestowed on them they would serve for the cause of the society. Deepti in *Sea of Poppies* and Nilima in *The Hungry Tide* are such leaders shaping themselves and shaping the society around. Nilima empowered with education and revolutionary mind-set, works hard to fulfill her dream of building others life, and her inner strength never fails her from completing her task and achieving her goal. Her honesty and transparency in running the NGO makes it a model for others and women find solace in her work. "Nilima", as complimented by her relative Kanai Dutt, "was legendary for her persistence - her doggedness and tenacity had built the Badabon Trust into what it was, an organization widely cited as a model for NGOs working in rural India."(19) As an activist, Nilima wishes that her actions should speak louder than her words and in turn the Trust would grow for benefit of all the women who depend on it for their livelihood.

She orients the women to use their skills and the material resources available in their area to weave and sew clothes that could be sold through the trust. She is the first to buy and adorn herself with their makings: "It was her practice to dress in saris woven and crafted in the workshops of the Badabon Trust, garments almost always of cotton, with spidery borders executed in batik." (21) To swirl women to her ideology is not an easy task for her. Women living in that tide island are bound with "male hegemony" (Feld:39) peculiar and awry. Widowhood is something that is dreaded of by Indian woman. It not only deprives them of a secured life with their husband, rather it makes them economically stranded. Surprisingly the women of the tide island are taught to prepare themselves for widowhood and the exterior changes of being unadorned with marital symbols in their appearance. Nilima is awestruck and appalled learning their habits:

Making inquiries she learnt that in the tide country, girls were brought up on the assumption that if they married, they would be widowed in their twenties –their thirties if they were lucky. This assumption was woven, like a skein of dark wool, into the fabric of their lives: When the men folk went fishing it was the custom for their wives to change into the garments of widowhood. They would put away their marital reds and dress in white saris; they would take off their bangles and wash the vermilion from their heads. It was as though they were trying to hold misfortune at bay by living through it over and over again. (80).

Metamorphosis is hard to occur in such stern ambience. As Clara Nubile in *The Danger of Gender* observes, "In modern India the situation is still far from an ideal, liberated, democratic model. Indian women keep on struggling against the burden of tradition, against the legacy of the past and the orthodoxy of patriarchal system." (271) If Nilima intends to create awareness on the need of changes to empower them and to improve their monetary condition, she has to remain passive and should never touch their culture and life style. She re-examines the Lusibari women's beliefs, understands their vulnerability and begins the process of metamorphosis talking to "the women who gathered at the wells and the ponds..." (80) with an aspiration to get them changed: "it did not matter what they were; what mattered was that they should not remain what they were." (81) Nilima's views on shifting of the existing images of Lusibari women are akin to the views of a feminist Rosemarie Tong who says that "change and growth are necessary to life and what makes feminist thought liberating is its vitality, its refusal to stop changing, to stop growing." (237)

In the past, the widows had been the oppressed lot. Nilima realises that widowhood "often meant a lifetime of dependence and years of abuse and exploitation." (81). She earnestly desires to transform them. It is her retrospection on the conditions of a widow she has witnessed at Lusibari and Lusibari shopkeepers' exploitation and the unjust behaviour toward her that compels Nilima to unite the Lusibari women and to instruct them to explore strategies to save money. Meanwhile this 'tiny seedling of an idea' (81) is a small move to establish the Women's Union, a forum in the name of 'Mohila Sangothon.' (81) Nilima's chivalrous attitude helps her to provide all possible services- "medical, paralegal, agricultural" (81) for people through this union. She convenes meetings several times a week to work on 'income-generating projects' – knitting, sewing, dyeing yarn and so on." (89). Nilima's perseverance and consistent efforts convince the women to be the members of the union and later associate with her as members of Badabon Trust, a NGO organisation that she starts to reach the society

ridden of basic needs and facilities like hospital. Hospital is one of the vital needs of people living in a village. When Government sector fails to provide health care facilities due to lack of resources "it is up to NGOs and private parties to step in and collaborate with the government in creating infra-structure for healthier India since India still lives in villages." (Soparawala)

What Nilima contributes to Lusibari through NGO sector cannot be underestimated. The hospital turns out to be not only the landmark of the village but also a solarium discarding darkness literally and figuratively in the lives of the people living there. She procures jobs for many villagers; a generator donated by one of the trust's benefactor illuminates the entire place and the children find the hospital a fitting spot to read; it helps them to save oil and candles.

The outer structure of the hospital building proves to be an epitome speaking of her power. Her nephew, Kanai is able to measure the hard work of Nilima behind this massive work standing before his eyes as a hospital. "They were nearing, the hospital now and seeing the building close up gave Kanai a renewed appreciation of the sheer scale of Nilima's achievement." (131) The maintenance and cleanliness of the hospital speaks about the efficiency of the person who heads it. Just one hospital is instrumental in metamorphosing the lives of the entire village. Nilima is surging not only with power but with a spirit to take hold of multiple responsibilities to sustain the socio economic conditions of women. Her foresight and vision gives birth to concrete actions towards financial independence especially for women who work in the hospital. Heavy traffic beside the hospital "led to the growth of a small service industry around the hospital's perimeters. Over the years, a number of tea-shops, guest houses and stands for cycle-vans had taken root and flourished. Directly or indirectly the hospitals now provided employment to the majority of Lusibari's inhabitants." (132-133) When she observes that settlers are a threat to the hospital and her husband is showing uncanny interest in getting involved with them she becomes furious. She resists his attempts and warns him of its impact:

And if you ask me what I will do to protect it, let me tell you, I will fight for it like a mother fights to protect her children. The hospital's future, its welfare – they mean everything to me, and I will not endanger them. I've asked very little of you all this time, but I'm asking you now: stay from Morichjhapi[...] If you get involved with those settlers you will be endangering my life's work. Just keep that in mind. That's all I ask. (214)

Nilima has to constantly fight with him to stop him supporting the settlers who disrupt the peace of Lusibari and disband the real purpose for which the hospital is built. What meant just a "social Service" to Nirmal is a "revolution" to Nilima. (388). Nirmal is not very supportive of her "robust and enduring social activism of his wife Nilima" (Choudhury) he persistently discourages and dismisses "her life's work" (120) as "an ineradicable stigma of 'social service'" (82). The obstacle she encounters externally is minimal in its amount and intensiveness when compared to her husband's reaction and response. The patriarchal society believes that the impact of women's work upon the family is dilapidating as it brings a breach between its members. Socialists and economists bring this incongruent and unpleasant situation under spill-over effects model (Chow and Berheide:5). Feminists believe that this model is biased and does not favour women. Though Nilima is depressed due to Nirmal's behaviour, she does not let him to stand a barricade to her endeavours. Her sense of independence persuades her to ignore her husband's biased attitude. She also

transcends her moments of combat with her Marxist husband and emerges “as a modern woman who retains her personality intact with rationality and responsibility.”(Sree: 45). She decides to go on with her social activism and build hospital and provide medical assistance only to people of Lusibari and not to anyone else despite knowing her husband’s favouritism for settlers from Morichjpai. Kusum, the settler from Morichjpai requests her to send medical help for them, Nilima’s outright as well the practical and discrete sensibilities makes her conscious of hospital’s destiny if she volunteers to help the settlers. Though an iota of mercilessness is surfaced upon her benevolence, there is a valid reason when she brusquely brushes aside Kusum’s request: “Nilima was immediately on her guard. She told her that as he would have liked to help, but it was impossible. The government had made it known that they would stop at nothing to evict the settlers: anyone suspected of helping them was sure to get into trouble. Nilima had the hospital and Union to think of: she could not afford to alienate the government. She had to consider the greater good.” (122)“ The greater good” is the medical service rendered through the hospital to the natives of Lusibari village.

Nilima continues to revel in the thought of her achievements though not with pride but with an attitude to self motivate to enlarge her vision and to bring changes in the constrained lives of Lusibari people especially the women. Feminist consciousness is divided between “consciousness of victimisation” (Lee:15) and “the joyous consciousness of one’s own power, of the possibility of unprecedented growth...” (Lee:16) Nilima is tossed between her consciousness of her power and also of her powerlessness. As a powerful women she unites Lusibari women under common edifice. At the same time she is also aware of her limitations and powerlessness to protect them from “the worlds ills”(29) pertaining to “male violence” (29). There are many occasions when she could not succeed to satiate the needs of under privileged who have built their life catching fish, crabs and prawns. The usage of nylon nets is a scourge to the spawn of fish and tiger prawns. And Nilima fears that by fifteen years there shall be no fish and she bravely resists it but could not stop for the political pressure involved in the matter. She consoles herself of the benign factors she has accomplished for the wellbeing of the people of Lusibari which even Sir. Daniel Hamilton could not do: I’m not capable of dealing with the whole world’s problem. For me the challenge of making few little things a little better in one small place is enough. That place for me is Lusibari. I’ve been given it everything I can yes, after all these years, it has amounted to something: it’s helped people; it’s made a few people lives little better. (387)

There are many other women characters like Piya, Kusum and Moyena notable for their unique characteristics in *The Hungry Tide*. Yet Nilima deserves to be glorified for her philanthropic sense and her readiness to adapt to any kind of

situation unhesitatingly shedding of her comforts for selfless reasons. She rebels against the conservative society, political intimidation, mentally unstable husband, settlers at Lusibari, ferocious tides and animal threats to solve the problems of women’s subordination and their socio economic liberation through Badabon Trust. Her relentless efforts fetches her one of the country’s highest honours.

Thus we find in *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh has struck a balance in his authorship as a social writer with profuse responsibilities towards the development of women’s status and their sustainability by creating women characters who are socially strong and economically independent. Being a powerful writer, his pro-women novels undoubtedly leave an impact on the readers’ mind and trigger their passion to contribute consciously to build a better society. The need of the hour is women leaders, gifted with an eye to explore evils, an attitude to foresee ensuing impacts, an aptitude to metamorphose the entire system and an energy to act in coalition with entire force supportive to building of nation – nation ensuring safety and peace to women. Nilima’s revolution and her renderings to the society as a leader, though not the major issues of the novel, are sure to impress the readers especially the women readers and motivate them to deeply get involved in social activities and act as agents of metamorphosis.

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