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Amitav Ghosh's Vision of Man-Woman Relationship in *The Hungry Tide*

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Literature is the analytical, critical, emotional and psychological expression of human life which is nothing but a bouquet of multi-coloured relationships like filial relationship, conjugal relationship and sibling relationship. Though all the relationships are important part of life yet man-woman relationship is considered the most pervading human relationship. Emphasizing the importance and value of the man-woman relationship, D.H. Lawrence, a great English novelist, points out in 'Morality and the Novel', "The great relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary." (1972: 130)

Right from the ancient epics and legends to modern fiction, the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression in modern time, literary endeavour has been to portray this relationship along with its concomitants. Twentieth century novelists treat this subject in a different manner from those of earlier writers. They portray the relationship between man and woman as it is, whereas earlier writers concentrated on as it should be. Now-a-days this theme is developing more important due to rapid industrialization and growing awareness among women of their rights to individuality, empowerment, employment and marriage by choice and preference. The contemporary Indian novelists in English like Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Sashi Tharoor, Salman Rusdie, Shobha De, Manju Kapoor and Amitav Ghosh deal with this theme minutely in Indian social milieu.

Amitav Ghosh, an anthropologist-cum-novelist possesses a deep knowledge of human psyche regarding man-woman relationships. He is concerned with the inner world of his characters. He tries to look for the deep desires, emotions and feelings felt by his characters and shows them as the influencing factor behind their action. In his novel 'The Hungry Tide' (2004), Ghosh chiefly focuses on the extensive archipelago of tiny islands and labyrinthine waterways known as the Sundarbans which is located in the southern coast of Bengal in India. The people, living there, share an extremely complex ecological and social system free from caste and religion bias. Man-woman relationship is a significant issue in this novel because it explores Ghosh's vision of this relationship which is different from that in most of the other Indian English novelists who think that it is never easy for woman in societies like India to break away from traditional notions of womanhood, especially as there is no widespread system of support available, such as woman's support groups. The extended family is often the only support network women have, and there is very real fear of being completely isolated with no means of survival.

In Indian patriarchal society, man-woman relationship is akin to master-servant relationship. Dr. A.K. Mishra observes, "Man-woman relationship is based on the woman's subjugation to man in India where a woman performs all drudgery, submits to the demand and blows of her husband and becomes a child-bearing and child-rearing

machine." (2007:174). P. Ramamoorthy confirms this view when he says: "Man's relationship with woman is most often the bond that exists between a master and a slave." (1991:115). But Ghosh's novel presents a different view of man-woman relationship. His female characters are not, merely, objects, child-bearing and child-rearing machines; rather they possess equivalent rights, duties and freedom to men in the family as well as in the society. Man-woman relationship seems to be based on equality.

Ghosh depicts three shades of the relationship between the two sexes in this novel viz. hunter-prey relationship, conjugal relationship and extramarital relationship. We find the hunter like attitude of Kanai, the central male character in the novel, towards the leading female characters - Piya, Moyna and Kusum. He appears to be a notorious womanizer. His comment about Moyna, "I'd say Moyna is the kind of woman who would be good for a brief but exciting dalliance." (2004:220) and his aunt, Nilima's warning to Piya about Kanai character, "he is one of those men who likes to think of himself as being irresistible to the other sex" (251) reveals his character, attitude and lecherous eye on women. Though he is well educated and well settled person from the capital of India yet he is very orthodox in his notions regarding the values and status of women. He treats them as objects or commodities like shoes and clothes to use, to change and throw at will.

Kanai, a forty year old bachelor, thinks that he has the true connoisseur's ability to both praise and appraise women. On account of this illusory notion about himself, he attempts to establish relationship with a young Indian-American cetologist named Piya who is a well educated and sensible woman. She quickly understands his evil desire for herself and begins to ignore him. Kanai himself concludes that Piya does not need his services, apparently supposing she can communicate intuitively with her guide Fokir: "I think you'll be able to manage perfectly well without a translator." (333) Fokir is able to establish emotional contact with Piya despite the communication barrier between the two which goes much beyond the depth and extent of the spoken or written words, simply because he is good at heart.

Piya's appreciation for an illiterate, poor, and low-caste boatman provides fuel to the burning fire of jealousy in Kanai's heart. The conversation between Kanai and Piya shows the simplicity of Piya and shrewdness of Kanai who thinks her to be her own property:

Piya said. 'Fokir's abilities as an observer are really extraordinary. With him....it was one of the most exciting experiences of my life.'

A sudden stab of envy provoked Kanai to make a mocking aside.....

'Listen,' said Kanai, in a flat, harsh voice. 'You shouldn't deceive yourself, Piya: there wasn't anything common between you. He's a fisherman and you're a scientist. (268)

Kanai does not know that true relationship does not need similarity in money, colour, education and status; it needs only love, care and mutual understanding. He does not want to marry her; rather he wants only physical relationship with her. Piya is quite sensible to smell his lecherous desire and rejects him strongly.

Getting disappointment with Piya, Kanai turns towards Moyna, the wife of Fokir. She works as a nurse in the Lusibari hospital, run by Nilima. While talking to Moyna, he very cunningly explores to her the relationship between Fokir and Piya so that she could begin to hate them and walk into his net. He exposes his shrewd strategy to kill two birds with one stone for his own benefit, in his following conversation with Moyna:

"You're a bright girl, Moyna," Kanai said. "If you knew what he was like, why did you marry him?" (156)

Moyna, why don't you forget about Fokir? Can't you see that as long as you're with him you'll never be able to achieve anything?" (258)

But Moyna, an educated and Indian married woman who loves her husband more than anything else in the world, does not bite the bait. Though she is jealous of Piya yet she cannot compromise with her honour at any cost. She can sense Kanai's evil intentions easily. On the parting day of Kanai from Lusibari, Moyna is very much happy to get rid of a lecherous animal in the form of man.

Kanai had been preying upon young women ever since he was a teenager. Being rusticated from his college in Delhi, he had come to Nilima and Nirmal in Lusibari. That time also he was in search of his prey i.e. woman. He saw Kusum, a widow "in her mid-teens, dressed in the frilly 'frock' of a child instead of a woman's sari." (90) He did not sympathize with her misfortune and pitiable condition; rather he took it as a golden chance to exploit her compulsion for his sexual gratification. He sat with her so closely that his body can get the warmth of her body and did what he should not do:

"Although he didn't dare look at her too closely, he became aware that their bodies were grazing each other at the shoulder, the elbows, the hips and the knees. Presently he saw that there was a mole on the swell of her left breast; it was very small, but he could not tear his eyes from it." (91) On an impulse, thinking to console her, he slid his hand...in the fold of her frock. His fingers grew frantic as he tried to extricate them and instead of finding this way out they encountered a soft and expectedly warm part of her body." (106)

Kusum was highly shocked at such an evil mischief by Kanai. She, suppressing her cry, jumped aside and went stumbling from there. She understood Kanai's desire to make her prey for sexual union for which she did not surrender herself. Kanai's all unsuccessful attempts to seduce women, show that Ghosh does not approve of such patriarchal notions regarding man-woman relationship.

The novel depicts conjugal relationship between Nilima and Nirmal; and Moyna and Fokir. Nilima belongs to a high class family. She is a well known figure, both in the islands and to the powers that be, in Kolkata. She belongs to a family, well known for its tradition of public service. Her grandfather was one of the founding members of the Congress Party and her father was an imminent barrister at the Calcutta High Court. She was enrolled in Ashutosh College where she was impressed by Nirmal's burning lectures. She fell in love with him so much that she married him against her family's will in 1949.

Nirmal was a leftist intellectual and due to political disturbance, he had to leave for Lusibari in 1950. Nilima like Sita, leaving her family and all the pleasures and luxurious of life, went with him in the forest. In Lusibari also she earned a dominant and effective place in the society for her and her husband happy life. Ghosh provides him with such a power that she organized an N.G.O in order to earn name and fame for her husband in the locality. She is prominent not only in the family but in the administrative society also:

She had developed a reluctant familiarity, with the officialdom of forests and fisheries. She had been expecting a grimy bureaucratic honeycomb and was taken aback to find herself looking at a small brightly painted bungalow. (30)

She does not want to see her husband in trouble and to lose him. So, she advises him not to take part in Morchijhapi movement but he ignores her and helps the people especially Kusum. It, naturally, creates a doubt in her mind and she became fearful of the extramarital relationship between Kusum and Nirmal. But Ghosh delineates her so much liberal and sensible to understand the reality of their relationship which was only an emotional attachment and not the physical one. Even after death of Nirmal in 1979, she wants to fulfill his desire and calls for Kanai for this purpose.

The relationship between Moyna and her husband Fokir is also based on love and trust. Both of them love each other by body and soul. She treats him as her Pati Permavesvar as per in Hindu religion. Though her husband is illiterate and she is educated, working as a nurse in a hospital at Lusibari, yet she does not need any option as is offered by lecherous Kanai. She snubs Kanai as is evident from their conversation:

‘You wouldn’t understand,’ she said.

‘I wouldn’t understand?’ he said sharply.

‘I knew five languages; ‘It doesn’t matter how many languages you know,’ she said. ‘You’re not women and you don’t know him. You wouldn’t understand. (156)...He’s my son’s father, Kanai-babu, Moyna said. ‘I can’t turn my back on him. If I do, what will become of him? (258)

Kanai, still a bachelor at the age of forty, cannot understand the intimate relationship between a husband and wife which is often shrouded in mystery. Sarbjit K Sandhu also refers to the strange and mystic elements in conjugal relationship when he says:

Marital life is nothing but a queer combination of several forces acting upon two human beings in different capacities to fulfill the marital ambition and play a vital role in society. Women are simpler in the given roles of the two human beings do undergo a change both at the functional and psychological levels. (1991:22)

Moyna herself can share anything with other but not her husband, not at any cost in the world. When she finds the proximity of Piya towards Fokir, she grows conscious of Piya. She knows well that Fokir’s spontaneous innocence is sure to create emotional ripples in Piya. She is fearful of losing her husband and even has an eye on both of them secretly. She does not exhibit her fear openly and makes Kanai to ask: “She wants to know why a highly educated scientist like you, needs the help of her husband - someone who doesn’t even know how to read and write.” (211). Piya’s answer “His knowledge can be of great help to a scientist like myself ” (212), removes all the doubts of Moyna and strengthens their bond of conjugal relationship.

The novel also offers a unique treatment of extramarital relationship by Ghosh. The extramarital relationship between Kusum and Horen is not for lust but for needful love. Kusum is a widow mother of a child and Horen has three children and a beautiful wife of his own. After death of her husband, Kusum cherishes true love for Horen who cares and helps her in searching her mother. Horen also develops extramarital relationship with her and even is ready to leave his wife and children. Out of Nirmal and Horen, Kusum chooses Horen as her lover. On the night before her death, she not only offers her body but also hands over her son, Fokir to Horen who took him back to safety. Horen himself describes their true love with each other:

The night before the killing – Kusum said to me, ‘come let’s go outside.’ She led me to my boat and there. She gave me proof of her love – all that a man might need.....it was as if the barriers of our bodies had melted and we had flowed into each other as the river does with the sea. There was nothing to say and nothing to be said; there were no words

to chafe upon our senses. Just an intermingling that of fresh water and the salt, a rising and a falling as of the tides. (364)

The extramarital relationships between Nirmal and Kusum, Fokir and Piya are spiritual. They were bound in the emotional attachment; not in physical one. Nirmal is impressed by the revolutionary notions of Kusum and loves her for that. But Nirmal could not enter Kusum's heart. Kusum chose the illiterate Horen over the educated Nirmal who on the other hand finds him to be torn between his wife Nilima and Kusum:

I felt myself torn between my wife and the woman who had become the muse I'd never had; between the quiet persistence of everyday change and the heady excitement of revolution – between prose and poetry. (216)

Piya is impressed by Fokir's knowledge of dolphins and child like simplicity. He is a human being in the right sense as he sacrificed his own life to save Piya. She remembers the mighty storm which gave them a single chance to be united:

Their bodies were so close, so finely merged that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him; she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (390)

After Fokir's death, when Piya returns to the Badabon Trust, she acknowledges Fokir's contribution and her spiritual love for him so much that she names her project 'Fokir'.

A deep study of the novel from the view point of man-woman relationships shows that women are not the slaves of man's desire. Piya, Moyna and Kusum easily sense of Kanai's evil desires for them and object to his designs so strongly that he changes his traditional thinking and returns Delhi. They seem to show a revolution against the traditional man-woman relationship in which a woman has to survive in the face of frequent physical abuse, mental torture, endless drudgery and continuous sexual exploitation. They are not mere objects in the hands of men to use them; they are the second and essential wheel of a cart or marital life which runs smoothly on the road of mutual understanding and emotional attachment. Ghosh provided them with such a power that they are the decision makers like Kusum and Nilima, heads of the family like Moyna, achievers and employers like Piya and Nilima. They have modern sensibility, higher education, liberal attitude and courage to revolt against marginalization. Above all they are true to their relationships with men.

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