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Resilient Women of Sundarbans in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract: ***For decades, literature has played a vital role in the feminist movement. Fiction helps to look at the challenges of women on various levels, whether in the workplace, family, emotional, or physical. Over the years, writers have written fiction to depict women's challenges and their brilliance and determination in overcoming them. Amitav Ghosh is one such writer who has often depicted women who put their heart and soul into it when it comes to achieving their goals. Both in personal and professional life. Ghosh's novel The Hungry Tide depicts working women who put their best foot forward despite sexual assault, caste discrimination, and financial difficulties. A cetologist named Piyali Roy comes to Lusibari for her work. Despite the sexual harassment, she finds a way to achieve her dream of studying dolphins. Financial and caste barriers confront Moyna, but she still finds a way to survive by studying and working as a nurse. Nilima is being called to serve the Sundarbans' people. She tries to fit herself into the system to ensure that the Lusibari people have as many facilities as possible. Kusum finds herself in the most difficult of all female characters. She loses her mother as a child, and her husband when she was young, and almost becomes a victim of sex traffickers. The novel depicts the challenges as well as the unbreakable spirit of women vividly.***
Keywords: Feminism, Ecocriticism

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has often depicted women in domestic environment. Women are shown to deal with issues of family and personal life more than their issues in work life. This leaves an impression that a woman's life revolves around personal life and nothing else exist beyond it. But women have professional life too where they are expected to meet goals and perform well. Women also have desires, aspirations, and dreams of fulfilling goals at professional front. A very limited section of literature shows women working with determination towards their goals and the problems they face in work life. Amitav Ghosh has presented such women characters in his works like *The Glass Palace, Gun Island, The Hungry Tide,* etc. where women lead successfully in their work life. Where many women fail to get acknowledged by people, Ghosh presents a wide range of female protagonists in his novels who are defined by their work.

In the paper "Role of Women in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide," Mrityunjay Mondal analyses the plight of subaltern women in Sundarbans as portrayed in the novel. He also highlights how the women characters 'play significant roles not only to make a separate identity for themselves but also to empower the women of the tide country' (Mondal 71). Dr. R. Manimozhi studies women characters as social reformers in selected novels of Ghosh. He highlights how 'his women never get suppressed by the patriarchal society" (Manimozhi 2) and 'much more determined in progress towards their desired goals' (Manimozhi 3). Suswagata Chowdhury studies the struggle of women against norms and desperate attempts to transgress gender roles in The Hungry Tide. She sees how the vulnerable position of these women characters 'drives them to seek an identity with an urge to defy the well-established gender roles' (Chowdhury 54) while challenging 'the established patriarchal setup' (Chowdhury 55). Dr. Venkateswarlu Yesapogu studied "The Status of Women in Amitav Ghosh's Oeuvre- a feminist Perspective" in which he concludes that women in Ghosh's novel struggle with 'systematic exclusion' from 'cultural production' (Yesapogu 59). To deal with this exclusion "They become sacrificial beings in the process of liberating and establishing alternative structures of living" (Mondal 59).

In this paper, we study how the female protagonist of the novel *The Hungry Tide* is portrayed in the workplace. What kind of problems did characters face in their workplace? Whether they have peaceful personal life or not and how does it affect their professional life? Then there is the overall analysis of female protagonists in the novel.

II. CHARACTERS

The novel presents four female protagonists Piyali Roy, Nilima, Kusum, and Moyna. While Nilima and Piya came from outside Sundarbans, Kusum, and Moyna grew up in the wilderness of Sundarbans. Even though these women had different social backgrounds, they all stood similar in their spirit of work.

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Nilima was a determined woman who had built the Badabon Trust, out of her persistence, doggedness, and tenacity, in Lusibari. It was 'a model for NGOs working in rural India' (19). A glimpse of her determination appears on the surface when she persuades Kanai 'in the quiet but firm tone' to visit Lusibari. She was well known in Lusibari as 'Mashima' for the 'great sacrifices' that she had made in the public interest. Her fame could be understood properly when Kanai asks Piya to visit Lusibari and ask for 'Mashima' or aunt and explains to her that

She's a real personage on the island- everyone calls her 'Mashima' (Ghosh 14)

She loved her husband Nirmal as passionately as she was devoted to her work. She fell in love with Nirmal when she used to go to college where he taught. Nirmal's fiery lectures and impassioned recitations had mesmerised many other girls in his class, who even claimed to be in love with him (Ghosh 76). But 'none of them had Nilima's resolve and resourcefulness' (Ghosh 76). One day Nilima followed Nirmal onto a bus and found a seat next to him. Within a window of a few months, she told her family that she wanted to marry him (Ghosh 77). Despite her family's opposition, she married Nirmal in a civil ceremony in 1949 (Ghosh 77).

Nilima supported Nirmal throughout his life. When doctors suggested Nirmal to spend some time outside the city, Nilima took help from her father who found a job for Nirmal in Lusibari. Then they decided to spend some years in Lusibari but stayed for life. On reaching Lusibari they saw the hopeless poverty-stricken people. Both felt a need to help the people of Sundarbans but had different approaches. Where Nirmal was overwhelmed and 'read and re-read Lenin's pamphlet without being able to find any definite answers' (Ghosh 80), Nilima 'began to talk to the women who gathered at the wells and the ponds' (80). Nilima was determined to bring a change in the social conditions of women which led 'to the foundation of the island's Mohila Songothon- the Women's Union- and ultimately to the Badabon Trust' (81). The union continued to grow more and more and offered "an ever-increasing number of services- medical, paralegal, agriculture. At a certain point, the movement grew so large that it had to be reorganised, and that was when the Badabon Development Trust was formed" (Ghosh 81).

Nirmal didn't support Nilima, rather he criticised her efforts of building Mohila Songothon as 'it bore the ineradicable stigma of 'social service', *shomaj sheba*" (Ghosh 82). After Nirmal's retirement, when Nirmal and Nilima developed a difference of opinion over Morichjhapi, Nilima continued to care for and love Nirmal despite their differences. Nilima was uneasy about Morichjhapi's issues and wanted Nirmal to stay away from it. But Nirmal was obsessed with the conflict of Morichjhapi so much that he completely forgot about Nilima. He became a stranger to Nilima and didn't talk to her. He hid things from her as if she was his enemy (Ghosh 119). Nirmal's behaviour continued to haunt Nilima the year after his death. When Kanai tries to talk about Nirmal when he met him in Lusibari, Nilima stops him saying

Stop, Kanai. Don't talk about it. I can't bear it. (Ghosh 25).

The very idea of Nirmal standing on the embankment in Canning triggered the chain of memories in Nilima's mind which haunted her. She believed that he might be out in the rain when he was found on the embankment because he caught pneumonia and died a few months later. Despite all those memories, she called Kanai to fulfill his last wish of getting his journal published.

Kusum was from Satjelia island. Her father had died leaving her mother with no source of income. A landowner named Dilip Choudhury had offered Kusum's mother a job in the city and had asked Kusum to go with him to the city to work with her mother. But Horen Naskar, a distant relative to Kusum, found out about Dilip's plan of trafficking Kusum to a brothel in the city. He rescued teenage Kusum and brought her home with him.

Being born and brought up in Sundarbans, she knew about the culture and life of Sundarbans islands. When she befriended Kanai in childhood, she told him about 'everything happening around it- cockfights and pujas, births and deaths' (101). She had deep faith in the local Goddess Bon Bibi. Like all natives of Sundarbans, she ardently believed that Bon Bibi was the main provider of food and water in the region. People believed that Bon Bibi saved people from the adverse environment of Sundarbans and made it worthy of living. She even passes this faith to her son Fokir who till his death stayed closely connected to *Gorjontola*, where Bon Bibi is worshipped. Kusum lived a difficult life from growing up without parents to almost getting trafficked and later becoming a young widow. But her faith in Bon Bibi remained intact. She had a strong will which helped her survive the hardships of life. She settled in Morichjhapi as a refugee, which was being threatened by the government. People on Morichjhapi island were being forced to leave the island as it was declared a forest reserve. But Kusum was head bent on not leaving the island. She became part of the revolution against the Government. It was her wild revolutionary spirit that attracted Nirmal and Horen Naskar. Both had a romantic interest in Kusum, but Kusum chose to marry Horen in her last days. Kusum died in the massacre.

Piyali Roy, an American cetologist, visits Sundarbans to study dolphins. She emerges as a passionate researcher who travels and studies marine life. She faces sexual harassment when she starts her journey with Mej-da and the guard.

At the beginning of the journey in the water, Mej-da makes a series of gestures to address the "points of similarity in their appearance- their clothes, their skin colour, the dark tint in their eyes and the cut of their short, curly hair' (34) which ends with obscene gestures of pointing 'in the direction of his tongue and his crotch' (34) and the laughter. But Piya was used to such 'company of watchers and minders' (34).

Kanai Dutt also hoped for a relationship with Piya. He invited Piya to visit Lusibari, so that he can know her more. He saw her as an opportunity that 'often arose unexpectedly' (16). When Nilima learns about Kanai's motive, she becomes bitter toward him saying

You're all same you men. Who can blame the tigers when predators like you pass for human beings? (Ghosh 243)

But it doesn't stop Kanai and he continues his attempt to woo Piya. Piya being a lone researcher, often travelled a lot which prohibited her from deep long-term commitment to anyone. She explains Kanai

Relationships aren't easy, you know, given the kinds of lives we lead. (311)

But it didn't mean that she didn't desire a relationship. She finds herself getting attracted to Fokir. It was only after Kanai showed her the reality of their social background that Piya started to see the reality. Being a married man from a different culture, a relationship would have not been successful. She even turns down Kanai's proposal for the same reason. However, her personal life and frequent incidents sexual harassment never stopped her from continuing her work.

Moyna was a native of Sundarbans. She joined the Trust as a "barefoot nurse" through a programme, which was an outreach project that aimed at providing medical assistance to people to people in out-of-the-way villages (128). Nilima was in awe of Moyna's efforts and diligence. She called her "ambitious and bright" (129). She completed her education without any support from her family. She used to walk kilometers to another village to get a school education. She wanted to go to college and even prepared a scheduled caste certificate but her family wasn't supportive of her plans. They decided to get her married. But it didn't stop her from pursuing her dreams. She wanted to become a nurse. So she made Fokir move to Lusibari so that she could achieve her goal (129).

She was married to Fokir who was not a match for her at an intellectual level. They had major differences of opinion when it came to raising their son. Fokir wanted Tutul to become a fisherman like him. While Moyna wished education for Tutul so that he could become an officer. Despite their difference of opinions, Moyna doesn't lose feelings for Fokir. She starts to worry when she learns about Piya and Fokir spending too much time together. On the other hand, Fokir shows no sign of affection and care towards Moyna. He stays lost in his thoughts most of the times only worrying about himself and his son. Just like Moyna's family, Fokir didn't support Moyna in any way either.

III. ANALYSIS

All the women characters did not have a very happy personal life. They were neither supported by their respective families nor their spouses. Kusum managed to find love in Horen but then she died shortly after. Moyna ended up being a widow. Nilima was haunted by memories of Nirmal even years after his death. Piya kept getting involved with people with whom it was impossible to have a family. Sadness and hollowness echo in their lives throughout the novel. There is an element of loneliness in their narratives because of the lack of support from their families.

But despite their hopeless situation in their personal lives, they continue to prosper in their work. Nilima continues to work in the Badabon Trust for the welfare of people. Moyna continues her work as a nurse at the Trust. Kusum doesn't get disheartened by the situations in her life and gathers strength to fight against the government. Piya smoothly carries out her research, without getting much affected by the incidents of harassment and disappointed romantic relationships.

They channel their energy and emotions toward their work. It plays a crucial role when it comes to dealing with a lack of fulfillment in their personal lives. To a great extent, work relations substituted for the supportive and caring family that they lacked in their personal lives. Toward the end of the narrative, Moyna, Piya, and Nilima develop a good connection and hand out mutual support to each other. These work relations and achievements in the workplace brought them peace that they lacked in their personal lives.

Four of the characters nurtured their work as a baby with their maternal instinct. Nilima devotes her life to Badabon Trust as if a mother devotes her life to a baby. In the same way, Piya becomes a mother to all her dolphins whom she researched for work. Kusum and Moyna's life starts to circle their sons which affects their work-life decisions.

IV. CONCLUSION

All of these women characters shared the indomitable spirit of working despite obstacles and hindrances. Their difficult personal relationships didn't stop them from continuing their dreams. Work life also becomes a mode of channelling their energy into something productive which keeps them distracted from their issues of personal life. Maternal love also plays an important role in their work life.

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Nilima nurtures Badabon trust as her child while Piya treats her dolphins/research subjects as children. On the other hand, Moyna and Kusum use the energy of their maternal love towards their sons Tutul and Fokir respectively in their work life. Their sons become a reason for them to chase their goals with more determination. M. Sarathamani writes

The women are portrayed as the preserver of home and the protector of culture, but at the same time women suffer and struggle, rebel and accept the reality. (Sarathamani 49)

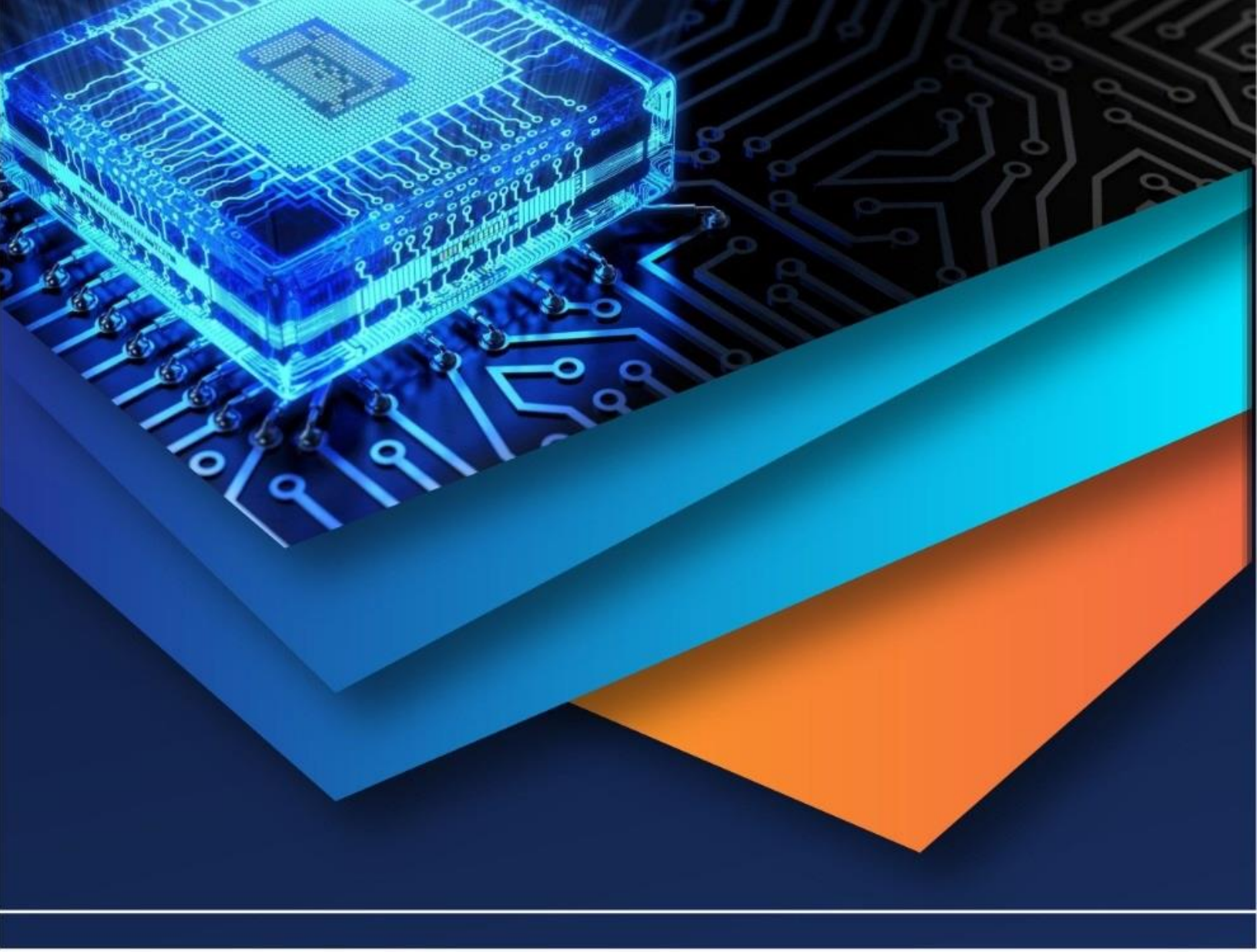
Thus, through his narrative, The Hungry Tide Amitav Ghosh succeeds in portraying the resilient nature of women.

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