
Fluid Boundaries and Threads of Identities: Unraveling Women's Narratives in *Flood of Fire*

Aparna Bajpai,

Research Scholar, Department of English & M.E.L, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, U.P. (211002)

Dr. Rajesh Verma,

Associate Professor of English, (Research Supervisor), Department of English & M.E.L, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, U.P. (211002)

Abstract:

Flood of Fire (2015) is the final volume of the *Ibis* trilogy by Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh following *The Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011). Amitav Ghosh's complex narrative strategies, high seriousness, and low humor tendency, and to probe the nature of national and personal identity are reflected quite remarkably in *Flood of Fire* concerning the 19th century opium trade between India and China which triggers the exploration of the colonial history of Opium wars and its impacts on diverse agencies. The novel has empire, commerce, culture, and identity as its primary themes; however, the intertwining of identity with gender can also be traced. This research paper intends to explore the intersection of gender and identity through the feminist lens examining female characters employed in the novel. This paper aims to analyze the struggles of female characters to redefine their identities within a patriarchal and colonial framework, and the reflection of the distinction and tension between rooted cultural expectations and individual agencies. Postcolonial feminism emerges as a prominent theoretical framework which would be the primary lens for the intended analyses by highlighting the journeys of female characters such as Shireen Modi, Paulette Lambert, Deeti, and Mrs. Burnham which would contribute significantly to the proposed objective. These female characters present a nuanced reflection of active feminist identity rejecting passive societal roles, emphasizing resilience, determination, and establishment of personal and economic independence in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, gendered exploitation, racial discrimination, resistance, Individual agency

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is a renowned Indian author born in Calcutta in 1956 and received the Jnanpith Award in 2018 which is India's most prestigious literary award. He has explored fiction and non-fiction in his writings drawing inspiration from history, myth, and culture employing various genres such as Historical fiction, travelogue, memoir, and autobiography. He invites readers' attention towards his works through his complex narrative techniques, exploration of contemporary events drawing parallels amongst their development and relevance to futuristic possibilities. Some famous works by him are *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tides* (2004), and *Ibis* trilogy which contains *Sea of Poppies* (2009), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015).

The *Ibis* trilogy is a historical fiction and falls under the category of postcolonial literature. This series is set during the 1830s across the Indian Ocean region amid the background of the First Opium War. The story represents a nonlinear narrative technique. The title is inspired by a schooner slave ship named *Ibis* that is used to transport opium and *girmityas*. The story highlights the opium trade between India and China and the trafficking of *girmityas* to Mauritius. *Girmityas* were British-Indian laborers who were transported from India to other various places to provide a workforce. In this trilogy, Ghosh emphasizes the role of India in the represented scenario. The series puts well-researched historical themes and ambitions which received great academic and critical acclaim. However, Amitav Ghosh writes,

There is no primary research. On the Indian presence in Canton, so little has been written. Historians have tended to write the military history of the war but the Opium War was very much an Indian war- finances, transport vessels, Indian Parsis, Bohras.

The first volume, *Sea of Poppies*, begins with the departure of *Ibis* from Calcutta for Mauritius carrying *girmityas* but faces a major storm. The second volume, *River of Smoke* is set in China indicating the tension between local authorities and international traders. Two more ships are introduced in this installment named *Anahita* and *Redruth*. *Flood of Fire* the third and final volume of this trilogy which culminates the outbreak of the First Opium War (1839-1842) and its impacts across the Indian Ocean region. *Flood of Fire* begins with

the after events of the separation of crews and passengers of Ibis due to certain circumstances in the previous two volumes. The novel connects their fates and circumstances generated through social and political forces to highlight the resulting era. The plot revolves around various characters such as Kesri Singh, Zachary Reid, Shireen Modi, Neel Rattan Halder, Deeti, Mr. Burhnam, etc. The story opens in Bombay with Shireen Modi, a major character who is moaning over her fate. She asks a question, '*Is there really nothing left? Nothing?*' which hides its answer as yes because in the background of this question lies a situation where her deceased husband has sold all his ships and stocks to a British businessman named Mr. Burhnam at low prices. Also, he had a wife in Canton as well who was dead before Shireen's acknowledgement. Shireen decides to visit her husband's grave and his illegitimate son in Canton, here the narrative focus shifts to Mr. Burhnam, and an ambitious and mix-raced Zachary Reid who is employed by Mr. Burhnam. Reid gets involved in an affair with the wife of his employer and raises his social and economic status to be an Opium merchant on his own. Afterwards, the invasion of the British over Canton comes into the center of the plot where the British army is seen through the eyes of Kesri Singh who is an Indian sepoy in the army. The invasion and British intention of free trade calls for an Opium War and is continued at the end of the novel.

This research paper aims to analyze Ghosh's representation of the female struggle to maintain and redefine identity, existence, and resilience in a male-dominated framework with the background of war and colonialism. This intersection of gender and identity set against the backdrop of colonialism and patriarchy provides ground for examining the novel within the light of postcolonial feminist theories employed by theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Bell Hooks, etc.

Postcolonial feminism critiques the patriarchal canon as well as Eurocentrism being the center of the mainstream and acknowledged feminist stream, also puts the unique, infamous, and unconsidered experiences of colonized women at the front. Ghosh's novel also criticizes the imperialist ideologies and patriarchal set of thoughts with an emphasis on the complexities of gendered power relations suiting well with the notable theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty analyzes the Western feminist discourse and talks about the homogenization of Third World Women in her seminal essay *Under Western Eyes* (1984). She argues that in the

understanding of Western feminism, primary adjectives for non-Western women are oppressed and unaware. Also, colonized women are considered ineligible to account for the social, cultural, and historical aspects of their experiences. Mohanty's observation is relevant to Ghosh's colonized women as they are shown as victims of colonial patriarchal power. However, they portray individualism and agency within the limitations and barriers of imperialism. Shireen Modi, for instance, struggles to navigate the established system for the security of her family's status and wealth, breaking the stereotypes imposed on her for being a Parsi widow. Also, Paulette Lambert, who is a Frenchwoman brought up in India represents the concept of hybridity discussed in postcolonial theory. She lies both within and outside of the power dynamics of colonialism due to her mixed cultural identities which represent a remarkable imprint of the intersection of race and gender challenging colonial binaries to create complex identities existing out of the box. According to Mohanty, such identities claim attention towards the reframing of the existing understanding of gender instead of the status quo where women are considered universally oppressed. This simplistic categorization is rejected.

Another prominent postcolonial theory of subaltern is derived from an essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is crucial for examining female perspectives portrayed in *Flood of Fire*. She argues that subaltern women, especially colonized women, are considered of no voice. They are considered ineligible to speak or present themselves in the discourse, be it colonial or postcolonial. They are thought of as having no opinions, choices, or individual identities. Hence, they are presented by colonial authorities or patriarchal structures and often get appropriated or erased by the same. *Flood of Fire* has certain female characters that stay silent with whatever they get to face and belong to lower or marginalized classes, which resonates with the theory and observation of Spivak. One notable example is Deeti, sister of Kesri Singh. Her position as a lower caste widow and tendency to choose silence reflects the tension between agency and voicelessness in the colonial structure. She suits well as a subaltern character who eventually chooses to escape to Mauritius later on which shows her resistance. Although colonial structures and male actions have been defining factors of her entire journey. Deeti's silence at particular times resonates with the idea of Spivak that subaltern women remain unheard mostly within dominant discourses, even when they establish themselves as an

exercising agency. Spivak's contention of Western feminism and its tendency to be the voice of the subaltern women is also detected here. Even when Ghosh has given voice to women like Deeti and Shireen, the tension between voicing the experiences of their struggles and the risk of simplified or romanticized presentation of the same is noticed widely which reflects Spivak's Idea of the rise of dominant power structures to silence subaltern's voices or to capture the authority to speak for them due to some ulterior motives.

The concept of *hybridity* by Homi K. Bhabha stands out as a central idea to the postcolonial theory and presents significant implications for feminist analyses of colonialism. The cultural and racial mixing that occurred in colonized places is understood as hybridity. Hybridity often produces identities that are neither colonizer nor colonized but amalgamated. In *Flood of Fire*, Paulette and the lascar sailors represent hybridity. Particularly the character of Paulette represents both, hybridity and feminist discourses in a colonial setting. She is a woman struggling with British imperialism as well as the patriarchal norms of Indian society. She challenges and refuses the dominance of either cultural expectation. The novel's connection with the themes of hybridity and fluid identity goes further with Paulette's relationship with Zachary Reid, an American of mixed-race heritage. An ambiguous colonial environment is created due to the mixed cultural existences and Paulette registers a gendered resistance within a given frame.

One more prime example from the novel is Kesri Singh who is a sepoy in the British army, whose consciousness is Indian. His complex relationships with women of his family and community reflect the gendered dimensions of colonialism. His story highlights the disrupted notion of pre-existing gender norms with the emergence of Western gender understandings in the colonial framework, and reshaped masculine and feminine identities; further complicating the intersections of gender, race, and power.

Within the framework of *intersectionality*, Kimberle Crenshaw provides another important lens for the analyses of *Flood of Fire*. Different axes of identity- such as gender, race, class, and caste intersect to create unique narratives of oppression and dominance, marginalized and privileged which is considered intersectionality. Indian society faces exploitation of pre-existing class and caste division due to dominance of the British colonialism and related gendered hierarchies that reflect a salient instance of intersectionality in the

colonial context. Shireen Modi, a high-class Parsi widow enjoys certain privileges as a wealthy widow; but still becomes subject to double dominant orders, patriarchal norms of Parsi society, and the colonial system. Shireen's journey through these intersecting identities resonates with the argument presented by Crenshaw that gender cannot be understood in isolation, in exclusion from other axes of identities.

At the same time, the lascar sailors- many of whom belong to marginalized backgrounds- are subjected to another form of intersectional oppression. They are put under poor working conditions and racial discrimination, on the other hand, their indigenous idea of masculinity is challenged by the rigid colonial hierarchies of the British. Another significant concept of *feminism from the margins* by Bell Hooks offers valuable insights in the light of Flood of Fire. This concept proceeds the concept of intersectionality further with the demand of putting focus on the interconnectivity of race, gender, and class emphasizing the significance of centering the voices of marginalized women in feminist colonial discourse. In the novel, Deeti and Lascar women are not voiced at the front foot which asks for a need to retell the narrative with their perspectives and central force resonating with the argument by Bell Hooks.

Moreover, Ania Loomba's ideas about colonialism and power dynamics also draw parallel with Flood of Fire. She also talked about the exploitation of traditional gender roles and performativity in new ways. While claiming civilization and modern values establishment, the British enforced Victorian gender roles with defined gendered activities and responsibilities which turned out to be a different cage. Oppression remains constant based on race, class, and gender. For instance, Deeti in the novel gets trapped in the colonial economic framework which indirectly subjects her to brutal labor and working conditions. This proves to be a new form of gendered exploitation. Deeti's journey illustrates Loomba's argument that colonial structures and patriarchy worked together to practice power over colonized women.

In *Flood of Fire*, colonized women stand out as a prominent subject to be studied in relevance to other different aspects such as imperialism, racism, class conflict, and patriarchal structures present in colonialism and Indian society. The experiences of women like Shireen Modi, Deeti, and Paulette Lambert invite more retrospective discussions and studies about the intersections complicating simplistic narratives of Western feminism and colonialism by

situating women's stories within the broader narrative of imperialism and resistance. Ultimately, this novel represents a nuanced depiction of the intricate lives of women navigating the dynamics of gender, identity, and power, their experiences of oppression, and resilience maintaining individual agency within a colonial and patriarchal set of power circles. A deeper comprehensive study of their complex narratives has been attempted in the paper within the theoretical cases framed by mentioned theorists such as *Gayatri Spivak*, *Bell Hooks*, *C. Mohanty*, *Ania Loomba*, *Kimberle Crenshaw*, and *Homi Bhabha* offering invitation to further studies regarding the resilience of women in the light of intersectional oppressions and a continuous struggle to re-establish identity out of the pre-existing and colonial norms.

References:

- Bhabha, H. K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. *Demarginalizing the intersection of Race and Sex*. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Flood of Fire: A Novel*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. Print.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 1984. Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Jesintha, J. *A Study of Feminism Ecology Language and Time in the Select Novels of Amitav Ghosh*. Independent Author, 2023. Print.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism-postcolonialism*. Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Mohanty, C. T. *Under Western Eyes*. Boundary 2, 1984. Print.
- Mohanty, C. T. *Feminism Without Borders*. Duke University Press, 2003. Print.
- Spivak, G. C. *Subaltern Studies*. Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.
- Spivak, G.C. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Afterall Books, 2020. Print.