



## CULTURE AND IDENTITY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S FLOOD OF FIRE

**Satya Narayan**

Research Scholar, Department of English & MEL, University of Lucknow, U. P.

[satyanarayansingh87@gmail.com](mailto:satyanarayansingh87@gmail.com)

### **Abstract:**

Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015) is the last volume of the 'Ibis trilogy' published in 2015. The novel is set against the First Anglo- Chinese Opium War of 1839-1841. The incidents in the novel move through a meandering zig-zag setting of India, Singapore and China. This novel deals with the lives of all the escapee characters of *Ibis* and how they find themselves again together grappling with their passions, desires, ambitions, insecurities, sexualities, and destinies. My paper proposes to examine and explore the cultural identity of women characters in *Flood of Fire* from the perspective of post-colonialism and postmodernism. I would explore cultural and identity situation in *Flood of Fire*. This novel is basically related to the rise and fall of protagonist characters. In this novel the events are dictated by the condition and movements of people. The perspective of writing will be the loss of homeland, money, national and cultural identity of women characters. By using the tools of deconstruction, this paper would focus on how the characters try to escape their wealth, identity, race, bodies, and places of origin while reconstructing his/her identity. In this I would show how the women characters attempt to reconstruct their cultural and personal identity by achieving success in her life.

**Keywords:** Meandering, homeland, deconstruction and identity.

The last part of the Ibis trilogy of Amitav Ghosh is *Flood of Fire*, which was published in 2015. It is mainly related to the nineteenth century opium trade between China and India. The plot of this novel continues and expands the story narrated in the previous two parts of his trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*.

The story of *Flood of Fire* begins in 1939. Deeti's elder brother, Kesri Singh, who is a havildar in East India, learns that Deeti, his younger sister, had ran away with Kalua from her husband's funeral pyre to avoid sati. Deeti was married with Nirbhay Singh's nephew Hukam Singh who was also in the British army but in a battle he was injured in one foot, and so after resigning he started his new job in Ghazipur opium factory. Hukam Singh was addicted to opium and died in his early life after born of his one child. Deeti elopes to her choice with a lower caste labourer, Kalua, because of which her husband's family is ashamed of her.

In *Flood of Fire* Shireen Moddie takes centre stage. It comes as a shock to her to learn about the sudden

death of her husband, Bahram Moddie. Mrs. Moddie sets sail for China as she intends to recover her husband's money in order to pay off his debts in Bombay. She is curious to know the details about her husband's death to Vico, a purser of Moddie, gives them:

It was an accident, Bibiji, said Vico. Sadly, it happened on the Seth's ship, which he loved so much. The Anahita was anchored near an island called Hong Kong, not far from Macau. We had just boarded that day, having come down from Canton. The rest of us went to bed early but Sethji stayed up. He must have been walking on the deck. It was dark and he probably tripped and fell overboard. (FF 16)

The news that her dead husband, Bahram Moddie has sired an illegitimate half-Chinese son, Freddy gives her hope in recovering his money. When she goes to China she is accompanied with Zadig Bey, true friend of his dead husband whom she decides to marry though fully aware that her relationship with Zadig Bey would be disapproved by her orthodox Parsi community.

The novel has also interwoven of tales of love and presented different layers of Human relationship and its intricate complexities – adulterous love of Mrs. Catherine Burnham and Zachary Reid, the love of Shireen Moddie and Zadig Bey and affair of Paulette Lambert and Zachary Reid and the affair of Catherine Bradshaw, love affair Bahram Moddie and Ah Chi-mei and Officer Neville Mee. All these love affairs are showing cultural identity of women characters.

After being remarried with Kalua, Deeti and Kalua are in fact the victims, and are forced to become girmityas or indentured labourers. However, in *Flood of Fire*, Amitav Ghosh describes how prejudice and false pride lead to a different perspective and narrative being imposed on the events.

Shireen Moddie becomes a very important figure in *Flood of Fire* and the manner in which she comes to terms with the death of her husband and how she copes with it bring out the importance of culture and identity in the individual's lives. The moment of Bahram's death during his journey to China, its impact are depicted in terms that are entirely culturally determined.

Shireen Moddie's first concern is to know whether her husband had been properly buried according to religious rites. She is curious to know about the death of her husband in detail to Vico. This is what she asks Vico, pursue of Moddie, who has brought the news about her husband:

So where was he found? On Hong Kong island, Bibiji. His body washed up on the beach. Was there a ceremony? A funeral? What did you do? Toying with his hat, Vico said: We held a funeral, Bibiji. Many other Parsis were in the area; one of them was a dustoor and he performed the last rites. Sethji's friend Mr. Zadig Karabedian also happened to be around. He delivered the eulogy. We buried him in Hong Kong. Why Hong Kong? said Shireen sharply. Isn't there a Parsi cemetery in Macau? Why didn't you bury him there? (FF 17)

In the Indian culture and the Parsi community women were confined to houses and did not play any role outside the house in their whole life. This conservatism is played out here as Shireen's brothers

are also products of this cultural attitude and refuse to allow Shireen to go to Canto and Hong Kong to deal with Bahram's business enterprise to the guardianship of Zadig Bey.

Shireen Moddie informs Zadig that she is handicapped by the fact that she has no male heir to send to Canton to claim money as Bahram, her husband had some sort of problem, something physical that prevented him from begetting a son.' When Zadig Bey reveals to her that Bahram bhai had a son with a Chinese boat-woman, she refuses to believe him. Like the sepoys who believed in saints or faquirs and astrologers, she has absolute faith in a saint who has said that her husband cannot beget a son.

Mrs. Shireen Moddie shook her head and uttered the first words that came to her, in a rush. 'No, Zadig Bey, you do not understand the reality. What you are saying is impossible about him. Shireen said, I can assure you of this because we once visited a man who knows of these things, a renowned Baba, and he explained that my husband would not be able to have a son without undergoing a long treatment. Zadig says, 'you see, Bibiji – what I wanted to tell you is that Bahram-bhai did have a son. . .' He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. 'Yes, Bibiji, what I say is true. Bahram-bhai was the father of a boy.' (FF 102)

Shireen is shocked not only by the fact that her husband is unfaithful to her, but also by the fact that this would happen in China and presumably with a Chinese woman, Chi-mei. She is curious to know about her husband's Chinese son, Ah Fatt. Some scene with Vico who confirms what Zadig had said is crucial:

All right, Vico, she said. Now tell me: who was the boy's mother? A Cantonese woman, her name was Chi-mei. Was she a — a tawaif? Some kind of dancing-girl? A woman of the streets? No, no, Bibiji, not at all. She was an ordinary person, a boat-woman. You could say a kind of dhobin — she used to wash clothes for foreigners. That was how Sethji came across her. And how old is the boy? What's his name? He is a young man now, in his mid-twenties: Sethji used to call him Freddie — short for Framjee. But he had a Chinese name too, and a nickname — Ah Fatt. Where is he now? Where did he grow up? Tell me about him, Vico — now that I know about him, I need to hear more. Bibiji, he was brought up by his mother, in Canton. Sethji was always generous with them. He bought her a big boat and she turned it into an eating place. She did quite well, I think, at least for a while. But she died some years ago. (FF 134-35)

Here Shireen's predicament is the consequence of her cultural and gender identity. She cannot send a male heir; she cannot go as she is a woman because her culture is not go to outside to home, but economic needs are necessary. At the same time, she also wants to visit her husband's grave as a sacred duty of a wife. Now the her hubby's son comes along whom she wants to meet not out of curiosity and compassion but perhaps to discover her husband's presence in him. The cultural predicament of Bahram Moddie and Shireen is outlined below:

Zadig smiled. 'You, Bibiji. Freddie wanted to meet you; he wanted to know you; he wanted to be accepted by you, to be taken into the family. You must understand that Freddie grew up in

Canton's floating city, among the "boat-people", who are like outcasts in the eyes of many Chinese — and he wasn't even fully one of them. Yet he knew that his father was rich and had married into a prominent family. He desperately wanted to claim some part of this birthright. He begged Bahram-bhai to take him away from Canton and bring him to Bombay — but Bahram-bhai knew that Freddie would not be accepted, by your family, or by the Parsi community. He knew that it would only make things worse for him.' There was a catch in Shireen's throat now, and she paused to clear it. 'I can't deny what you say, Zadig Bey: my husband was probably right. There would have been a terrible scandal and my brothers would not have allowed the boy to set foot in the house. Perhaps I too would have refused to meet him. But now that my husband is gone everything has changed. Now that I know about this boy, I will have no rest until I see him. Do you think he might still want to meet me?' (FF 155)

Finally, Shireen reaches Singapore with Zadig. The scene of her meeting with her son, Ah Fatt is described by Ghosh in a manner that highlights how in his attitude and by implication in his character an assortment of cultural and social factors are working. Freddie gives his own interpretation of what he thinks actually happened:

'I think father went down the ladder because someone call him.'

'Who?'

'My mother.'

'Your mother?' cried Shireen. 'But that's impossible. Hadn't she died some years before?'

Freddie shook his head:

'Did not die, lah, my mother,' he said. 'Was murdered, ne? By men who came looking for me. She helped me get away and did not tell them where I went. So they stabbed her and threw her in the river – the Pearl River. There was no funeral, nothing, so she is still in the river, still in the water, this water that we are on. I see her sometimes; she has not found rest, so she comes to me. That night, when Father came here from Canton, in this ship, I think she came to him and called him away. He went down the ladder to go to her. I have seen it so in my dreams, lah. (FF 446)

Shireen is shocked to hear from Freddie about the death of his mother, Chi-mei and how her dissatisfied soul is returning to earth. Chi-mei lost her life to save her son's life. Shireen refuses to believe him about such incident, but then her cultural belief in the existence of souls and that souls appear in dreams to talk to humans are shared with Freddie who has inherited the same belief from her mother's Chinese culture. Thus two similar beliefs interweave and create a common understanding of love and acceptance between the two. While cultural differences can be divided, similarities can unite and bring strangers from different cultures close to each other.

Shireen tells Zadig, 'I saw a dream; it was very strange – like the dreams that Freddy talks about.' . . . I saw that my hubby, Moddie was standing beside me. He had come to see me and there was something he wanted to say his inner thought. 'He asked my forgiveness and said that I should put the past behind me. He said I should look to the future and make the best of my remaining years. Then he took his leave, saying jauch, and that was all. He was gone. That was when I

woke up.’ (FF 451)

Hence, Shireen accepts what her husband says to her in her dream - that she should put her past behind her and should look to the future and make the best of the remaining years of her life. This dream plays a crucial part in her decision to later marry with Zadig, her husband’s close friend. In the following passage, it is very obvious that there is a conflict raging within her due to her desire for Zadig Bey and its impropriety according to the norms of her cultural identity and social milieu.

Shireen described to Mrs. Burnham her personal life after the death of her hubby and feeling at the news about his illegitimate child and his Chinese wife, Chi-mei; Mrs. Said, ‘ever since Mr. Kerabedian came into your life? . . . you’re very lucky you know. You are a widow; you can remarry.’ ‘That’s impossible,’ said Shireen adamantly. ‘My children, my family, my community – they would never forgive me. And I have a duty to them after all.’ Mrs Burnham slipped her hand into Shireen’s and gave it a squeeze. (FF 446)

When Zadig Bey, Mr. Karabedian proposes to Shireen for marriage, she is happy and willing to accept the proposal because her husband has entreated her in a dream to enjoy her future life and to leave her past behind.

However, the problems continue as when after some days Freddie dies suddenly, Shireen suggests that he be buried next to his father. Yet she fears that her community, the Parsis, may object that he was not a member of their community and take this as a transgression against their culture and religion after he was son of a Parsi.

In *Flood of Fire* Amitav Ghosh has always rejected the prevalent ideas of purity of blood, race and culture. As a postcolonial novelist Ghosh believes that identities are always hybrid, not fixed and always evolving.

Paulette Lambert met Zachary Reid on the *Ibis* and they stayed with two days on that. During that meeting they are kissed each other but not taken physical entertainment. She is shy girl who was staying with Mr. Burnham at Bethal Kolkata. Mr. Burnham wants molest of her at his home so she run away from his home and reached on *Ibis* at Reid, and planned never return at his home. Zachary tells to Mr Burnham about the relationship between Paulette and Mr Burnham:

‘She said that while she was here Mr Burnham would often call her into his study, to give her scriptural lessons in private.’ . . . ‘She said that as the lessons progressed Mr Burnham had asked her to do . . . certain thing.’ . . . What he wanted was a larruping – I guess he likes the feel of a girl’s hand on his rump. Don’t understand it myself, but there’re all sorts in this world.’ . . . ‘She agreed because he had been kind to her and she did not wish to appear ungrateful. But one day she realized that what she was doing was very dangerous so she decided to run away.’ (FF 167)

Mrs. Burnham wanted to know the reality regarding to the relationship between them and asked to Reid – did she run away because she had been seduced? Violated? Reid replied that it seemed almost

certain to him now that she was so feared. Paulette said rather that she had decided to escape before it came to that. But that time guessed by me that she hiding something – lying, not to put too fine appoint on it. Reid said to Mrs. Burnham, ‘No matter – her fears.

After knowing about the relationship between Paulette and her husband, Mrs. Burnham was shocked and it was unbelievable point in her life. Some identical points about Mrs. Burnham must be mentioned here:

Zachary looked up, startled, but she pulled his face down again. ‘It’s just the brandy, and the table,’ she whispered in his ear. ‘It doesn’t matter. No one will hear it over the storm.’ Her torn nightdress had wound itself around their shoulders now, and his half-discarded drawers and breeches were wrapped around their ankles. When they tried to move they began to roll in the other direction and crashed into the something else. Zachary’s lips were on her breasts and he didn’t bother to look up. But he caught the sound of her voice, whispering: ‘It’s just my tamacha.’ (FF 169).

Mrs. Cathleen is wife of Mr. Burnham, a businessman. She has a daughter, Annabel. She meets Zachary Reid at her home where Reid came to repair her ship. Reid was bathing in the river without any cloth so she was so angry on him. She is shy woman and well cultural manner taking to her religion. In a party at the home of Mrs. Burnham, she suddenly uncontrolled to her body she need to rest to her body. Reid opened her button of tight gown. She heartily thanks to him and said if you could undo the buttons at the top of my gown. You will get the end of a leather fastening you need only to do pull you need only to do pull on it. Reid gave it a tug and there was a loud creak, followed by a sudden easing in Mrs. Burnham’s constricted postured. She replied:

‘Oh thank you, Mr. Reid! You have saved me – I’m most grateful!’ Now, as Mrs Burnham’s bosom began to rise and fall, inn a steady rhythm, Zachary’s eyes were drawn over her shoulder, to the jewelled pendant that lay at the centre of her chest. On its tip, suspended just above the bustline of her gown, was a sparkling diamond: it pointed towards the triangle of velvety darkness where began the valley that ran between her breasts. The dark little hollow seemed, to grow when she exhaled: Zachary’s gaze was drawn so powerfully towards it that he unconsciously edged a little closed. (FF 88)

Mrs. Burnham was also physically attracted to Reid. She was very carefully watching his body. She wants to know in detail about Reid’s disease and his first sex with a woman.

On hearing the news about the relationship of her husband to Paulette, she was shocked and felt herself to be out of control in her thrill to enjoy physical love with Zachary:

‘When he stirred and tried to disentangle himself, she whispered into his ear: ‘No not yet: wait a little. Tomorrow we will wake to an eternity of guilt and remorse. Since we have only this one night together, we may as well deserve our punishment.’ (FF 169)

Mrs. Burnham and Zachary were closely related to each other. She said, ‘Oh my dear Reid I think we both know that neither of us is strong enough to be rid of the other. You have turned me into a weak, wayward gudda of a woman, Mr Zachary Reid. She said that consoles me in that I am at least assisting you in overcoming your affliction. When Reid proposed her that why not cure me forever? Why not run away with me? She replied:

‘Oh Mr. Reid! Now it is you who is being the gudda. Surely you can see that it would not suit me at all to be a mystery’s mistress, living in some dank hovel? And if I were on your hands all day long, you too would quickly tire of me. In a week or two you would run off with some larkin of your own age and then what would become of me? I would end up as a buy-‘em-dear, trawling for grapeshot on Grope-chute Lane.’ (FF 196)

Gulabi is a character in this novel, her profession is prostitution. One day she meets Kesri Singh. She called him at her home but Kesri said, ‘I have no money’. She smiled and lay down on the charpoy. It doesn’t matter, she said. You can pay some other time. You’re not going anywhere and nor am I. We are both fauj-ke-ghulam – slaves of the army. (FF 113) She sleeps with Kesri Singh. After this she said to Kesri Singh that after Bhyro Singh had finished with you, he came to me – he took me into a room and after he had done what he came for, he slapped me in anger. Kesri asked its reason then she made an uncomprehending gesture. She said he had molested many girls, and she was not the only one who was raped and beaten by him. ‘I swear, Gulabi, he said. The day that Bhyro Singh dies I’ll give away a maund of sweets – that is if I don’t kill him myself first. She laughed: Don’t forget to give me some of those sweets. I can’t wait to taste them. (FF 115) After Gulabi was oppressed and exploited by many people, she became a professional prostitute. Her nature was very kind mainly for Indian people.

The Ibis trilogy charts a historical period beginning with opium farming in India and depicts how this crop and the trade arising out of it led to the Opium War between the British and the China. This has far reaching consequences as the Chinese are defeated and made to accept humiliating and unjust terms of trade and business. This brings out the dark side of the imperialistic project of the British. But apart from being an indictment of colonialism, it also highlights how money, business and trade played a great role in affecting and transforming the world. It was this new period of business and speedy transportation that threw peoples from diverse cultures and nations, with different identities, together -- sometimes to become dependent on each other and sometimes to be in conflict due to their allegiances and loyalties, as much political as cultural. The new multi-cultural world that emerged affected all individuals, families, communities, nations, diplomacy and international relations and brought about changes like hybrid identities and shared, syncretic cultures which paved the way for the world we inherit today.

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