

Intersectionality and Gendered Marginalisation in Amitav Ghosh's Historical Fiction

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Received: 11/03/2026

Accepted: 17/04/2026

Published: 30/04/2026

Abstract: Amitav Ghosh is widely read as a novelist of history, migration, empire, and ecology, yet his treatment of gender has received less sustained attention. This article examines the representation of gender roles in *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, the *Ibis Trilogy*, and *Gun Island*, using a feminist-postcolonial framework drawn from de Beauvoir, Butler, Spivak, Chatterjee, Connell, and ecofeminist thought. It argues that Ghosh's fiction does not offer a single or consistent gender politics. Rather, it places women and men within the pressures of colonial modernity, nationalism, caste, migration, and environmental precarity, and allows these pressures to unsettle inherited scripts of domesticity, honour, and masculinity. Women such as Tha'mma, Uma Dey, Deeti, and Kusum exercise agency at the margins of official history, while men such as Alu, Kalua, and Fokir reveal the plurality of masculine roles. At the same time, the narrative focalisation of several novels remains male-centred, and some women characters function more as guides or symbols than as fully interiorised subjects. The article concludes that Ghosh's contribution lies in showing gender as historically produced and relationally negotiated.

Keywords: Gender roles; postcolonial feminism; masculinity; nation; Indian English fiction.

Cite this article: Ali, K. & Pankaj, K. (2026). Intersectionality and Gendered Marginalisation in Amitav Ghosh's Historical Fiction. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3(4), 63-67.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh occupies a distinctive place in Indian English fiction. Since the publication of *The Circle of Reason* (1986), he has written novels that move across Bengal, Burma, Egypt, the Indian Ocean, China, and the Mediterranean, and in the process he has become one of the principal literary chroniclers of empire, migration, and, more recently, climate change (Hawley, 2005; Mondal, 2010). Critical discussion has largely gathered around these themes: the porousness of national borders, the memory of colonial trade, and the entanglement of human and non-human worlds. Questions of gender have often been treated as secondary or addressed only in passing within studies devoted to other concerns. Yet gender is not peripheral to Ghosh's fiction. Who may travel, speak, inherit, grieve, or resist is repeatedly shaped by gender, and his novels attend closely to how these permissions are distributed within families, nations, and empires.

This article asks how Ghosh represents gender roles, and whether his fiction reproduces, questions, or reworks the roles assigned to women and men in South Asian and wider Indian Ocean societies. It proceeds from three assumptions. First, gender roles are historically produced rather than natural, a position associated with de Beauvoir (1949/2011) and Butler (1990). Second, in colonial and postcolonial contexts gender cannot be separated from caste, class, religion, race, and nation, so that a woman's position is seldom determined by gender alone (Mohanty, 2003; Rajan, 1993). Third, a novelist's representation of gender is shaped not only by the characters created but also by narrative form, including who focalises the story and whose voice is recovered or lost.

The study focuses on *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, the *Ibis Trilogy* (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*), and *Gun Island*, with supplementary reference to *In an Antique Land*. The method is qualitative and interpretive, combining close reading of characters and situations with existing scholarship (Bose, 2003; Hawley, 2005; Mondal, 2010). The argument is that Ghosh presents gender as a field of negotiation under historical pressure, and that his most compelling women and men are those who occupy the gaps left by official narratives, even though the architecture of his narratives sometimes limits the space given to women's voices.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory offers several points of entry into Ghosh's fiction. De Beauvoir's (1949/2011) argument that womanhood is made rather than given locates gender in social formation instead of biology, and Butler (1990) extends this by describing gender as a repeated performance within regulatory norms. Such a view is useful for a writer whose characters often live under shifting regimes, whether colonial, nationalist, or diasporic, that demand different performances at different moments.

In the South Asian setting, the relationship between gender and nation requires special attention. Chatterjee (1989, 1993) argues that Indian nationalism resolved the so-called women's question by assigning the material, outer domain to men and the spiritual, inner domain of the home to women, so that women became custodians of national cultural identity. Sarkar

(2001) and Mani (1998) show how colonial and nationalist discourse alike turned women's bodies and customs, especially sati, into sites for competing claims about civilisation and tradition. Spivak's (1988) well-known formulation, that colonial intervention in sati often amounted to white men saving brown women from brown men, warns against reading the rescue of women as simple liberation and raises the question of whether the subaltern woman's own voice can be heard.

Two further strands matter. Mohanty (2003) cautions against treating Third World women as a homogeneous category of victims, and Rajan (1993) examines how real women are overwritten by imagined ones in cultural representation. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, along with its subordinate and marginalised forms, allows men too to be read as gendered subjects whose roles are contested. Finally, ecofeminist scholarship (Mies & Shiva, 1993) connects the subordination of women with the exploitation of nature, which is relevant to Ghosh's ecological novels even where he does not adopt an explicitly ecofeminist stance.

Taken together, these perspectives allow the present study to put four questions to each text. How are domestic and public roles assigned? Where do women exercise agency, and at what cost? How are masculinities represented? How do narrative structure and focalisation shape the visibility of women?

Domestic Authority and the Nation in the Early Novels

The Circle of Reason: Unheroic Masculinity

The Circle of Reason follows Alu, an orphaned weaver, from a Bengal village to the Gulf and the Sahara, in a journey that is largely a male odyssey of labour, suspicion, and flight (Ghosh, 1986). Its most interesting gender work lies in its treatment of masculinity. Alu is quiet, gentle, and absorbed in his loom, and he stands in marked contrast to the aggressive and ideologically certain men around him. His uncle Baram's devotion to phrenology and the cult of reason is treated with affectionate satire, exposing male intellectual authority as obsession rather than wisdom. In the migrant world of al-Ghazira, women such as Zindi hold practical authority over households and communities, showing that women can command influence in the spaces that men's labour migration creates. Such figures remain at the periphery of the plot, but they establish a pattern that recurs in later novels: women's authority tends to operate beside the main lines of male movement, and masculinity is shown to be plural rather than singular.

The Shadow Lines: Women, Home, and the Nation

The Shadow Lines offers the most sustained early treatment of gender and nation. The narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, is a former schoolteacher who raised her son alone after being widowed young, and she is the novel's chief embodiment of the nationalist imagination (Ghosh, 1988). Her adolescent fascination with the militant nationalism of Bengal, her donation of her gold chain to the war fund in 1962, and her conviction that a nation must be a clearly bordered territory show how thoroughly the home can be a site of national feeling. Chatterjee's (1989, 1993) account of the nationalist assignment of women to the inner domain helps explain the paradox of her position: she is the guardian of the family and its moral order, yet her patriotism is intense, public, and violent in its imagery. Ghosh complicates this by making her journey to Dhaka in 1964, undertaken to bring her

elderly uncle back to Calcutta, the journey that leads to the riot in which Tridib is killed. The woman as custodian of nation and home is thus not insulated from the violence nationalism produces; she is among its victims as well as its carriers.

Ila and May Price represent contrasting configurations of women's freedom. Ila, who grows up abroad in a diplomat's household and settles in London, regards the city as a refuge from the surveillance of Indian family life. Her claim to freedom is undercut by her marriage to Nick Price, whose infidelity exposes how a cosmopolitan setting can reproduce older patterns of male privilege and female dependence. May Price, in turn, is an independent English woman whose sense of responsibility for Tridib's death leads her into a long and private reckoning with guilt. Her moral seriousness resists the stereotype of the Western woman as free but shallow that Tha'mma's suspicion of Ila seems to invite. Read together, the three women show that no single location, whether the Calcutta home, the nationalist imagination, or the metropolitan city, guarantees women freedom (Rajan, 1993). The unnamed male narrator's focalisation, moreover, means that these women are seen through his affection, admiration, and incomplete understanding, a feature that both humanises them and limits direct access to their interiority.

Women in the Making of History: The Glass Palace

The Glass Palace extends this concern to Burma, India, and Malaya across the first half of the twentieth century. The novel opens with the British annexation of Upper Burma and the exile of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat to Ratnagiri in western India (Ghosh, 2000). Supayalat is depicted as imperious, proud, and unwilling to accept the diminished status of royal exile. Her authority is steadily eroded by colonial confinement, and it is tested again when one of her daughters marries Sawant, the Indian driver, an event that unsettles the hierarchy of rank on which the queen's sense of self depends. Female sovereignty is shown here not as an unchanging attribute but as a status dependent on political power and vulnerable to its loss.

Dolly, the young palace attendant who accompanies the royal family and later marries Rajkumar, represents a different kind of endurance. Rajkumar's masculinity is defined by enterprise, accumulation, and a will to succeed in the timber and rubber economies of the empire, while Dolly's life is marked by patience, displacement, and finally her decision to become a Buddhist nun in Burma. Her withdrawal can be read in two ways: as a retreat into the pious role traditionally reserved for older women, or as a considered refusal of the commercial and familial ambitions that structure her husband's life. The text sustains both readings, and this ambiguity is characteristic of Ghosh's treatment of women's choices, which are neither simply liberating nor simply constrained.

Uma Dey is perhaps the most openly political woman in Ghosh's early fiction. The wife of the district collector in Ratnagiri, she is initially bound by the expectations placed on a colonial official's wife. After her husband's death, she travels, rejects domestic seclusion, and enters nationalist politics, becoming part of the networks of anti-colonial activism that extend beyond India itself (Ghosh, 2000). Her trajectory aligns with scholarship that recognises women's participation in nationalism as more varied than the model of the inner domain allows (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 2001). It also suggests that women's political agency in

colonial India often began after the dissolution of domestic ties, and that it remained bound up with personal loss.

Ecology, Displacement, and Gender in *The Hungry Tide*

The Hungry Tide is set in the Sundarbans, the mangrove delta of Bengal, and brings together Piya Roy, a cetologist of Indian descent raised in the United States, and Kanai Dutt, a Delhi businessman and translator (Ghosh, 2004). Piya's characterisation is notable. Her authority rests on professional skill, she works the delta without a male guardian, and the novel does not treat her competence as an exception requiring justification. Her relationship with Fokir, an illiterate fisherman, is founded on shared attention to the river and its dolphins rather than a shared language, and it avoids a conventional romantic resolution. Kanai, by contrast, is introduced as a glib and self-assured cosmopolitan whose confidence rests on his ability to translate between worlds. His attempts to impress Piya expose the limits of a masculinity grounded in verbal and social command, and his reliance on words proves inadequate to the realities of the delta.

The local women of the novel reveal sharper tensions. Moyna, Fokir's wife, is dissatisfied with a life of precarious fishing and hopes to train as a nurse, secure schooling for her son, and escape poverty. Her impatience with Fokir's illiteracy and way of life works against any romantic idealisation of local knowledge: she is a woman who sees modernisation as a pathway to security. Nilima, who founded the Badabon Trust and its hospital, is an institution builder whose practical, long-term work contrasts with the idealist, poetry-loving temperament of her husband Nirmal. In this pairing Ghosh reverses the familiar association of the male as public builder and the female as private dreamer (Ghosh, 2004).

Kusum, who appears in Nirmal's notebook rather than in her own voice, is the novel's most politically charged female figure. A displaced refugee who becomes a voice of the Morichjhapi settlers, she is killed when the West Bengal government forcibly evicts the settlers in 1979. Her story reaches the reader through the written account of an educated male witness and then through Kanai's reading of it, so that the subaltern woman's experience is filtered through layers of male mediation. This structure recalls Spivak's (1988) question about whether the subaltern can speak. It can be read both as a limitation and as a deliberate acknowledgement that official records preserve little of the suffering of the poor (Nixon, 2011).

The legend of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess honoured by Hindus and Muslims alike, adds a mythic dimension. In the legend she protects the poor boy Dukhey from Dokkhin Rai, a tiger-demon who stands for predatory power. The pattern of a female protector confronting male predation invites ecofeminist readings, which link women's care with the stewardship of nature (Mies & Shiva, 1993). Yet the novel resists a simple identification of women with nature: Piya's relationship to the delta is that of a scientist, Moyna's that of a worker seeking release from its precarity, and Kusum's that of a political actor. The Sundarbans is a landscape in which gender, class, and ecological vulnerability intersect, and the women who inhabit it respond to it in sharply different ways.

Gender, Caste, and Empire in the *Ibis* Trilogy

The *Ibis* Trilogy, set in the years leading to the First Opium War, offers Ghosh's most extended engagement with gendered violence under empire. In *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti, a

woman from the Bhojpuri region, is married to Hukam Singh, an opium-factory worker who is addicted and ill. When he dies, she is drugged and laid on his funeral pyre in a sati ritual, and she is rescued by Kalua, a low-caste ox-cart driver, with whom she flees and boards the *Ibis* as an indentured labourer (Ghosh, 2008). The episode invites comparison with the colonial rhetoric criticised by Spivak (1988) and Mani (1998), in which sati served as proof of Indian barbarism and a justification for imperial rule. Ghosh refuses that narrative. The rescue is carried out not by a white colonial official but by a man at the bottom of the caste order, and the novel makes clear that the opium economy created by the British Empire has devastated Deeti's household. Patriarchal violence and colonial capitalism are presented as interlocking rather than opposed.

What follows the rescue is as significant as the rescue itself. Deeti and Kalua enter an inter-caste union that breaks with the norms of her origins, and on board the ship she becomes a figure of authority within a new community held together by the kinship of shipmates rather than by caste or birth (Ghosh, 2008). In *River of Smoke*, she appears as a matriarch among the *Ibis* migrants in Mauritius, keeping the memory of the voyage alive through a shrine of painted images (Ghosh, 2011). Her trajectory, from a woman about to be burned alive to a keeper of communal memory, is the clearest example in Ghosh's fiction of the woman as an agent of history.

Paulette Lambert, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist raised in a British household in Calcutta, offers a different case. To escape her guardian's household she disguises herself as a Bengali widow and boards the *Ibis* (Ghosh, 2008). The disguise illustrates Butler's (1990) argument that identity is constituted through repeated performance: Paulette's gender, caste status, and nationality are re-enacted through costume, speech, and bodily conduct. The novel does not treat the disguise as mere play, however. It shows that a European girl's freedom to cross the borders of identity depends on privileges that Deeti and the indentured passengers cannot access. In *River of Smoke*, Paulette's work among plant collectors in Canton shows how women's intellectual labour was both possible and constrained within the imperial economy of knowledge (Ghosh, 2011).

The trilogy is equally attentive to masculinity. Kalua is a man of great physical strength whose tenderness toward Deeti departs from dominant expectations of male dominance, and his vulnerability to the violence of upper-caste men such as the overseer Bhyro Singh shows how masculinity is stratified by caste (Connell, 1995). Zachary Reid, a mixed-race sailor passing as white, and Neel Rattan Halder, a Bengali landowner convicted of forgery and stripped of rank, illustrate how colonial hierarchies of race and law can remove the status that underwrites a man's gender role. In *River of Smoke*, the merchant Bahram Moddie conceals his long relationship with Chi-mei, a Chinese woman, and their son Ah Fatt, and in *Flood of Fire* his widow Shireen must manage the consequences of his death and unresolved debts (Ghosh, 2011, 2015). These plotlines reveal how far men's honour, commerce, and secrecy rest on women's labour and silence.

Later Fiction: Knowledge, Climate, and Care in *Gun Island*

Gun Island returns to the Sundarbans and moves to Venice, following Deen Datta, a rare-book dealer in Brooklyn, as he pursues the legend of the Gun Merchant and the serpent goddess Manasa Devi (Ghosh, 2019). Women again occupy the roles of

guides and interpreters. Cinta, the Venetian historian, and Piya, who reappears as an established marine biologist, hold forms of knowledge that the sceptical male narrator must learn to respect. The treatment of Manasa Devi continues the pattern begun with Bon Bibi: a female divinity associated with the forces of nature and with the protection or punishment of human action. The novel's attention to migrant journeys also shows that climatic disruption increases the risks borne by the poor, a subject Ghosh addresses at essay length in *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh, 2016). That book does not theorise gender explicitly, but its argument that climate change exposes the limits of the modern imagination suggests the broader ground on which a gendered ecological reading can be built (Nixon, 2011).

Discussion: Patterns, Tensions, and Limits

Across the novels, several patterns emerge. First, women frequently act as custodians of memory and historical knowledge: Tha'mma's recollection of Dhaka, Dolly's endurance of exile, Deeti's shrine, and Kusum's presence in Nirmal's notebook all show women preserving what formal histories overlook. Second, gender is never isolated from other hierarchies. Deeti's vulnerability is inseparable from caste and the opium economy, Ila's freedom from race and migration, and Moyna's ambitions from class, which is consistent with Mohanty's (2003) insistence on locating women's experience within specific material and historical conditions. Third, masculinity is plural. Alu, Fokir, and Kalua embody gentleness, endurance, and strength that depart from patriarchal dominance, while figures such as Bhyro Singh embody a harsher masculinity enforced through violence and rank (Connell, 1995).

Several limitations also deserve acknowledgement. The narrative structure of many of the novels, including *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*, tends to privilege male focalisers who observe women from outside, so that women's interiority is often inferred rather than rendered directly. In *In an Antique Land*, the narrator's position as a male visitor limits his access to the women of the Egyptian village, and the medieval letters through which he reconstructs a history of trade and friendship are largely men's correspondence in which women appear only fleetingly (Ghosh, 1992). Some women characters, such as Piya, Cinta, and Bon Bibi, also function as guides or symbolic figures within the education of a narrator or reader, and their psychological complexity does not always match the detail given to male characters. These tensions do not negate the novels' achievements, but they mark the boundaries of Ghosh's gender politics, which is more evident in the plots he constructs than in the narrative forms through which they are told.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's novels do not offer a single doctrine of gender, and it would be misleading to describe them as straightforwardly feminist or as indifferent to women's experience. What they offer instead is an understanding of gender as historically produced and relationally negotiated. Women such as Tha'mma, Uma Dey, Deeti, and Kusum show that women's lives were shaped by the intersecting pressures of nationalism, empire, caste, and displacement, and also that women acted upon those pressures, whether by guarding memory, entering politics, escaping a pyre, or leading a community. Men such as Alu, Kalua, Fokir, and Kanai show that masculinity is likewise an uneven and fragile

construction, vulnerable to colonial law, economic change, and ecological risk.

The article has also noted the limits of this achievement. Male focalisation, the mediated recovery of women's stories, and the symbolic function of some female characters mean that Ghosh's fiction often grants women agency within the plot while giving them less interior space within the narrative. These limits are themselves instructive. They remind readers that gender in historical fiction is partly a question of whose story can be reconstructed from the surviving record, and Ghosh's novels consistently acknowledge the difficulty of that reconstruction.

Further research might extend this analysis in two directions: a comparative study of Ghosh's women alongside those of Arundhati Roy and Shashi Deshpande, and an ecofeminist reading of his later work that attends to climate vulnerability among women in the Bengal delta and along Mediterranean migration routes. Such work would deepen understanding of how one of the most widely read Indian English novelists writes gender into the histories he reimagines.

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