



Multicultural Pluralism of the *Girmitiyas* in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy

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Abstract:

The research paper traces the journey braved by marginalized individuals of nineteenth-century colonial India in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy. These individuals sought refuge as *girmitiyas* (indentured labourers) aboard *Ibis*; they had to migrate in order to escape the binarism of hegemony and marginalization. The whitewashing of historic events like the migration of Indentured labourers to replace coloured slaves in sugar plantation sites of Britain across the Indian Ocean is also one of the focal points of this paper. The paper is concerned with the bond shared among the ship siblings, formed over turbulent waters, they had grown to care for each other as a biological family would. The lack of biological and genetic relations among them did not affect the kindled warmth of their kinship. The paper also strives to study how multicultural pluralism of the *girmitiyas* becomes an answer to the increasing intolerance in prevalent times.

Keywords: Marginalization, Migration, Hegemony, *Girmitiyas* (indentured labourers), Whitewashing, Hierarchical Bigotry.

Introduction

The social structure as the term indicates is made up of many parts. These sections are known as 'class' which is further stratified according to hierarchy into the upper and lower classes. The upper class includes people of high caste and high standing; the characters of the Burnhams, the Thakurs, Hukam Singh, Chandan Singh, Bhyro Singh, and Zachary Reid's are some from the *Ibis* Trilogy who represent the powerful section of the world. Whereas the lower class may consist of people who usually hail from low caste or are unstable in terms of their financial stature, and the weaker section of society.

The characters of Deeti, Kalua, Paulette Lambert, Neel Rattan Halder, and Zachary Reid embody the weaker section of the social order in the Trilogy by Ghosh. Though they were oppressed for varied reasons like gender, caste, class, prejudice and greed; yet they had



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formed a world where they were free of the shackles of the discriminating thoughts of the upper crust of the populace. The familial relationship shared between “ship-siblings” originated from the heart and were much stronger and indifferent to the hierarchical bigotry of the distinguishing nature of the upper classes. Akin to a foster family, they (the ship siblings) too had grown to care for each other as a clan, a unit, the lack blood relations among them did not affect the kindled warmth of their kinship.

The *Girmitiyas* (indentured labourers):

The indentured labourers, also known as *girmitiyas* and coolies, were individuals who signed their lives, shipped across the oceanic waters, to earn monetary security for their families. The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary defines the term coolie as an offence with reference to an untrained labourer with no proficient expertise in Eastern nations. The term finds its origin in Telugu and Urdu ‘*kuli*’ which meant day labourer and slave respectively. Coolie, the term, in Krishna Gubili’s opinion had spread across the globe with Britain’s reign over India. He, moreover, states that the term, Coolie was affronting and disparaging. Labourers of high birth, i.e., people belonging to high caste perceived being identified and known as a Coolie as being humiliated and considered the appellation (coolie) a derogatory term of address. Though they protested against the aforementioned offensive reference, yet the backbreaking toil and drudgery of the plantation snuffed out the remnant dying embers of resistance possessed by the *girmitiyas*.

The fact that *girmitiyas* (indentured labourers) had become an exhibition that aroused inquisitiveness among the onlookers so much so that “they would stand around for hours, watching, pointing, staring, as if at animals in a cage” (*Sea of Poppies* 339), particularly the purveyors and hawkers, who become the source of alleged untrue anecdotes replete of imaginary dread. These rumours were liable for the distress among the *girmitiyas*.

The curious natives were eager to find answers to their questions at any cost. Their curiosity resulted in the native concocting answers to their unanswered queries, as they had tried to extract answers from the coolies by baiting and reeling the labourers if provoking them failed to fetch the sought responses. The onlooking natives went as far as regarding the marching group of *girmitiyas* as caged specimens of “human zoos” (Sánchez – Gómez 1)



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showcasing the “breathing ethnological exhibitions” (Khan and Rawal 504) displayed since the last few decades of the nineteenth century until the early years of the twentieth century. These zoos were opened in Europe where individuals of assorted ethnicities were placed on display for the Europeans to look at and luxuriate in assorted exhibits of gestures and bodies of those deemed as “primitive in Eurocentric perspective” (Sánchez – Gómez 1).

In *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849), Herman Melville too, meditates on the thought of the Lascars were scrutinized and observed by the gentry class of Europe. Melville was one of the very few writers of the nineteenth century, intrigued by the Lascars in colonial times who were a part of the populace on the fringes ruled by the colonists rather than focusing on those of gentle birth and privileged classes. An instance of same is witnessed in *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849) when the cargo ship reaches its destination, the burghers of high society would gather around to look at the “richly cosmopolitan group” of people identified as the Lascars by the Occidents (“Of Fanás and Forecastles” 5):

Every Sunday, crowds of well-dressed people came down to the dock to see this singular ship...It was amusing...to watch the old women with umbrellas, who stood on the quay staring at the Lascars, even when they desired to be private. These inquisitive old ladies seemed to regard the sailors as a species of wild animal, whom they might gaze at with as much impunity, as at leopards in the Zoological Gardens (Melville 164 – 5).

Systems of Servitude:

An Anglican Priest, social reformer and educator, Charles Freer Andrews, along with William Winstanley Pearson also perceived the system of indentured labourers can be paralleled to slavery, as evil, humiliating, merciless, savage, and dehumanizing as slavery, if not more in their “Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry” (1916). Ghosh, too, acknowledges the connection between the two systems of Slavery and Indentured Labourers, as he paints a vivid sketch of the jaded history of *Ibis*, the vessel, which was initially built to be a “blackbird” (*Sea of Poppies* 11). It was referred to as such because the ship was intended to convey “human cargo” formerly and later it was employed as a means to transport the modern and sophisticated version of slavery (*Sea of Poppies* 12). The difference



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between both the systems laid in the varied names and origins of people alone, as both the systems were built to cater to the growing needs of the British Empire. Unlike the slaves who were of captive Africans, indentured labourers customarily were of Indian origin, as offenders of the law of the Company's law irrespective of their nationalities were also shipped across the Ocean as coolies to the various sugarcane plantations of the Imperialistic British Empire.

Life of the Coolies:

Coolies were the unofficial and unrecorded replacements of the slaves working on the plantations. As the Slavery Abolition Act of the British Parliament of 1833 was liable for the emergence of *sami*, *kuli*, *jehaji* – *bhais*, *girmitiyas*, and coolies in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The *girmitiyas* were not subjected to derogatory treatment and humiliation by their European plantation owners alone, but they were further subjected to marginalization and discrimination by their fellow natives as well. The *girmitiyas* replaced the slaves not in name alone, but in deeds as well, for they now toiled just as hard, if not more than the slaves. Slaves and Coolies differed in label alone for Andrews and Pearson state that “the new word, ‘indenture’ ... equivalent to the old word ‘slavery’ writ large” (2). The coolies like their predecessors (slaves) worked for two – thirds of the day for six days of the week in vicious inhumane conditions.

Krishna Gubili in *Viriah: 1.3 Million (13 Lakh) Indians were Shipped as Indentured Laborers to Sugarcane Plantations in British Colonies to Replace Slaves: My Great – Grandfather was One of Them: This Is His Story* (2018) includes a rare picture of the barely clothed coolies of the indenture system. Similar to the rare picture, the records of the migrated *girmitiyas* were difficult to find because the labourers were rendered to a mere series of numbers allotted to them on disembarking the ships to a foreign land.

A majority of the young coolies lied and faked their ages, i.e. they claimed to be older than they in reality were. It was out of fear that they lied about their real ages as they speculated that if their owners were to know the true age then they might be paid less or not appointed at all. Being away from their families apart from having no means to survive on, the *girmitiyas* had to insure to earn their living if they did not wish to die of starvation.



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Finding any kind of record written or captured in pictures was not an easy feat, likewise, attempting to get one's hands-on matrimonial records is equal to hitting a hard brick wall, for there were hardly any formally recorded marriages of the coolies.

Returning to their barracks after incessantly working in pouring rains due to the lack of dry firewood, the coolies had to satisfy their hunger through cold leftover meals if they were salvageable and the situation worsened more so when the coolies felt under the weather i.e. when they did not keep well. Due to being unwell, the coolies were unable to work for a couple of days which resulted in them losing a month's wage. It was not uncommon and unheard of for the plantation owners to deduct the labourer's ration and wages for an absence of a couple of days even if the workers were on leave for less than a sennight. Moreover, the workers would be whipped and humiliated for mere mistakes and trivial issues as they could not let any opportunity pass, which could benefit them. This benefit could be monetary or even a psychological benefit and satisfaction of proving themselves as superior to the modern and improvised slaves belonging to various other nations, races, ethnicities and faiths.

The plantation owners were individuals belonging to the various classes of British society. It was a Frenchman, formerly a soldier In the British Army – injured in the Napoleonic Wars (1799 – 1815) who was unsound both in psyche and in health, who had brought one of the ship siblings – Deeti and eight more coolies from the *Ibis* to a remote corner of the island in Mauritius. It was also the least populated area of Mauritius due to which purchasing land in the area was easy and economical to own. The district, the inmates of *Ibis* were brought to, was remote and inaccessible that the only means of transportation available to them were waterways. Commuting through a boat, too, was a luxury that the indentured labourers could avail to visit elsewhere, but it was used to import limited rations alone. The ration disbursed among the labourers was insufficient for them to survive on that they often had to forage and venture in the forest as it was deeper and richer in their neck of woods than elsewhere on the Morne.

Hardships braved by the female labourers:

Life as a coolie was not smooth and easy. It was a difficult experience replete of hardships and pain, which cannot be completely articulated in written words. To consider that



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the *girmitiyas* were composed of the male populace alone would result in overlooking the other half of the human race. As women too were shipped to unknown plantations across the ocean, they were not familiar with, and the womenfolk experienced oppression in the name of their status as indentured labourers and furthermore as females. Many a time it so happened in India that the indenture recruiting agent of the Company would bring people by decoy and deceit. This deed was carried out of greed as they were paid extra incentive to recruit people, especially women, as illiterate and ignorant women were much easier to lure in and were also paid far less for the incessant labour asked of them

Coolie women braved just as many hardships and drudgery if not more than the male coolies, yet they were remunerated with half the wage given to the male *girmitiyas*. In addition to the difference between the wages paid to the two genders, the distribution of rations was another demarcating factor depicting the discrimination laden perspective of sardars (group leaders) and plantation owners. This outlook resulted in neither ranking officials nor the plantation owners to extend any form of leniency to pregnant coolie women even those in their third trimester were to work the long and tedious hours of “dawn to dusk” and they also had to look after their children and cook for them as well (Gubili x).

The female *girmitiyas* had to fight off and save their person from the unrequited advances of male coolies, arkatis, captains of the ship they boarded as indenture, the doctors, guards and sardars (group leaders) of the plantations they worked at. As the ratio of women shipped with each batch of one hundred male coolies was forty per batch. The scarcity of women in comparison to the headcount of the male *girmitiyas* on ships and the plantation sites did not fare well for the welfare and safety of the womenfolk neither in the water vessels (ships) nor on the plantation sites. The exhaustion from working continuously and the constant need to look over their shoulders in order to ward off the unreciprocated attention increased the struggles for the female coolies all the more.

The state of female indentured labourers can be paralleled to the state of Dalit women working on the farms owned by the men of high caste. The sexual, physical and psychological harassment along with financial exploitation faced by both forms of female workers, especially with reference to the women being paid half the wage given to two male employees along with the inhumane and malevolent treatment of heavily pregnant labourers



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was analogous. The difference between the exploitation of the female indentured labourers and the Dalit women laid in the perpetrators alone. The perpetrators of injustice against women with reference to the Dalit women was executed by their community and the members of the high caste society, in particular. Whereas the plantation owners were liable for the deteriorating state of the female populace in the society of indentured labourers.

Multicultural society of the *Girmitiyas*:

Among the bifurcations based on which the labourers were marginalized among themselves was the caste system. The caste system existed in foreign lands too in the circumstances where a coolie of high birth had to work with labourers from other castes. The system also posed a problem in matrimonial prospects wherein a coolie from a higher caste was vehement in his repudiation to marry a woman of another caste. This vehemence was even stronger when they were matched with a woman of the untouchable or the lower caste. But it could not prevail for long as the hardships faced by the labourers of a nation, resulted in erosion and obliteration of the caste system. The community of the Indian coolies was brought together as a united front through cultural forces. Among these forces, the dress worn by the male coolie was a major leveller. All the coolies would clothe themselves in turbans and dhotis alone as this was the traditional garment worn by men in India. And the women folk dressed in cotton saris along with minimal jewellery which consisted of bangles, nose rings and anklets. The differences stemming from language, caste and, religion were erased during the festivities and in their endeavours to build sacred religious places wherein *girmitiyas* from all castes and religions stepped forward to lend a hand of aid.

The lower section of the society remains nameless and faceless in the annals of history as they were similar to the flowers Thomas Gray pondered upon in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751). As the members of the lower section of the society, too, toiled to thrive in their lives, yet they withered away unseen and their sweetness is “waste(d)” in the clime of “desert” i.e. hardships braved by the labourers (line 55;56). Unlike those from the privileged sections of the society, who were commemorated and immortalized through verses and busts. For instance, the temples, cathedrals, pyramids, and palaces all of which comprise the historic architectural monuments are cherished and celebrated for its kings and



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patrons, yet hardly any tribute and respect is attributed to the labourers who helped to construct these monuments.

It was through its imperialistic invasion of India and China that Britain succeeded in infiltrating and interfering in internal administrative matters of these nations. The Battle of Plassey (1757) paved way for Britain to control and dominate the administration through the laws like Doctrine of Lapse and discourse through revolutionizing the Indian education system by implementing Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Education" which allowed Britain to establish its supremacy over that of the Indian education system and its books. In the name of running a state in an organized manner, Britain under the garb of modernization attempted to take over all aspects of pre-colonial India, it was as though prior to the year 1757 India was a savage wilderness, a nation which had no systems in place to administer its states. Having established its supremacy through diplomatic policies, the British East India Company and eventually the Crown began to take charge of the discourse of Asian nations like India, which was then "whitewashed" (Mishra 621). The people of West (whites) and surprisingly some of the native historians were responsible for the homogenization of discourse through means of whitewashing. These native historians were the ones who either wished to gain favour from the administrative authorities of Britain or had been swiped away with Macaulay's intention of creating "a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay 72).

Britain's modernization in India had borne some negative effects as well, some of which were painting India and its citizens as uncouth beings who needed to be civilized under the benevolent notion of aiding the savage. Another effect of this modernization was that the knowledge which seemed unpleasant to the colonizing nation (Britain) was to either resist complete erasure or be doomed to eternal darkness. This whitewashing on an enormous scale resulted in the erasure of certain selected pieces of history. The occurrence of the Opium Wars and the migration of millions of Indians along with other Asians and some Europeans for that matter were a significant part of history pushed from mainstream to the sidelines by the Whites. The aforementioned incidents were some occurrences which were able to resist and prevail the alteration through the efforts of writers. These writers revived and



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reinterpreted various historic incidents and scrupulously beaded facts with fiction, in order to avoid “silencing” all versions parallel to that of the West (Mishra 621). Amitav Ghosh, Krishna Gubili, and Orhan Pamuk are some of the prominent writers who endeavoured to bring such overshadowed incidents to the fore. Alas, the fact that these historic events needed to be brought to the fore proves that the West had succeeded in their intended whitewashing to a certain extent, which was why there was scarcely any research and discourse available to its seekers.

As scarcity of basic records like the arrival, employment, marriage, demise, and or departure due to change of employment were hard to find for researchers looking into the system of indenture or even for those who wished to trace their roots back to their ancestors. Collective memory plays a crucial role in Gubili’s endeavours to retrace his great – grandfather’s steps in Natal, South Africa. Collective memory as defined by Maurice Halbwachs can be understood to be a combination of individual memories of the members of a particular group or society. As it is the memory of a group or a society that aids people to “acquire their memories ... It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (38). The same proves to be true for Gubili, as he too, was able to locate details like Viriah’s (his great – grandfather’s) name and date of arrival in the archived records with his distant family’s help. It was through their memories communicated in the forms of oral tales and letters that he was able to fulfil his Late grandmother’s last wish to locate Chengamma, her estranged sister-in-law and her family. It was after several decades of combing through all possible resources available to Gubili, after coming across many dead ends, that he succeeded in locating Viriah’s details and forming a cordial bond with Chengamma’s daughter – Charmaine, as the year 2014 was dying. Gubili’s efforts prove that the lack of proper records cost him years of toil to be able to locate and connect with his great-grandfather’s life and that of his daughter’s as well. Gubili was successful only because he had resources, but there are hundreds of thousands of indenture descendants who either lack the necessary information or the resources. Another obstacle in their path would be the deficient records or the incorrect entries recorded in the registers maintained in order to document the number of coolies and details of the plantation sites they were sold to. Ghosh



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too employs the collective memories recorded in books and various artefacts, in the creation of Ibis Trilogy.

The indentured labourers who had begun their respective journeys by boarding the *Ibis* from various parts of colonial India were *girmityas* who became “ship-siblings – *jaházbhais and jaházbahens*” over the course of their journey to Mareech (Mauritius Island) (*Sea of Poppies* 356). The mutual factor of being marginalized by the society or even by their own families in some cases helped them bond where they stood together in the face of adversities and looked out for each other. The fate of characters like Serang Ali, Ah Fatt, Neel, Deeti, Paulette, Jodu, Kalua, Mr and Mrs Moddie, Mr and Mrs Burnham, Zachary Reid, Kesri Singh, Raju can be randomly traced over the Trilogy, though certain characters, minor characters in particular, were not carried forth by the author (Ghosh). Being bought by different Plantation Owners many among the siblings were separated at reaching Mauritius. Yet a brief and vivid glimpse of the Colvers’ life following the years of Opium Wars was given in the second and third volume of Trilogy, *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) respectively.

Multiculturalism is one of the many aspects abetted by the cosmopolitan colonial world and with time and globalization, it has become more common in the contemporary world; though societies have been advancing to a pluralistic outlook and are become receptive of the notion of multiculturalism yet the fact that frictions regarding multiculturalism are still witnessed. These hurdles are the responses of people who have ethnocentric perception or believe in the persistence of monoculture alone; many factors play a crucial role in their rejection of the idea of multiculturalism such as their preconceived notions based on which they form judgemental views for other cultures. Borrowing from Rawal’s statement on the definition of Multiculturalism in “Multicultural Assimilation: A Linguistic Study of Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* and Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*” (2018) that “the word ‘multiculturalism’ ... not only the differences but also recognizes and acknowledges the equality and value of all cultures” resonate with Ghosh’s ideology of a world without boundaries where faith, beliefs, cultures and sentiments of all nations and its people with all their diversities are respected, acknowledged for all their similarities and differences and yet are treated with equality. Ghosh skilfully depicts the



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pluralistic multicultural characters and carefully explores the various dialects and languages while staying true to their distinct linguistic heritage. Use of distinct languages in narrative led to the exploration of many regional and foreign languages and this linguistic innovation is reflected in the Trilogy in an attempt to present an unadulterated scenario of the society prevalent in the nineteenth century. All characters of Ghosh in the course of the narrative evolve as round characters who gain understanding, wisdom and maturity by learning from their experiences as the story proceeds towards culmination. And Ghosh through his skills manages to bring people of various nationalities, faiths, ethnicities, beliefs, caste, religion and gender together through pluralistic approach and his craft of words over multiple languages, he also manages to create a bridge between the “apparently unbridgeable gaps of language” by exploring communication across cultural and linguistic barriers (*River of Smoke* 346).

The social, cultural, political, economic and climatic preoccupations of the world since the end of World War II form the base of Contemporary literature. They are also concerns raised by Ghosh and are reflected in his fictional and non-fictional works among other contemporary writers. His (Ghosh's) approach lends him an edge which sets him apart from his contemporary writers, as unlike most of the authors Ghosh presents his concerns through works which are rooted in cultural historiography. As the national boundaries are receding, a globalized form of the world comes to the fore. The issues raised by Ghosh in the Trilogy resonate with the issues faced by multitude as they are being subjugated in the name of race, caste, gender and nationality in the contemporary world and he (Ghosh) with the help of minutely researched facts and his creative imagination reveals the perpetual presence of matters like racism, cultural colonialism, casteism, gender discrimination and the plight of the marginalized have been prevalent since ages.

Deeti was the first among Paulette, Neel, Raju, Kalua, Serang Ali, and Jodu to settle in the Morne of Mauritius and became the Matriarch of the Colver family. Though Deeti struggled to survive with Girin, her infant son, tied to her back in the mountainous region as the *girmityas* were placed in a remote area where she and her fellow labourers had to venture deep into the overgrown trails in attempts to keep from dying of starvation. Nevertheless, over the years Deeti along with the Fami had settled in Mauritius making it their safe haven, their Elysian Field where the parameters such as gender, language, ethnicity, and caste, upon



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which they were subjected to subaltern treatment were irrelevant. It was a place where the descendants of these kins were regaled with tales of Neel and other, now, elder members of the clan, while the children admired with wonder the paintings on the walls of the cave Deeti and Girin, her one-year old had stumbled into, Deeti's Memory Shrine. The children of the Fami were made aware of their roots, and that of the origin of their predecessors, every member of the clan knew of Deeti's Madhubani paintings was an art she got in the heritage from her maternal family. All knew of the tale of the Patriarch's and fellow fugitive's escape from the *Ibis*, many such tales were verified by "Tantinn Paulette" and "Neel – mawsa" (uncle), who was delighted to tell such stories (*River of Smoke* 14). Maddow Colver's life was regarded as one of the most cherished by the younglings, the chutkas and chutkis, laikas and laikis" of the Fami because a special chamber was dedicated to the patriarch's experiences (*Flood of Fire* 607). The appreciation and value of freedom were ingrained in their young minds as the Fami had made it a tradition to visit the sacred pilgrimage, during the "Gran Vakans" every year (*Flood of Fire* 607). It was on this annual pilgrimage that they were regaled with tales of fugitives' escape from the *Ibis* as well as from Mauritius through sampan procured by Jodu which had slowly edged beside the *Ibis* in Hong Kong to rescue Serang Ali, Jodu, Neel, Raju, Kesri, and Maddow as per Sernag Ali's plan of escape:

...they waited breathlessly for that moment when Deeti would point to the stylized image of a sampan, with six figures seated inside: Serang Ali, recognizable by his blood-red mouth; Jodu with his three eyebrows; Neel, with his journals; Raju, in his fifer's hat; Kesri, who, by convention, was always drawn with abundoos – and of course, the patriarch himself, Maddow Colver... 'Ekut, ekut!' Deeti would cry, and that great horde of bonoys, belsers, bowjis, salas, sakubays and other relatives would follow her finger as she traced the path of Jodu's *sampan* (a small boat) (*Flood of Fire* 607).

Future generations of the ship-siblings were free of the various hegemonic and discriminative demarcations that their predecessors were marginalized for, viz. gender, caste, class, and prejudice. The Ship-siblings made a world they wished they had been born in. The siblings taught their younger generations to be free of the prejudiced psyche their worlds and societies were tainted with.



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Conclusion:

Ghosh, through the *girmityas* of the Trilogy, suggests that the only way to overcome the crisis of facing discrimination in the name of ethnicity, caste, language, race and gender is to create a human community where people of diverse nationalities, faiths, ethnicities, beliefs, caste, religion and gender can reside together while sharing a multicultural and pluralistic outlook where individuals are respected and accepted with all their differences rather than letting the dissimilarities become a demarcation and source of discrimination. As it is only through a pluralistic outlook, where the intermingling of varied diversities is celebrated is the only answer to the growing differences and unrest in the prevailing times, as these tiny threads of kindness, humanity, respect and tolerance will weave and spin a gigantic tapestry of a world free of demarcations and a human community rather than any of its counterparts (other forms of discriminative communities).

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