



AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE CIRCLE OF REASON* IN THE ARENA OF MAGIC REALISM

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ABSTRACT

The Circle of Reason is a debut novel by Amitav Ghosh which was published in 1986. The Circle of Reason won the Prix Médicis étranger, one of France's top literary awards. Its theme is different from traditional concerns of Indian English Fiction. It challenges a direct and simple appreciation. In fact, it needs a different type of approach to be grasped fully. The book itself is sort of a paradox. It exudes restlessness with extreme control and poise. The new thrust and lift that came to Indian English Fiction during late eighties and early nineties is partly due to this path breaking work. It internationalized our fiction. It brought a refreshing 'contemporary Society'. It is daring in its experimentation with the form, content and language of the novel. This novel is full of conflicts. There is internal conflict along with other conflicts with the outer world in the central character, Alu, who is a protagonist. There are also conflicts among other groups in the novel.

Key Words: *Quest for the Science, Societal impact, exploitation, Conflicts and the Circle*

INTRODUCTION

The Circle of Reason, Amitav Ghosh's debut novel, was first published in 1986. Though it is the first novel, it won so many laurels to the author in and abroad. It had so many striking themes. It portrayed in many aspects reflecting the then society. In the first part of the novel Ghosh depicted the life of the indigenous people and their struggle with the aliens. How people underwent through trials and tribulations in a foreign land without rights is vibrantly

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portrayed through the life of Alu, The Protagonist of the Novel. It is understood in the following description:

“Vomited out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away, they had no anger left. Their only passion was memory Lalpukur could fight no war because it was damned to a hell of longing. (TCR, p.59)

The Indian orphan, Alu lives with his maternal uncle, the determined and righteous Balaram, whose plans to assist his village put him frequently in trouble with the village's corrupt chief, Bhudeb Roy. His uncle's plans anger Roy once too often, and in an eruption of violence one night, Balaram is killed. Alu must flee, leaving his love, Maya, behind. Alu moves from Laipukur in India to Al-Ghazira in Egypt and then to a small town in the northeastern edge of Algerian Sahara. The journey does not aid in any kind of satisfaction or success. It commemorates the sagacity of unquiet wanderings. It goes on and on searching a revelation suitable for present times; it is like chasing an apparition that finally fades away into the thin air. The journey is the end of the process. Amitav Ghosh remarks as:

“Foreign places are all alike in that they are not home. Nothing binds you there He knew that his swimming Head had no connection with that hint of sand in the distance. It would have made no difference whether that bit of land was al-Ghazira or Antarctica. The journey was within and it was already over, for the most important thing was leaving”.

(TCR, p.266).

This novel also discovers the divergence between the power of cold heartless reason and nurturing power of human qualities. Alu's quest for identity discloses against this background. In his chase of Search for identity, he goes through different stages in his life. His journey starts from Lalpukur, a small border village in Bengal. The second phase opens itself in al-Ghaziria. At both these stages Alu's endeavor to seek out an identity ends devastatingly. His quest reaches its conclusion in El Qued, the Algerian Sahara. Here it takes a significant and positive turn which puts him on the right path to self-discovery and some kind of hope.

Alu, the Protagonist of the novel, comes to quiet Lalpukur from Calcutta when he is eight years old to live with his uncle, Balaram and aunt, Toru-debi. He had been given his nickname by his phrenologist uncle as his huge head looked something like a potato and portrayed an interesting future-at least so his uncle thought. His parents had recently died in a car accident. Even though Balaram and his brother had been long separated, Balaram and

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Toru-debi decide to take in Alu and brought him up as they had no children of their own. Alu by personality is a quiet child, so it takes him some time to familiarize himself to new surroundings. Alu is an insatiable reader. He devoured the books in Balaram's library with a great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, Budeb Roy's sons had driven him out from school. Disturbed by his orphaned nephew's impassivity and lack of emotion, Balaram bose had attempted to reach out to the boy. Urging him to "forget the past and look to the future" he reassured him that "one could do anything with the future, one could change the world".(28) Alu's frequent visits to Shombu Debnath, the unfathomable weaver, makes his uncle to suppose that he is interested in weaving. To his great joy Alu is apprenticed to Shombu Debnath. Moving from weaving coarse cloth to the finest Jamdani, the young Alu seems well on the way creating a pattern in his life. This tragically interrupted when he is caught in the vortex of the turbulent passions of Bhudeb Roy, his uncle and aunt.

Balaram Bose's inner conflict for name and fame is also scrupulously portrayed by Ghosh. After throwing away phrenology, Balaram Bose had taken likewise passionately to the idea of cleanliness. Balaram takes up passionately the task of cleaning up the refugee shanties with carbolic acid when the war broke out and the refugees stream into Lalpukur. His extreme irrational obsession with cleanliness had made him unmindful to the human tragedy surrounding him. A similar weakness proved dangerous during his forays into phrenology. This new zealous devotion takes him to commit a blunder that resulted in tragedy. Obsessed about gems, he begins to see Bhudeb Roy too as the most dangerous germ of them all. He provokes Shombu Debnath to pour carbolic acid on Bhudeb Roy's head when he is addressing a political meeting. The simmering animosity between the two men now erupts into open argument and results in outright violence, compounded by Bhudeb Roy's suspicion that Balaram Bose had a support in Shombu Debnath's elopement with his wife.

Balaram accepts an offer of employment from Bhudeb Roy at a time. Roy, a very fat man being given to self enhancement, has decided to start a school in remote Lalpukur, about one hundred miles north of Calcutta. Balaram becomes one of his chief teachers. Roy quickly becomes a political browbeat in the remote village, though hiring thugs to implement his policies at the school and elsewhere. The two men become rivals competing for the minds and hearts of the villagers. Sixteen years on, in 1967, Balaram's mind is beginning to illustrate some sprain of living under Roy's thumb. He eccentrically describes the story of his life, for instance as the biography of the discovery of the Reason-but most people around him think he has very little to do with Reason; in fact, they find him somewhat comic in his favorite notions. He gives them plenty of reason during Maa Sarswathi Puja planned by Bhudeb Roy to acquire favour with the inspectors of schools. At once, Balaram jumped up onto the statue's platform and ripped off its head, declaring it to be conceit rather than Knowledge. Then, Five of Roy's sons attack Balaram's eleven-year-old servant, Maya. In

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this incident, Alu who was also eleven at that time, had run and fetched Maya's sixteen-year-old brother, who defended her from possible rape.

Another incident in their encounter takes place when a plane crashes into Roy's school and burns half of it to the ground. Every one finds it remarkable that Bhudeb Roy has had the foresight to insure the school just two days before the fire, which seems to demonstrate his wisdom, or at least his luck. In response, Balaram takes hold of upon the destruction to found his own school- much to Bhudeb Roy's chagrin, of course. It is called the Pasteur School of Reason, and is divided into two divisions: in the Department of Pure Reason, Balaram teaches principles of sanitation; in the department of Practical Reason, his wife teaches students to tailor and Shombu Debnath teaches them weaving. Shombu's son, Rakhel, gives up his revolutionary ways to become the school's business manager. The new school is very successful first year, so in its second year, a third division is added: the Department of the March of Reason, the home base for Reason Militant. This third division begins by spraying carbolic acid throughout the village, disinfecting everyone and everything. But in the process of this purification, Balaram entirely disturbs Bhudeb Roy's latest political gathering. The next day, Roy burns several of Balaram's possessions to the ground.

This conflict is vibrant, where Balaram explains that "what is wrong with all those scientists and their sciences is that there is no connection between the outside and inside, between what people think and what they are" (17). He justifies his interest in phrenology by saying that in this science the inside and the outside, the mind and the body, are one (17). According to Phrenology, the shape of a person's head indicates the nature of his or her character. In other words, by examining the body, one can examine the mind. This comment is perhaps on the artificial separation of various branches of science, whether natural or human into distinct, 'pure' islands is taken further in the last part of the novel, where Mrs. Verma, a microbiologist contemplates the origin of the microbes she examines. She then equates the body with a machine and states that "at least the surgeon sees the whole machine, even though it's all shrouded and chloroformed, face covered and weeping mothers hidden away every trace of its humanity blanketed" (412). This sentence bringing together natural science to do with body and human sentiments to do with mind anticipates Mrs. Verma's reflections:

"And when you find something in a specimen can you really help wondering Sometimes where all those microbes and bacteria and viruses come from? Whether they can really, all of them, be wholly external to our minds? And just as you let yourself wonder whether sometimes they are anything other than a bodily metaphor for human pain and unhappiness and perhaps joy as well you cut yourself short, for it dawns on you yet again that ever since Pasteur that is the one question you can never ask (412).

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We may see this between Dr. Mishra and Mrs. Verma on whether to cremate the body of Kulfi or not, but this too is surrounded by the issue of purity. Dr. Mishra's arguments are that the officials will not allow for cremation, and, more importantly, that the situation does not meet the requirements the old set for proper cremation. To establish that they cannot go along with the burial in the first place, Dr. Mishra chooses to stand for the purity and persistence of the principles of the Hindu Religion: "he wants the cremation to follow the rules set by ancient religious doctrines of "the spiritual times"(407).

The use of carbolic acid nicely brings together the cleaning 'rituals' of ancient religion (holy water) and modern science (carbolic acid). When Dr. Mishra complains that there are certain rules that have to be followed Mrs. Verma answers: "All you ever talk about is rules. That's how you and your kind have destroyed everything—science, religion, socialism— with your rules and your orthodoxies. That's the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human" (409). As a result, this modified version of ancient Hindu burial takes place in spite of Dr. Mishra's arguments.

Many of these comprise magnificent elements and, although Ghosh never goes away from the bounds of what is austere possible, the use of fancy suggests a world-view that has affinities with both contemporary magic realism and a range of South Asian narrative traditions.

Ghosh is proficient at twisting and turning his narrative line. Ultimately the story reaches the climax in the al-Ghazira section with a disagreement that will see Alu, an idealist like his uncle, being running scared by the forces of the capital. Alu's campaign to annihilate the power of money which Alu has identified the root of all evil, is trodden. However, Zindi manages to disentangle Alu, herself and Kulfi and Boss, two other members of the household, from the mess created by Alu's idealistic scheme, and eventually they all end up in the little town of El-Qued at the northeastern tip of the Algerian Sahara.

Al-Ghazira, in fact, is a phenomenon of which Ghosh is one of the first chroniclers: the exodus of thousands of men and women of the Third World to the Middle East in exploration of an alternative and feasible future. A cross-eyed egg-seller is said to be able to see Cairo and Bombay simultaneously. Disabled persons, Filipino faces, Indian faces, Egyptian faces, Pakistani faces, and even a few Ghazira's faces, a whole world of faces. Indeed, certain parts of Al-Ghazira have the cosmopolitan jostle and bustle of a present-day vanity fair. It is almost as "though half the world's haunts had been painted in miniature along the side of the single street of the city".



Although these faces and the places have packed the desert spaces of the Middle East, they have not been able to make Al-Ghazira into a home, because there were problems everywhere, no matter what you were paid, and because “foreign places are all alike in that they are not home. Nothing binds you there”.

In El-Qued, the fugitives come across the Vermas, two Indian doctors who have taken up jobs in the Algerian desert. Mrs. Verma is pleased to see the fugitives, because Kulfi appears to be just the woman she wanted to transmit as the heroine of her production of a Bengali dance drama. In the desert town of El-Qued The Circle of Reason is completed. Mrs. Verma, hurried and nonsensical, manages to disabuse Alu of the dream of a world purified by coherent methods. The most important thing, we learn, is to “try to be a better human being”. The only hope is “to naje di di wutg wgat we’ve got.”

Not astoundingly, at the end of Ghosh’s first novel, his major characters recommence their travel again, disburdened of false dreams. Zindi and Alu head for “home” via Tangiers. Das joins them as he moves forward for a migrant’s life in Germany. He will accompany Alu and Zindi till Tangiers, where migrating birds fill the sky as they make their annual flights. Thus, the novel presented various turns and moves throughout the novel without any deviation from the line of the story. All the characters are linked to each other in a circular way.

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