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## AMITAV GHOSH'S "*THE CIRCLE OF REASON*": A UNIQUE ART OF NARRATION

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**Dr Sarang Rani Asthana**

M.A. Ph.D (English)

B R A Bihar University

Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's debut novel entitled *The Circle of Reason* (1986), which has won him the prestigious literary Prix Medici Estranger Award for its French version in the year 1990, is a highly remarkable novel. The novel according to Ghosh himself has been "vigorously international from the start." It has also been called a saga of flight and pursuit. It is this novel which places him as a master craftsman in the world of fiction. "Written for selected readers, the novel is neither a novel of plot, nor a novel of character, but a novel of thought." In the entire novel we find no conventional development of plot or character. The novel, does not deal with one single character like R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*, a story of Raju or Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, a story of Bakha, rather it deals with the entire humanity. All characters of the novel belong to this mundane. The novel, like Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, describes all characters with visual details and creates a picaresque effect.

**Keywords** :Pluralistic, Magic Realism, Cosmopolitan, Bildungsroman

Amitav Ghosh, the most cosmopolitan of contemporary Indian English writers,

holds a key position in the history of Indian English literature. All writers and all artists cherish a desire in their heart to create a place for themselves in their infinite universe. In the list of such writers the name of Amitav Ghosh comes first. He is a person who is completely involved in this quest for narrative significance, in trying to find a place for himself. This quest is constantly seen in almost all the works of Ghosh, even though they seem to cover a wide range of genres, his innovative attitude of narration is highlighted in almost all his works.

His skillful and artistic use of English language lends a singularity and significance to his narratives. His significance is deeply rooted in his cosmopolitanism, for he is a writer who travels and re – maps the world drawing connections across the boundaries. His writing style resembles flowing water. A keen interest in anthropology, in places of today and yesterday, adds flavor and interest to his novels and makes them informative as well. "With an anthropologist's sense of detail, and a historian's grasp of facts and chronology, and with a creative writer's curiosity about causation and effects, and great narrative skills and imagination, Ghosh weaves

together a pluralistic and self – reflexive view of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Amitav Ghosh’s debut novel entitled *The Circle of Reason* (1986), which has won him the prestigious literary Prix Medici Estranger Award for its French version in the year 1990, is a highly remarkable novel. The novel according to Ghosh himself has been “vigorously international from the start.”<sup>2</sup> It has also been called a saga of flight and pursuit. It is this novel which places him as a master craftsman in the world of fiction. “Written for selected readers, the novel is neither a novel of plot, nor a novel of character, but a novel of thought.”<sup>3</sup>

In the entire novel we find no conventional development of plot or character. The novel, does not deal with one single character like R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide*, a story of Raju or Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, a story of Bakha, rather it deals with the entire humanity. All characters of the novel belong to this mundane. The novel, like Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, describes all characters with visual details and creates a picaresque effect. Each character is an epitome of human suffering and pain. Everyone has a story to tell i.e. the story of their untold sufferings. And as we know generally any story is narrated in two modes – diegetic and mimetic. Ghosh has made ample use of this in almost all his novels. *The Circle of Reason* is the first in his series of novels and we do find frequent use of both the modes of presentation. For example, the following line describing the personality of Shombhu Debnath is completely mimetic.

“Shombhu Nath was tall, spectrally dark and skeletally thin.

..... lipped and full – nosed, pouring in a broken glade from ridged cheekbones at the corners of his eyes; the eyes blood – red but lustrous, the forehead soaring uneasily to a crown of knotted hair, coiled snake – like on top of his head .”<sup>4</sup>(p-74)

Similarly, the lines: “It happened on 11 January 1950 at 4.30 in the afternoon. We know the date because that was the day Madame Irene Joliot – Curie, Nobel Laureate in physics and daughter of the discoverers of radium, Pierre and Marie Curie, arrived in Calcutta ablaze with glory,” (p-15) are diegetic in mode. Such instances are scattered throughout the novel. It gives a balance to the novel.

The novel has a narrative quality which are fantastical and it is this quality that puts it in the category of magic realism. Magic Realism basically means describing events in a real-world setting but with magical trappings, often incorporating local customs and invented beliefs. Viewed in this context we see that the novel has a lot of such instances where we see use of magical tips in real setting. For example, we see though Alu remains inside the machine for many days he remains alive. Though it has been presented in a normal way but his being alive after being in pain for such a long time is in itself a magical phenomenon. In this entire scene it is seen that people all around are coming to see him, Alu in this particular moment has become a table talk discussion. People are worried a lot about him. But he is not even least conscious of the worries of these people. He thinks as if nothing has happened and is quite cool. When he

comes out of it he behaves in a very casual manner. Thus, it is seen that here the approach of Ghosh is quite real. He has presented the real scenario but with a tinge of magical setting in it.

Another point that holds our attention is the presence of omniscient narrator throughout. Though all the characters have expressed their ideas and views but what is notable is the fact it is the omniscient narrator is always present. The characters in the novel, unlike conventional categories of round and flat characters or types and individuals, are descriptive characters. Ghosh's art of characterization beautifully reveals his power of imagination and keen sense of observation reminding one of Dryden's "Here's God's plenty" for Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. However, it deals primarily with Alu, a bengali orphan.

Since the novel traces the journey of Alu from Lalpukur to Calcutta, Kerela, the Middle East and Algeria it is considered as a bildungsroman.

Ghosh along with using a galaxy of techniques in his writing also switches over to oral tradition of story – telling. In the present novel i.e. *The Circle of Reason* it is seen that the second part of the novel has been narrated partly in oral tradition. For example, Zindi's story about the calamities that have fallen on her house, Abu Fahl's story of the trip of the ruins of The Star, Hajj Fahmy's story of the coming of the oilmen and Jeevanbhai's story of Alu's return all have been narrated orally. "The narrator of the novel recedes into the background, as these

representatives of the lower social strata are given a voice of their own."<sup>5</sup>

*The Circle of Reason*, as the title suggests, is a novel which minutely examines the philosophies of reason, and the science and technology associated with these philosophies. And Ghosh has chosen a circular pattern for it. But the novel is not merely circular. It is a linear story told in flashback. The novel begins in the past and continues it later on a linear pattern. So it can be said that the novel is a well patterned one and, when seen as a whole, displays the intricate "buti work"<sup>6</sup> of a master weaver in the making. Without fail it is really a narrative tapestry of unsurpassing beauty.

Ghosh here, as a natural weaver, weaves intricately the different ideas and varied stories linking through Alu and his childhood passions. Undoubtedly "Alu's love for weaving is the only metaphor that binds and weaves the episodes together."<sup>7</sup>

The novel opens with the description of Nachiketa Bose (Alu) – who remains present in all the three sections of the novel. Nachiketa Bose, an eight-year-old boy, comes to live with his uncle Balram Bose and Aunt Toru-debi in Lalpukur because he has lost his mother and father in a car accident. The only remarkable thing about this orphan is his extraordinary head. It is "extraordinary head, huge, several times too large for an eighty-eight-year-old, and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps." (p - 03) People talk about his head in different manners, but it is Bolai da, who gives Alu him lifelong name as well as part of his

identity. Bolai da says “No, it’s not like a rock at all. It’s an Alu, a potato, a huge, freshly dug, lumpy potato. So Alu he was named and Alu he was to remain”. (p-03). If we think logically and in an allegorical way, Alu is someone rooted in soil and therefore in identity. But in the story, we find that the situation is just reverse. Alu seems only to satirize his name. And the entire novel deals with the modern man’s problem of alienation, migration and existential crisis in life.

Migration, since the beginning of human race, has been a major phenomenon. But that migration was different from what it is today. That migration used to be in groups. What is new and typical in our age is the sense of loneliness and vacuum that comes with individual migration. Since time immemorial, the human race has been obsessed with the idea of belonging and heritage. But now the situation has completely changed and it is surprising as well. Everyone is willing to sing his/her own song. “Suddenly everyone has become .....Asian in Europe and so on. Everyone is away from the roots – where have all the roots gone?”<sup>8</sup>

In fact there is nothing in this novel that can be called at home. Alu starts his life in a refugee village. Despite entering the family of his uncle Balram, he is confined to the periphery of the circle of this family. Again, at Al – Ghazira, though he becomes a part of Zindi’s circle of friends and lodgers, we find him detached from the group. He is an outsider both to Balram who does not understand him and to Zindi who wants to help him in a simple way. However, “the two circles of Balram and Zindi are interconnected, on the one hand

by the presence of Alu and on the other hand by sewing machine, carbolic acid and Alu’s weaving skill.”<sup>9</sup>

The tripartite division of the novel is not done merely from the structural point of view for the arrangements of events in Alu’s life but bear a symbolic significance. “Divided into three sections called Satva: Reason, Rajas: Passion, Tamas: Death, the novel symbolically deals with three phases of human life.”<sup>10</sup> These three sections of the novel have been basically derived from ‘The Bhagwadgita’ which symbolically represent three distinguished gunas. The first one, that is Satwa, symbolizes the search of wisdom. In this section we find that ‘Reason’ dominates throughout. As the story unfolds, we are introduced with the uncle of Alu, Balram who “stands for reason and propagates reason.”<sup>11</sup> Balram, in the novel, is a man of reason who applies logic to every small thing. He is of the view that “Science doesn’t belong to countries;....., the mundane things that happen in real life which move people”. (p – 53).

The Second section Rajas symbolizes life of Passion. It begins with Alu’s arrival in al – Ghazira. “Rajas has an outward movement... Rajas is the impurity which leads to activity.”<sup>12</sup> Here we find that the same carbolic acid which was used for Balram’s plan of cleaning, creates trouble in al – Ghazira when the ‘displaced’ persons living with and around Zindi decide to clean every house and shop. When they take a sort of task of cleaning and try to clean shops and stores in this foreign place, the police shoot them and most of them die. Here one thing is notable

that in the entire novel Zindi is the only person who does not believe in this cleanliness movement. It is only she who is down to earth and has practical knowledge, of the value of money in a foreign country and who refuses candidly to join this mad movement of the mob. Though the cleanliness movement was started by Balram initially, in this section Alu is the person who talks about Carbolic Acid, cleanliness and money. Alu carries this movement from Lalpukur to al – Ghazira. After being saved from the collapsed building Star, he lectures the mob about money. Buried under the two sewing machines he happily thinks about life and death. In fact, his situation is “Unlike Nachiketa of the Mahabharatha .....death’s door but his knowledge brings nothing but destruction.

And he tells the spellbound crowd that this germ is Money. “No money, no dirt”. (p - 302) These people who have left their home and have come to al – Ghazira in order to earn money and send it back to their family members, are convinced by the eloquence of Alu. Ghosh here once again ridicules the mob psychology of the people who are mesmerized by Alu’s speech. The common belief that money is the root cause of all evils has been paradoxically presented. We find that the people who have gathered to the oil – city of al – Ghazira illegally to earn money are prepared to hand over their money to the Professor. Alu here, just like Raju of The Guide, has been depicted as a saint who preaches and teaches the entire group about the evils of money and the dirt it creates. A single collapse has changed the entire personality of Alu. Alu who once

was a silent person, a passive character who acted according to the conscience has suddenly become so eloquent that people believe in what he speaks. Alu, who is basically a weaver throughout the novel, has been shown in a different image here.

In the third section of the novel Tamas stands for darkness and destruction. And is described as “darkness and inertia.”<sup>14</sup> In this section we find the trio i.e, Zindi, Alu and Kulfi, in the small town of El Oued which is situated on the north – eastern edge of the Algerian, Sahara Desert. Dr. Uma Verma who has already given shelter to Jyoti Das, the Police officer from India, helps these three persons. Here in the library of Dr. Uma, Alu finds the book Life of Pasteur given to her by her father Dantu who was a friend of Balram. Ghosh is thus able to connect the third part with the first part with the help of Carbolic Acid and Life of Pasteur. Again, while acting the role of Chitrangana in Tagore’s play against Jyoti Das as Arjuna, Kulfi collapses and dies. Ghosh at this point makes mockery of the Hindu death rituals. Because in the place of Ganga Jal it is carbolic acid that is considered ‘pure’ as Ganga Jal and is put into Kulfi’s mouth. We find towards the end of the novel, Mrs. Verma is shown using carbolic acid instead of Ganga Jal. Dr. Mishra remarks, “Carbolic acid has become holy water”. (p - 444) To this Mrs. Verma retorts, “What does it matter whether it is Gnaga Jal or Carbolic Acid? It is just a question of cleaning the place, isn’t it? People thought something was clean once, now they think something else is clean. What difference does it make to the dead, Dr. Mishra (p – 445)?” Here “Ghosh is of course pointing

out the blind faith of millions of Indians in Ganga Jal even though the water of the life giver is so badly polluted.”<sup>15</sup>

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