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THE NARRATIVE TAPESTRY OF 'THE CIRCLE OF REASON' BY AMITAV GHOSH

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's debut novel entitled 'The Circle of Reason' (1986), which has won him the prestigious literary award Prix Medici Estranger for its French version, is a highly remarkable novel. The novel according to Ghosh himself has been vigorously international from the start. It is 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.

Keywords: Transcendental, Diaspora, Bildungsroman, Nationalism, Subalternity, Nihilism

Amitav Ghosh, a pioneer of English literature in India, was born in Calcutta on 11 July, 1956. This outstanding literary personality has "emerged as one of the foremost writers in not just the Indian, but the global fiction scene."¹ He is one of the renowned figures in English literature chiefly known for his diasporic writing. Along with V. S. Naipaul and Bharti Mukherjee, he is one of the prominent

writers who have taken exile, loss of identity and the problem of immigration as his subjects. He is the most cosmopolitan among the contemporary Indian English Writers. He has emerged as a powerful voice among the writers of Indian diaspora. As a fiction writer, Ghosh holds a remarkable position for the simple and convincing reason that his narratives defy generic boundaries. Almost all his novels focus on the arbitrary nature of national borders. In the literary cosmos he is highly acclaimed for his fictions, travelogues and journalism. He has penned seven novels and four volumes of essays. Apart from this, he has also tried his hand at other prose writings, such as newspaper articles, articles in magazines, commentaries and essays. His fictional works, though relating a story, are resistant to classification. Because in his novels, history, travel, science, nationalism, mystery and discovery blend together to produce the narrative.

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

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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.”²

Amitav Ghosh’s debut novel entitled ‘The Circle of Reason’(1986), which has won him the prestigious literary award Prix Medici Estrangerf for its French version, is a highly remarkable novel. The novel according to Ghosh himself has been “vigorously international from the start.”³It is 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.”⁴

In the entire novel, we find no conventional development of plot or character. The novel, instead of dealing with one particular character like R. K. Narayan’s ‘The Guide’, a story of Raju or Mulk Raj Anand’s ‘Untouchable’, a story of Bakha,deals with the entire humanity.

All characters belong to the world. 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 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. He was usually nearly naked, with only a thin gamcha wound around his waist, displaying proudly the corded muscles he bore all over him as a legacy of his years of weaving and wandering. His face was his own hoarse crescendo in Bhairavi, a stumbling sweep, lush – 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 (p-74).”⁵Similarly the following 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

RESEARCH ARTICLE

daughter of the discoverers of radium, Pierre and Marie Curie, arrived in Calcutta ablaze with glory (p-15) is 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 derby 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 who is presenting the thought of these different characters. 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.

'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"⁶ of a master weaver in the making. Without fail it is really a narrative tapestry of un-surpassing beauty. Ghosh here, as a natural weaver, weaves

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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.”⁷

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 eight-year-old, and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps (p-3).” People talk about his head in different manners, but it is Bolai da, who gives Alu his 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-3). 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 an emigrant – a village student in a nearby town, a semi – urbanite at Delhi or Mumbai, a Punjabi in Bengal, a Tamilian in Orissa, an Asian in Europe and so on. Everyone is away from the roots –where have all the roots gone?”⁸

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.”⁹

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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."¹⁰ These three sections of the novel have been basically derived from 'The Bhagwadgita' which symbolically represent three distinguished gunas. The first one, that is Satva, 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."¹¹ 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, Reason doesn't belong to any nation. They belong to the history – to the world"(p-54). He says at one point, "if reason, science and all the rest – are to mean anything, they must have the power to move people...it is the everyday, the mundane things that happen in real life which move people" (p-50). The trouble with him is that theories come first and truth afterwards. Rational thinking is his only goal in life. But the author, being a man of mature thought, points out the end of rationality in practical situations.

Balram is a man who can't look beyond reason. That's why his plans are

invariably put out of gear when put into practice. In the novel we find that though Balram has been presented as a rationalist and a firm believer in science and reason, yet he acts in a very irrational way. His favourite hobby is studying heads, phrenology, which is no longer considered as a science. It is also ironic that a person who swears by science and talks of reason all the time relies on nineteenth century pseudoscience, Phrenology, which is close to the Indian superstition of popular religion and astrology which he himself opposes. Phrenology in the true sense is the study of the size and shape of people's heads in the belief that one can find out about their characters and abilities from this. He tries to find the 'inside' of a person from 'outside'. For him the book 'Life of Pasteur' is an epitome of Reason. Ghosh defines his interest in 'Life of Pasteur' and the Rationalist's society as 'a pasteurized cosmos.'(35)

The novelist opines "It wasn't talk of reason, it wasn't the talk of universal atom. It was passion, a passion which sprang from the simple and everyday... it is that passion which makes man great". (p-50) It is this passion that makes Balram clean the surrounding area that brings about his doom, destruction and death. Interested in the School of Reason he opens a school called 'The School of Reason' but fails in his attempt to educate the village youths to think rationally. Balram's knowledge of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

science and his faith in Reason do not find a base in real life situations. The knowledge that he possesses is abstract and knowledge without worldly wisdom brings nothing but disaster. He also considers weaving, a part of Reason because it has connected people of the world and has always been a part of history.

In one of the meetings of the rationalist society, opposing Gopal, Balram questions, “If we can’t make them change their lives, if we can’t make them see Reason, what can we ever have to say to the masses of Hindoostan?” (p-50) Balram tries to solve all his problems with buckets of Carbohic acid and practically seems to lose it himself. In a way Ghosh highlights the reasoned approach of Balram and tries to present the folly of obsession by his limited knowledge of scientific inventions of the Western Science.

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.”¹² 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 Carbohic 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 who had returned from Yama the lord of death after acquiring knowledge about Life and death, Alu thinks of only purity and dirt.”¹³ Nachiketa of ‘The Mahabharata’ had gained philosophy of life. This Nachiketa that is Alu, returns from death’s door but his knowledge brings nothing but destruction. However, he believes, ironically, that he has acquired the true knowledge:

“There in the ruins, he (Alu) had discovered what it was that Pasteur had really wanted all his life – an intangible thing, something he had not understood himself, yet a thing the whole world had conspired to deny him.” “Purity. Purity was what he had

RESEARCH ARTICLE

wanted, purity and cleanliness – not just in home, or in a laboratory or a university, but in the whole world of living men...the Infinitely small, the Germ (p-280).”

The third section of the novel *Tamas* stands for darkness and destruction. Andis described as “darkness and inertia.”¹⁴ 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 Carboic 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-411) 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-411)?” 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.”¹⁵

Zindi describes Mrs. Verma’s house as the house of death. She says “I can smell death in this house, it is there in writing – one of us is not going to leave this house alive.” (p-393) However, “at the end of the section there are hints of the restoration of life and of reason”.¹⁶ A new light and a new realization comes into being, as Mrs. Verma says “If there’s one thing people learn from the past, it is that every consummated death is another beginning.” (p-414) At this Alu’s stiff thumbs start moving and so Mrs. Verma declares “You can do whatever you like as long as you want to.” (p-417) Ultimately after many ups and downs, many sweet and bitter experiences, and having experienced many crisis Alu, accompanied by Zindi and Boss, returns back to India completing the circle. The novel thus seems to incorporate “elements of the picaresque novel, the novel of ideas, the thriller or detective novel (with Assistant Superintendent of Police Jyoti das, trailing the alleged extremist Alu, through several continents and the Hindu epic.”¹⁷

RESEARCH ARTICLE

One of the tendencies of the post – modern writers is that they simply present themselves without showing their identity or roots. Ghosh being a post –modern writer has followed this tradition. The novel, in fact, is crowded with characters. Every character has been given a tale to tell but no inhabitation, no roots. In the words of John Clement Ball “His central figures are travelers and diasporic exiles: examples of ‘the migrant sensibility’ that Salman Rushdie calls ‘one of the central themes of this century of displaced person.’”¹⁸ All his characters have been merely presented as fable – characters, passively listening to each other. The oral tradition of story – telling has been well exploited by Ghosh as each character who narrates a story becomes a narrator for a brief period and tries to present a tale from his/her own viewpoint.

“In ‘The Circle of Reason’ the attempts of the novelist are obviously oriented to floating the events and characters through a medley of metaphors and ideas.”¹⁹ Ghosh uses metaphors in the novel to form circles. The most important one is the book “Life of Pasteur” which Balram, Gopal, Dantu and Alu like for their own varying reasons. ‘Life of Pasteur’ is a significant symbol inside the novel. The book functions in different ways at various levels. The role played by the book is more intricate. We are first introduced to it when Balram, worried about the seeming lack of emotion in Alu, lectures to him about

passion. He reads to Alu from the book and stops to see “tears in Alu’s eyes.” (p-29) When Toru debi burns Balram’s books, Alu retrieves one book – ‘Life of Pasteur’ – from the flames.

This time in a fit of emotion and affection they hug each other and Alu handovers the book to Balram – “This time tears were Balram’s.” (p-34) Thus, the book helps in forging a bond between generations. And the bond extends to a passionate fight against germs – which seems to be the root cause of all illnesses. The book also inspires a young Balram’s campaign for clean underwear. Again the pages of the book come to the help of Karthamma who refuses to deliver the baby without signing papers. Then Prof. Samuel tears the pages of the ‘Life of Pasteur’ and gives it to her to sign. We also find one copy of ‘Life of Pasteur’ in the library of Mrs. Verma. This is the copy which Balram had given Dantu and Dantu had given to his daughter. Lastly the book is cremated by Mrs. Verma and Alu with Kulfi’s corpse suggesting the completion of the circle.

Besides ‘Life of Pasteur’, one of the other metaphors which Ghosh uses is ‘Carbolic Acid’. Carbolic Acid runs throughout the book connecting the three parts. He uses it to create a germ free society. The same carbolic acid which Balram uses for waging a war against Bhudeb Roy in section one confines him in

RESEARCH ARTICLE

its circle, as we find that at one place Balram himself is surrounded by the drums of Carbolic acid. It gains more importance in al – Ghazira where Ras people set out to clean all places with carbolic acid. Carbolic Acid works as a weapon not only against infectious diseases but also against the wicked, the impure – against all enemies of mankind. Carbolic acid is a part and parcel of Alu’s cleaning up campaign. Towards the end of the novel, we see Mrs. Verma pouring it into the mouth of Kulfi instead of purificatory Ganga Jal and then Dr. Mishra comments “The whole world has come full circle.” (p-411) Thus we find that in the novel Carbolic Acid finally performs the spiritual act of making the body pure and holy. Meaning it stands for purification.

With great dexterity, Ghosh has used another metaphor which dominates the entire novel – the ‘sewing machine’. In the First section, where most of the action takes place in, sewing and weaving run parallel as important metaphors. At one place he says, “Weaving is hope, a living belief that having once made the world one and blessed it with its diversity and it must do so again.” (p-58) Weaving in the novel has almost become the identity of Alu. It has also become a synonym for his love for Maya. When Alu at one place tries to create various Butis, we find he satisfactorily succeeds in creating Maya – buti. Again at Hajj Fahmy’s house, while everyone is engaged in the mission to get rid of the

money, Alu is engaged elsewhere in weaving all the time, sitting in a corner as if he has nothing to do with the rest of the world. In the last section we find he is unable to weave because his thumbs have gone stiff but again with the cure of Alu’s thumb, we find an implication of Alu’s renewed activity of weaving. Toru – debi teaches sewing as Shombhu Debnath teaches weaving.

Toru Debi has great fascination for the sewing machine because it is a part of her dowry and has been with her since her wedding night. She is unable to push the machine away as “it is her child in a way her husband’s nephew could not be.” (p-6) Being childless, she doesn’t have any idea about children, so she tries to interpret it in terms of her stitching. She says “what do boys of eight do? They neither hemmed, nor chain – stitched, nor cross – stitched, nor quilted. What did they do?” (p-9) When it so happens that Parboti – debi, wife of Bhudeb Roy, comes to her house with her daughter, she directly thinks that she must have come for taking her blouses that she had promised her. Sensing the forthcoming danger, she thinks of the sewing – machine as a savior and opines “He is coming and it’ll be the end of everything if the blouses aren’t ready. Only the sewing machine can save us now.” (P-136) And really the machine works as a savior at different places right from the very beginning till the end of the novel. In the second section we

RESEARCH ARTICLE

find when the huge building ‘Star’ falls on Alu surprisingly, Alu is saved because of the two sewing machines. The whole book seems as a research for the sewing machine.

Thus it is seen that the metaphors generate circles in the novel. . Ghosh has used metaphors which run throughout the novel, acting as a golden thread to hold the narrative intact. Metaphors of Carboic acid, sewing machine, germs and the book, Life of Pasteur find a recurring presence in the novel. In Mistry’s ‘A Fine Balance’ embroidery is a motif, binding the narrative. But the movement is linear and it gains symbolic significance as the end is reached. And this has been done by Ghosh as the “...linear narrative techniques of the text are...set against a multi-voiced, self – consciously cyclical structure.”²⁰

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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