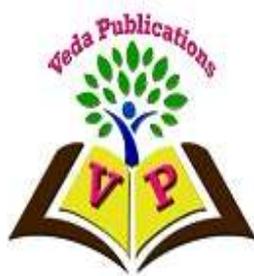




HISTORY AND SUBALTERNITY IN AMITA GHOSH'S *THE CIRCLE OF REASON*

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ABSTRACT

The circle of Reason (1986) encompasses all possible critical consideration by the scholars and critics of postcolonial fiction it has received because it points to the state rationalities that shape postcolonial and subaltern experience. Its conceptual focus on reason, as signaled by the title, makes it a particularly suitable text representing the subaltern history duly interwoven with the narrative of Alu's run from the police is the story of his recruitment in various utopian scheme. When its characters become migrants-and here the novel fully acknowledges the very different circumstances of bourgeois and subaltern migration-it is to escape the police, driven by the rationalities of the state. The question of subaltern agency is also related to the role that imagination plays in the construction of knowledge, which is an issue central to Ghosh's project.

Keywords: *Subaltern, Agency, Rationalities, Migrants.*

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INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh belongs to the literary tradition that was fostered and nourished by Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and others. Dispossession, cultural fragmentation, colonial and neo-colonial power structures, postcolonial corruption, cultural degeneration and the crisis of identity are some of the major preoccupations in their writings. Like many of his contemporaries he has been immensely influenced by the historical, political, cultural and individual milieu of post-independent India. He belongs to that elite group of Indian writers writing in English, who attended exclusive schools, almost British, in the post-Raj period and is more comfortable with the English language than with any other Indian language.

Amitav Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* first published in Great Britain in 1986. The novel presents history as a collective memory embodying a symbiotic relationship between the past and the present. The past, a reference point for understanding what is happening now is equally dependent on the present which determines how we look at it. Science, philosophy, history, politics, culture, art, language, the joy of living, the despair of repeated loss—these are only some of the strands which make the scope of this novel fairly formidable.

The Circle of Reason has been translated into many European languages and has even won the prestigious literary *Prix Medici Etranger* for its French version. His novels reflect a historicity as history is always present in his novels. Even this first novel is an extraordinary accomplished work of fiction as he innovatively and successfully explores new possibilities for the Indian novel in English. His novels reflect the tendencies and concerns of the age. The modern novel, according to Trilling, 'is a perpetual quest for reality and is the most effective agent of the moral imagination' (Trilling, 1961: 107). Ghosh attempts to understand the lives of his contemporaries in lands as diverse as India, Bangladesh, Egypt, England and so forth. His canvas is always large and his novels are colonized with a variety of characters. Characterization is his forte. Every important character is delineated realistically.

The Circle of Reason (1986) is a skillfully constructed novel encompassing a world that

stretches from a remote village in Bengal to the shores of the Mediterranean. The novel is a saga of escape and pursuit. It chronicles the adventures of an eight year old orphan known as Alu, a young master weaver who is wrongly suspected of being a terrorist. He was chased from Bengal to Bombay and on through the Persian Gulf to North Africa by a bird-watching police inspector, Alu encounters along the way a cast of characters as various and as colourful as the epithets with which the author adorns them. Though possessing serious undertones, particularly resonant in today's political climate, the novel is a delightfully humorous picaresque adventure. Asnani describes the novel, 'It is also an interesting tale of myriad colourful people, of man's relation with the machine, his curse and salvation with science and reason' (Asnani, 1987: 226). The novel marks a break from the traditional themes of the Indian English novel. The immediacy of experience of the reality is conveyed to the readers by a medley of devices; ironic mode of narration and recreating a magical world. Dhawan comments on its technique, 'The all embracing structural principles of magic and irony eloquently weave the total pattern of the novel' (Dhawan, 1999: 19).

The Circle of Reason deals with the modern man's problem of alienation, migration and the existential crisis in life. The novel is grounded in a traditional Indian conceptual frame work. Ghosh seeks to structure the novel with reference to the three cardinal qualities that, according to Indian philosophy, make individuals what they are: Tamas, Rajas and Satwa, the order indicative of a soul's gradual and upward evolution. Curiously, in *The Circle of Reason* the order is reversed. Part One is entitled 'Satwa: Reason,' Part Two, 'Rajas: Passion' and Part Three, 'Tamas: Death.' As such, the novel symbolically deals with the three phases of human life. 'Satwa': symbolizes the search of wisdom, 'Rajas' symbolizes the life of passion and 'Tamas' stands for darkness, and destruction. The journey from 'Satwa' through 'Rajas' to 'Tamas,' the three parts of the novel is not a straightforward narrative but one full of resonances harkening back and forth and each contextually different.

The novel inscribes what might be termed a 'magical real' sensibility of quotidian extreme, wild



coincidence and tangential, picaresque epic against bounded ideas of language, history and genre. The perception of a linear shift from the British Empire into a postcolonial world of discrete nations is challenged by Ghosh's portrayal of a teeming world of transverse histories. This diffusion of 'big history' into the long movements and strange moments of diaspora is most crucially drawn out through Ghosh's heightened, sometimes perplexed and at other times enchanted, exploration of what might be described as the 'polylingualism' of language. Ghosh portrays a world in which the smaller terms of community belie the ideologies of nation impressed by the 'traditional' realistic novel form—and the apparently organic, rooted terms of 'community' are themselves collapsed into a recognition that all people can be traced back to histories of displacement and migration.

Deriving the three *gunas*, *Satwa*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Ghosh names the three sections of the novel accordingly. Each section of the novel is dominated by the mode (*guna*) as it has been named. Whereas *Satwa* is described as light of consciousness by most of the scholars, Ghosh prefers to call it reason. The concept of reason is very much western and it is associated with many traits like the power to think rationally, scientific way of discriminating between right and wrong, a state minus superstition, progressive attitude and civilized way of life. The writer without making any loud announcements brings together Indian and Western elements, even the title of the novel is suggestive of this. However, it is ironic that as the characters move towards the west, passion and death dominate.

In fact, the story begins when an eight-year-old orphan Alu comes to Lalpukur from Calcutta to live with his uncle Balaram and aunt Toru-debi. He had been given his nick name by his phrenologist uncle, since his large head looked something like a potato and portended 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-estranged, Balaram and Toru-debi decide to take in Alu and raise him, since they had no children of their own.

Alu soon displays an amazing ability to pick various languages. Yet, in one of the many paradoxes

that run through the novel, he rarely speaks at all. When at fourteen the boy stops attending school, Balaram, the supposed scientist surprises everyone by encouraging the boy to take up weaving. Alu begins by taking lessons from Shombhu Debnath, a master weaver. Alu seems a gifted child, just Balaram had predicted: not only is he good at languages (that he doesn't use), but now he also surpasses his teacher in weaving.

How Balaram became a phrenologist offers us insight into his quirky personality. He had discovered a book on *Practical Phrenology* at a second-hand bookshop in College Street on 11th January, 1950, the day that the physicist Madame Curie was visiting Calcutta. At the time of her visit, Balaram was working for the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and he went to interview her. As it turns out, he asks what appeared to be a silly question: Madame Curie's hosts had begged off further questions because, they said, she had flown at high altitudes and this had exhausted her. Balaram thinks: 'Professor Joliot was wrong; 9000 feet wouldn't tire a Curie. The Curies lived in the highest reaches of the imagination'. When his spontaneous observation draws laughter from those at the reception, and then from his workers back at the office, his fragile personality takes a turn that has ramifications for the rest of the story. He decides to leave journalism altogether, and to devote his full energies to phrenology.

The day after the incident at the airport, however, he also accepts an offer of employment from Bhudeb Roy. Roy, a very fat man given to self-aggrandizement, has decided to start a school in remote Lalpukur, about one hundred miles north of Calcutta. Balaram becomes one of his principal teachers. Roy quickly becomes a political bully in remote village, though, hiring thugs to enforce his policies at the school and elsewhere. The two men become enemies competing for the minds and hearts of the villagers. Sixteen years on, in 1967, Balaram's mind is beginning to show some strain of living under Roy's thumb. He strangely describes the story of his life, for instance, as the biography of the discovery of Reason—but most people around him think he has very little to do with reason; in fact, they find him somewhat comic in his pet notions. He gives them



plenty of reason to come to this conclusion: during an especially extravagant *puja* to Maa Saraswati (goddess of knowledge) planned by Bhudeb Roy to garner favour with the Inspector of Schools, Balaram jumped up onto the statue's platform and ripped off its head, declaring it to be Vanity, rather than Knowledge. In response, Bhudeb Roy surreptitiously poisons the fish in Balaram's pond. Then five of Roy's 'sons' attack Balaram's eleven-year-old servant, Maya. In this incident Alu, who was also eleven at the time, had run and fetched Maya's sixteen-year-old brother, who defended from her possible rape.

The next incident in their battle for influence occurs when a plane crashes into Roy's school and burns half of it to the ground. Everyone finds it remarkable that Bhudeb Roy has had the foresight to insure the school just two weeks before the fire, which seems to demonstrate his wisdom, or at least his luck. In response, Balaram seizes 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 Shombhu Debnath teaches them weaving. Shombhu's son, Rakhai, gives up his revolutionary ways to become the school's business manager. The new school has a 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. The third division begins by spraying carbolic acid throughout the village, disinfecting everyone and everything. But in the process of this 'purification,' Balaram completely disrupts Bhudeb Roy's latest political gathering. The next day, Roy burns several of Balaram's possessions to the ground.

By and large one can come to a graceful conclusion to make it out loud that history and politics happened to play their own roles at their high ends to witness breathtaking failures on the part of almost all characters in the novel Hence a subversion of history on record and made available to posterity is thought to be out of currency, when we call a spade a spade In turn, all the characters in the novel are understood to be representatives of subaltern

concerns Hence an official history kept on record by the Europeans is not dependable for it gives way to a new history truthful in its fabric from top to toe.

To make an argument about the ways in which *The Circle of Reason* interrogates the legacy of rationality in a postcolonial context is to adduce a relationship between narrative and the social realm that calls for clarification. In suggesting that the critiques of rationality that run through the novel are best understood in political, historical, cultural and individual contexts. Ultimately of course, the seriousness with which Ghosh understands springs from the fact that it is not easily acquired. The Circle takes a lot of beating, tracing a repeated pattern of achievement and loss. In all three parts the novel finds patches of settled community life. Each part of a tale of the novel attempts to better society, efforts (except with qualifications, the law section) which flame into destruction and exile. Yet the novel does not slip into cynicism. The way it looks at its stories ensures that the urge to mould a better life remains undefeated. Circling in the novel is invoked in three ways: in the title, in the form of the narrative, and in terms of travel. The style of *The Circle*, the location of its 'home,' also gives it hope. This hope is important because *The Circle* leads us into a universe which is spectacularly destructive. The Circle does not have a single conception of time. Or rather, it explores the many possibilities offered by its general idea of time. A delicate network weaves connections between different phenomena, and removes any claim to absolute autonomy which they may generate. While the overall design patterns time, in its turn the arrangement of time moulds history in the wake of the history, politics and the individual with the perspective subaltern concerns in it. Ghosh imagines other forms of subaltern associational life that signify interstitial and transnational alternatives to civil society. The way Ghosh tells stories, mconclusionakes story-telling itself a way of looking at the world.

Thus Ghosh's novels occupy a unique place in the arena of postcolonial literature: they evaluate both globalization and postcolonial nationalism, by depicting the experiences of those in transition, those in-between nation-states, those going back and forth as travelers and migrants in search of lost



homes and better lives. Ultimately, Ghosh suggests three things: (i) Community, like memory, is transnational. (ii) The intimacy of inter-national migrants can also be testimonies to the material abjection and psychic violence of globalization that is elided in celebratory discourses. (iii) The transitional and translational space occupied by migrants is a transnational one too: not globalized, not between nation-states, but outside them, linking communities across borders through its desires and discourses of material and emotional belonging.

Thus we opine that Ghosh practices a subaltern ethnography insofar as he counteracts the traditional views and interpretations contained in the imperial project of historical, political and cultural 'improvement' on the part of the individuals who are but victims of colonial forces in one and all respects and to which anthropology contributed for such a long time. The distinction between traditional idealism and modern day free value thought is brought out in a very subtle way.

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