

An Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's "The Circle of Reason"

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Abstract

The themes of quest and journey are as old as the dawn of civilization in this world. Some quest and journeys are philosophical and some quest and journeys are physical. In this novel Ghosh thematises the journey from "Satwa" through "Ragas" to "Tamas" in three parts. He reveals a keen sense of history and a firm grasp of sociocultural and historical material. Those who have read Ghosh's first novel, "The Circle of Reason" will realize his close knowledge and intimate relation with the Middle East and the Arab world. His novel depicts the subversion of history and present a comparative study of human life in modern time and of time past and recent past.

Keywords: Journey, Picaresque, Quest.

Introduction

"The Circle of Reason" is the first novel of Amitav Ghosh. It is remarkable for many reasons. Its theme is different from traditional concerns of Indian English fiction.

In his article "An Allegorical Tom Jones: An Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's The Circle of Reason" S. Sengupta says :

What the novel (The Circle of Reason) celebrates is a quest. In typical fashion a picaresque protagonist moves from Lalpukur in India to al-ghazira in Egypt to the little town of El-Qued in the north-eastern edge of Algerian Sahara. But this journey has the appearance more of withdrawal and retreat than of the bold adventures of Fielding's hero. It is a search for a transforming vision. (Sengupta, p.29)

Dwelling the theme of journey, k. Damodar Rao observes :

The journey as the motif runs throughout the novel and unites characters across its three parts, borders "With almost the biological necessity if not always the case and nonchalance of migratory birds (G.J.V Prasad)". This motif is particularly associated with Alu who is on the run having being branded as an extremist by the police and with Jyoti Das always close on his heels. He moves from Lalpukur to Kerela and then sets off to al-Ghazira in the middle along with a number of characters who travel in search of material wealth and more opportunities. Travel itself is converted into a homeland. For Jyoti Das more than the professional obligations it was the prospect of seeing more birds on his travels that urges him to move on in pursuit of Alu. Ironically it was he who causes the journey of Alu once again from al-Ghazira through Alexandria, Egypt, Lisbon, tunis to the little town of El-qued. He is accompanied by Zindi, Boss and Kulfi and whenever Zindi says "we're going west where the sewing machines are " , Jyoti Das seems to overhear them for he appears wherever they go. (Rao. P.37)

Travel writing, broadly speaking , is of two types, real and fictional. The fictional travel is normally a product of the author's imagination for instance William Golding's Lord of the Files. The other type relates to travel with a purpose. In this case, the traveller is a person who goes in quest of something- money, education or knowledge. Besides, there are travellers with a purpose who are searching for their roots. For instance , V.S Naipaul undertakes a journey to India in search of his roots in An Area of Darkness. Sometimes a writer is imperceptibly drawn by the place he visits. In the "Prologue" to his travelogue The Jaguar Smile, Salman Rushdie writes: " I did not go to Nicaragua intending to write a book. Or indeed , to write at all; but my encounter with the place affected me so deeply that in the end I had no choice." (Rushdie. P.12)

Amitav Ghosh is a compulsive traveler. "Ghosh's writing ," says Robert Dixon, " reflects the recent concern of anthropologist with the prosody of cultural boundaries." (Dixon p.3)



Sangita Kumari

Secondary Teacher
Dept. of English
Yadav Vidyapith +2 school
Maulabagh, Ara, Bihar, India

The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but dwell in travel "In cultural space that flow across borders – the "Shadow lines" drawn around modern states. In his article, "The Transit Lounge of Culture," the American to frame Ghosh's work in the context of the recent developments in the discipline of anthropology. (Clifford, p.7)

It is significant that *The Circle of Reason* is divided into three sections : Satva: Reason ; Rajas : Passion and Tamas: Death. S. Sengupta explicates this division:

What Ghosh tries to show is that ultimately Reason proves to be inadequate and he celebrates the triumph of human goodness. Pasteur, the epitome of science and reason, reigns supreme in the first section. Balaram his ardent devotee, believes that just as Pasteur had destroyed the germ with the help of science, he would bring relief to the society around him by using carbolic acid. (Sengupta, p.40)

In the first part titled "Satva" Reason has its suzerainty as apotheosized by Balaram Bose. Reason gives Balaram courage, courage to fight germs like Bhubdev Roy and his power of money with carbolic acid for Reason has nothing to fear. As Balaram points out : "Bhudeb Roy lives in moral fear , there's nothing in the world he fears so much as carbolic acid..... He fears it as he fears everything that is true and clean and a child of Reason. (CR.P.108)

Again, Balaram's campaign against dirty underwear seems to be based on Reason and Dantu is quick to point out its limitation : "Dirt doesn't lie in underwear. It is the world , the world of people, which makes dirt possible . How can you hope to change people's bodies without changing the world ? (CR p.112) But his protest fails. The obsession with Reason falls into smugness and complacency feeds the power of money: "..... Most of the students (of the Pasteur School of Reason) would much rather have had the money they had helped to earn for themselves." (CR p. 127) Reason proves to be self-destructive. Shambhu Debnath's warning to Balaram comes too late :

Balaram – babu, you'll destroy everyone without even stopping to think about it. You're the best Sadhu I'veever known , Balaram babu, but no mortal man can cope with the fierceness of your gods. (CR, p. 153)

His words prove prophetic and Balaram is destroyed along with his family. Only Alu survives.

In part 3 Ghosh shows the death of reason and through Mrs. Verma makes a passionate plea for reaffirmation of the basic qualities of the heart. As Mrs . Verma points out :

What does it matter whether it's Gangajal or Carbolic acid? It's 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? (CR, p. 445).

But the death of reason is not a pessimistic view of life. Ghosh points out : ".....if there's one thing people learn from the past, it is that every consummated death is another beginning". (CR, p. 447) The world of reason has come full circle. It is born, grows and dies

and its death heralds the birth of a new world where the heart will come into its own. Ghosh gives us a glimpse of the new world in the figure of Jyoti Das as he walks jauntily away to a new life, a new beginning : "Jyoti Das's face was radiant, luminous, as though a light were shining through him. Hope is the beginning." (CR, p. 457)

In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh presents history as a collective memory which gathers in a symbolic fashion all that existed in the past into all that happens in the present. The immediacy of experience of reality is juxtaposed with history of the eastern world, particularly, Egypt. Around the bare outlines of the plot which moves over continents are clustered an infinite number of stories ranging back and forth in time. Ghosh weaves delicate connections between different phenomena so that no event becomes autonomous, generating the mobility with which history traverses past and present, creating an acceptable fluid pattern of time, by showing life as a journey larger than death, *The Circle of Reason* makes death find its identity in the horror and sadness which emblams this process. It concerns the picaresque adventures of Alu, a weaver from a small village Lalpukur, who leaves home to journey across the Indian Ocean to the oil town of the al-Ghazira in the Persian Gulf. Critics read Alu for tradition and his uncle Balaram for progress.

Ghosh's Ph.D thesis at Oxford was a history of weaving and the cloth trade between Britain and India in the 19th century. In each of his subsequent texts weaving is a synecdoche of that " intricate network of differences" in which all cultures are emmeshed with their neighbours. When Balaram decides to make the young Alu a weaver, he tells him a history of the technology of weaving that evokes cultural instability and borrowing across borders. (Dixon, p.6)

Balaram says, ".....(the loom) has created not separate worlds but one , for it has never permitted the division of the world . The loom recognizes no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together." (TCR, p.59). Balaram develops the idea that culture is a process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders :

Human beings have woven and traded in cloth from the time they built their first houses and cities. Indian cloth was found in the graves of the pharaohs . Indian soil is strewn with cloth of China. The whole of the ancient world hummed with the cloth trade. The Silk Route from China, running through central Asia and Persia to the parts of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe, bound continents together for more centuries than we can count...All through those centuries cloth, in its richness and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal, bountiful trade.(TCR, PP. 59-60)

Reason destroys Balaram phrenology is an expression of Balaram's quest for a unified theory to explain the universe. But Balaram,s is a losing fight ; every effort of his ends in disaster. Alu's journey to al-ghajira, escaping from the police, characteristically resumes his craft of weaving.

In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh thematises the journey from "Satva" through "Rajas" to "Tamas" in three parts. Here also we encounter reality, but it is metafictional and in it "reality" is also constructed and mediated.....(and) is to the extent 'fictional' and can be understood through an appropriate 'reading' process" (Wagh, p.18)

At the end of *The Circle of Reason* the quest and journey for alternative worlds and visions are carried in through the stages of Satva, Rajas and Tamas and finally the circle is completed by a return to Satva and Reason.

Aim of the study

In this article I tried to interpret ambivalence of post colonial modernity by a way of a close reading of Amitav Ghosh novel *The Circle Of Reason* I also want to focus on the theme of query and journey through this article.

Conclusion

In *The Circle Of Reason* Ghosh presents history as a collective memory which gathers in a symbolic fashion all that existed in the past into all that happens in the present. The immediacy of experience of reality is juxtaposed with the history of the Eastern world, Particularly Egypt. Around the bare outlines of the plot which moves over continents are clustered an infinite number of stories ranging back and forth in time. Ghosh weaves delicate connections between different phenomena so that no event becomes autonomous, generating the mobility with which history traverses past and present, creating an acceptable fluid pattern of time. By showing life as a journey larger than death, *The Circle of Reason* makes death find its identity in the horror and sadness which embalms this process. It concerns the picaresque adventures of Alu, a weaver from small village Lalpukur, who leaves home to journey across the Indian Ocean to the oil town of the al-Ghazira in the Persian Gulf. At the end of the story The quest and journey for Individual self, truth, spiritual and corporeal explorations, the promise for alternative worlds and visions are carried on through the stages of Satva, Rajas and Tamas and finally the circle is completed by a return to Satva or Reason.

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