

THE HETEROGLOSSIA OF BORDERS: A READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE CIRCLE OF REASON*

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Abstract

*Amitav Ghosh has always been a champion of perception. He believes that perception of 'home' can be exercised through imagination and articulation which further enable his characters to cross borders of all kinds — political, cultural, racial, communal, linguistic and temporal. My paper examines Amitav Ghosh's worldview as reflected in *The Circle of Reason* and which revolves around the perennial search for a meaningful existence for characters who have been displaced by the forces of globalisation. I explore the lives of the different characters, their motives and aspirations. Furthermore, I believe that 'home' has been defined from various perspectives in the novel. To cite an instance, Ghosh draws the character of Zindi who runs a prostitution house in Al-Ghazira. For a character like Zindi, who was exiled from her own diasporic Indian community and thrown out from her husband's place for not being able to bear a child, the business of prostitution creates a substitute family for her. Zindi bargains for an existence, through migration and subsequently, survives in a surrogate home where she manages migrant sex workers. The perspectival difference of the other migrant characters also demands attention. I explore the conditions of possibility the characters experience. In fact, I believe that all the major characters of *The Circle of Reason* try to constitute their own world and hence, motivate their actions through patterning of some kind. In the process, Ghosh's characters challenge borders of every conceivable kind and construct an alternative 'reality.' I conclude the paper by observing that the limitations of the bordered nation-state are clearly evident in *The Circle of Reason*. 'Home' and family transcend borders and are always undergoing a process of reconstruction.*

Key words: Home, border, family, reality, nation.

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The *Circle of Reason* addresses multiple concerns of cosmopolitan multiculturalism. Amitav Ghosh weaves a pluralistic world that constantly challenges the certainties of postcolonial and generic boundaries. He redraws the cultural and political lines. In this paper, I argue that Ghosh's worldview proposes that perception is all and imagination and articulation can enable the characters to cross the 'shadow lines' – be they political, cultural, linguistic, racial, communal, spatial or even temporal.

Now, let us start discussing the characters one by one. Balaram, a student of the Presidency College, Calcutta has internalised the values of colonial education. With the biography of Louis Pasteur as his Bible and carbolic acid as his weapon of purity, he wages war against the common enemy – Germ. He looks at non-western religious practices as being opposed to the rational scientific knowledge of the West. His destruction of the Saraswati idol is not only his attack against Bhudeb Roy's obscene display of wealth and vanity, but because the Hindu Goddess represents a knowledge which is in opposition to the Western concept of knowledge. Amitav Ghosh however presents a sardonic view of Balaram's acceptance of Western reason. His actions during the course of the novel often become whimsical, unpredictable and irrational. He becomes a comic figure with his penchant for hygiene. In *The Circle of Reason*, Amitav Ghosh exposes the blur between rationality and irrationality. Balaram's practice in the pseudo-sciences challenges the existing binaries of science.

The second character that I examine is Alu. Through the character, the ironic parody of reason is continued. Alu represents the powerful presence of non-reason. He becomes a weaver because his uncle believes that a weaving loom is a fine tool for a rational, mechanical man. Not unlike his uncle, Alu declares open war against 'dirt.' He openly equates money with dirt and fights against it. The result is disastrous in both Balaram and Alu's cases.

Alu, an orphan of eight who goes to the village of Lalpukur in Bengal to live with his phrenology obsessed uncle Balaram. When Balaram's Pasteur School of Reason is burnt down by the landlord Bhudeb Roy and Balaram is branded as a terrorist, Alu is orphaned once again. He is also branded a criminal and is pursued by the Assistant Superintendent of Police Jyoti Das who travels from Calcutta to Kerala and then to Al-Ghazira in the Middle East in the former's pursuit. Against the backdrop of the narrative is always the shifting, provisional community of migrants.

Alu, in order to escape the clutches of law, boards the ship *Mariamamma*. Karthamma, a woman in labour, refuses to give birth unless the adequate form is signed. Karthamma hopes that the form will ensure a better life for the unborn child. For Karthamma, the power of the written word provides a legal guarantee for legitimacy. Similarly, Jyoti Das, who is in pursuit of Alu prepares an intelligence report where he states that

'There appeared to be no rational grounds to substantiate the principal source's belief that a retired schoolmaster in his village was being used by a foreign trained agent of some kind, disguised as a weaver to run a network of extremists.' (Ghosh 37)

This dossier becomes the prime justification for Jyoti Das to pursue Alu halfway through the globe. Hence, the term legality, whether in the case of a made up 'terrorist' or in the desire of a poor, immigrant who wants a better life for her son is shown as illusory.

Many of these issues are dramatized in *The Circle of Reason*, with the oil economy appearing as an asymmetrical and frequently oppressive system. The first glimpses we are given of this system are from on board the boat *Mariamamma*, which transports Alu and a small group of (mostly illegal) immigrants to al-Ghazira. En route we are shown the lengths to which the characters will go to avail themselves of the alleged employment opportunities, consumer goods and freedom and rights of this promised land. *Mariamamma's* engine is defective and the immigrants spend several days stranded on the ocean, wondering if they will ever reach the Gulf. Yet the narrative suggests that they are fortunate in travelling on board an expensive and comparatively safe boat. Some boats are so overcrowded with people desperate to emigrate that they capsize or sink, while others are apprehended by the harbour police.

Migration is a constant motif in *The Circle of Reason*. The multicultural ambience is described by Ghosh in the following lines:

‘On one side of the road, jostling for space, were tiled Iranian chelo-kebab shops, Malayali dosa stalls, long, narrow Lebanese restaurants, fruit-juice stalls run by Egyptians from the Sa’id, Yemeni cafés with aprons of brass studded tables spread out on the pavement, vendors frying ta’ameyya on push-carts – as though half the world’s haunts had been painted in miniature along the side of a single street.’ (Ghosh 344)

When Alu and his companions leave the Ras and enter the town to spend their pooled earnings, uniformed men with guns ambush them. The composite, diasporic community that migrants have forged beyond the repressive structures of their post-colonial nations proves to be vulnerable to the forces of capital and of police, forces that are global in scope. The presence of these forces is felt at this point as narrative attention shifts to the police, from whose perspective the reader learns of Alu's inspiration and the planned shopping trip. The men who ambush Alu and his companions are employed by the new regime that is now exploiting Al-Ghazira. With its newly discovered reserves of oil, Al-Ghazira is exemplary of the workings of neocolonialism: we learn in one of the many tangential stories that oil men from abroad have imprisoned the Malik and have installed his American-educated brother as oil minister and minister of public works. When Alu and his friends challenge in even a mild way the economic terms of this arrangement by banding together as workers and consumers, the regime responds with a show of force. The fact that a crisis is precipitated by their shopping trip is itself telling—the residents of the Ras want to enter the market on their own terms, and that of course is not acceptable to the neocolonial rulers of Al-Ghazira. In their encounter with the police, many of Alu's friends are killed, and the survivors are rounded up and deported. Alu himself escapes with Zindi, Kulfi, and Boss, but is forced once again into migratory flight.

Alu evinces traits of the picaresque anti-hero such as the fact that he is an orphan and outsider, adopted by his uncle, but never quite “belonging” anywhere. Travel is an important feature of the picaresque, which becomes more evident as the novel progresses. Alu and his companions’ restless movement accelerates as Jyoti Das gains ground on them and Zindi’s repeated exhortations to ‘Go west!’ become increasingly desperate.

The only character who accompanies Alu in his journey through the three parts of the novel is Jyoti Das. Officially, Das is in charge of the sedition case against Alu and is in the latter's pursuit. However, his trips are more about pursuing his hobby of bird watching. His trip to Mahe is justified by 'the possibility of seeing a paradise fly catcher' (151). He also considers relocating to al-Ghazira because 'it is a whole new world of birds.' (166) Towards the end of the novel, in an almost epiphanic moment he sees a whole world of dolphins and a sky full of birds. Both the characters of Jyoti Das and Alu feel that 'hope is the beginning' (423). It seems as if the novel ends with a new beginning – a renewed search for contexts and personal treadings. *The Circle of Reason* holds out hope for the success of certain aesthetic quests.

The Circle of Reason ends with possibilities. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator says:

'When the ferry entered a bay and turned away from the rock of Gibraltar towards the shiny oil-tanks of Algeiras, Jyoti Das turned back to wave for one last time. But all he saw there was a mocking gray smudge hanging on the horizon, pointing to continents of defeat-defeat at home, defeat in the world-and he shut his eyes, for he had looked on it for too many years and he could not bear to look on it any longer. And so he turned to face the land before him, now grown so real, and dizzy with exultation he prepared to step into a new world.' (Ghosh 423)

This sense of possibility is also conveyed by the figure of weaving, a figure that emphasizes the intricate character of people's lives and their capacity to creatively transform these lives. *The Circle of Reason*, is, above all, a celebration of stories and narration. It is also replete with metaphors, the most prominent being that of weaving. Ghosh connects weaving with narration. The weaver uses the loom to create a beautiful cloth out of different threads. In a similar fashion, the writer uses words and narration to produce fictions that connect different times, places and ideologies. In the first part of the novel Ghosh draws on the history of weaving to create a counter-narrative to the Western history of scientific development, expansion and industrialization by staging the loom as the agent of every new step in the grand narrative of modernization.

Amitav Ghosh attempts to give a certain degree of value and substance to individual lives. G.J.V. Prasad believes that, 'Ghosh is interested in the ways in which changes can be incorporated in our understanding of the world.' (Prasad 66) His is the attempt to re-read and re-

write different kinds of histories and the ways in which these histories have affected our perceptions. The central quest of *The Circle of Reason* seems to be to look for the appropriate meaning of life. Amitav Ghosh seems to say that reality' is also constructed. The use of magic realist narrative technique helps Ghosh in investigating the complexities hidden in the discourse of the 'real'. In this context, Samrat Laskar comments,

'The inclination of crossing the border is never to be missed. By crossing the border of conventional realistic mode and the fantastic mode of story-telling, Ghosh attempts a postcolonial critique of Western reason with a unique effect.' (Laskar 112)

When it comes to narrative style, Amitav Ghosh again challenges conventions. *The Circle of Reason* concentrates on the importance of narration and the power of language to signify and to create alternative realities. Silence, apart from being a feature of Alu's character, plays only a limited role. He sits at the loom, weaves ferociously and speaks in a strange mixture of languages. The usually talkative group of people gathers around him to listen in silence:

'It was like a question, though he was not asking anything, bearing down on you from every side. And in that whole huge crowd nobody stirred or spoke. You could see that silently they were answering him, matching him with something of their own. . . . Tongues ... They understood him, for his voice was only the question; the answers were their own.' (Ghosh 279)

The quoted portion of the text might even refer to the mythical past when languages hadn't evolved. Tuomas Huttunen believes,

'The scene illustrates the magic-realist spirit of the novel, but it also has relevance to Ghosh's theme of diversity-in-one — as an example of all languages in one it would also do away with the problems of agency and appropriation.' (Huttunen 32-33)

The Circle of Reason presents history as a collective memory embodying a symbiotic relationship between past and 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. Dantu, Balaram's friend who is a secondary character in the first part surfaces again as Hem Narain Mathur, an important character in the third section for the immediate concerns of this part demand a greater attention to history. The fluid pattern of time is juxtaposed with the mobility of

history. By disallowing absolutes, Ghosh is able to break free from the constraints of conventional realism. The journey from 'satwa' through 'rajas' to 'tamas', the three parts of the novel, is not a straight forward narrative. Rather, the narrative shuttles back and forth, crossing contextually different incidents. Patricia Waugh beautifully describes:

'*The Circle of Reason* implies like other meta-fictional texts that "reality" is also constructed and mediated ... and is to the extent "fictional" and can be understood through an appropriate "reading process".' (Waugh 16)

The perception of a linear shift from the British Empire to a world of discrete but cooperative nations is challenged by Ghosh's portrayal of a teeming world of transverse histories, in which the definition of community belie the ideologies of nation – and the apparently rooted terms of community are themselves collapsed into a recognition that all people can be traced back to histories of displacement and migration.

In *The Circle of Reason*, narration creates the world, makes it "real", even corporeal. Consequently, by changing the narrative, the narrator changes the world:

'They had lived through everything Zindi spoke of ...; yet it was only in her telling that it took shape; changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing, a block of time that was not hours or minutes or days, but something corporeal That was Zindi's power: she could bring together empty air and give it a body just by talking of it. ... And when sometimes she chose a different word or a new phrase it was like a potter's thumb on clay — changing the thing itself and their knowledge of it.' (Ghosh 212-23).

I conclude the paper by saying that *The Circle of Reason* concentrates on the importance of narration and the power of language to signify and create alternative realities.

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