



Patterning Various Personal Efforts : A Special Reference to Amitav Ghosh's

The Circle of Reason

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Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is considered totally different from the traditional themes of Indian English novels. *The Circle of Reason* is about the quest necessary for motivation and survival of the artist in every soul in an inherently deadening, hostile and uncertain environment. A life of constant movement and violence has incessantly serrated our roots. The novel combines within itself an uncompromising restlessness with a poise and control that suggests peace rather than longing. *The Circle of Reason* offers nothing, which we normally call home. Initially located in a refugee village, the story refers back to Bangladesh and Calcutta and finally moves to Middle East via Kerala, where it reaches its denouncement in a desert of shifting sand dunes. And it travels through an environment, which is never entirely rural or urban. Nor do its ideas present a stable attitude. Each idea evolves from a story posing a challenge to the proceeding and is itself qualified by succeeding understanding, Pradip Datta rightly remarks: "The *Circle of Reason* is an epic of restlessness. And yet the calm....."¹

But, for G.S.V. Prasad, "The *Circle of Reason* is not merely circular but a finely patterned novel and when seen as a whole displays the intricate butiwork of a master weaver in the making".² The journey from 'Satwa' through 'Rajas' to 'Tamas' the three parts of the novel is not a straight forward narrative but one full of reasons hankering back and forth like an unfolding raga circling and repeating notes and sequences of notes each contextually different. And like a singer Amitav Ghosh points to the expert's appreciation of the subtle variations, the resonance and hence, the whole narrative structure. In a sense, like other contemporary metafictional texts, *The Circle of Reason* is about narration itself. The book is about patterning the various personal efforts at imposition of order in a chaotic world in order to come to terms with it, in order just to live. Realistic fiction and chronological narrative have been discarded, as being insufficient to convey the vastness and complexities of experience and life. Allegory, symbols, fantasy magical realism, narrative fluctuating backward and forward in time, the compelling use of narrator, fluency in storytelling and unveiling of layers and layers of meaning have all become a mode of writing. Novy Kapadia is very apt when she says: "Slick craftsmanship and continuous experimentation with narrative and possibilities for Indian novel in English".³



Thus, the most striking feature of the novel is the author's self-assured style of narration. Science, philosophy, history, politics, culture, art, language, the art of living, the despair of repeated loss—these are only some of the strands which make the scope of this novel fairly formidable. The novel provides not one, but many stories, each equally appealing and important. There are always fresh disclosures and subtle connections between the numerous stories. Almost all the major characters in *The Circle of Reason* try to understand and constitute the world, hence, motivate their actions through patterning of some kind. Basically, there are three stories knitted around characters, namely, Balaram, Alu and Mrs. Verma.

In the first section 'Satwa: Reason', the story of Balaram the idealist entranced by the 'Life of Pasteur' and his entanglement with the congressman Bhudeb Roy get unfurled. Balaram is an idealistic without limits and this very obsessive trait of nationalism leads him to treat people as object either of observation or of change. As he says to Gopal:

“You ought to be preserved in methylated spirit, you've a discovery. You are the only person alive with phlegmatic organ.”⁴ (TCR:13)

This very obsession of Balaram leads to his destruction. He is obsessed with the science of phrenology of disinfectant, and this to be rational to the extent where even science fails to go. Later on, in this part Balaram gets entangled with Bhudeb, a congressman who, though motivated by cynical considerations, looks at the people in the same way as Balaram. And this fight of Balaram, with his alter ego Bhudeb ultimately culminates in the death of Balaram and destruction of his family. Only Alu, his nephew survives to face the hard realities of life. Alu searching for shelter ultimately reaches Mariamma, the big boat of Zindi sailing towards al-Ghazira. The sail highlights the absurd and ugly side of Indian society enticing its people to leave for other countries for shelter and food and this journey to al-Ghazira takes us to second part of the novel. 'Rajas: Passion' which revolves around Zindi, the early practical zestful trader whose presence brings together a community of Indians in the Middle East and Alu, the only survivor of Balaram's family. The very presence of Zindi makes their life less miserable, as they are scolded by their masters, so money is the only thing that matters for most of them. Now, the story moves through Alu, the only life saved from Balaram's destructive obsession. The Circle of Reason fails every time in the novel where there is crisis. Here too, Alu makes attempts to create co-operative community, which tries to dispense with money and trade. All this leads to nothing but death. Again Alu with Zindi and Kulfi survives and they are made to run for life from one place to another till they reach El-qued on the North Eastern edge of Algerian Sahara. From here we are moved into the third part of the story 'Tamas: Death' where we are acquainted with Mrs. Verma, who in defiance of all rational skepticism, creates in the desert an oasis of Indian community life.



The main source of continuity in the novel is the story of Alu, Jyoti Das and the police officer who is ordered to keep track of Alu. Alu is declared an extremist by his boss. The D.I.G. Jyoti Das starts the chase of Alu in the first part of the novel, but he catches him only at El-Qued at Mrs. Verma's house. He finds surprisingly Alu as innocent as expected. Himself caught up in officialdom, he leaves for an unknown destination away from Mrs. Verma, Ali and his desert: "so returned to face and land before him, now grown so real, the dizzy with exultation he prepared to step into a new world". (TSR:423) The story of Alu and Jyoti Das is the main source of continuity. Thus, the scope of novel is formidable but Amitav Ghosh's narrative technique is an indication of development in Indo-Anglican fiction. The story of Alu starts from Lalpukur and Das sustains the interest of readers from the very beginning because it is thrilling and it also exposes the corruption and inefficiency of police and its oppressiveness. Officially Jyoti Das is in charge of sedition case against Alu and is on duty in pursuit of guilty. But personally, he is in pursuit of birds. The bird man is migrating to begin a new life and for him as for Alu, 'Hope is the beginning'. (TCR:166) The Circle of Reason appropriately ends with a new beginning, the renewed search for contexts and personal readings and the novel holds out hope for the success of these aesthetic quest.

Thus, we find all the characters in The Circle of Reason try to understand and constitute the world and hence motivate their action through patterning of some kind. The author invests in his characters—flesh and blood, dreams and defeats, which root them firmly and make them recognizable. The major characters in their various attempts of reading reality create and float in the sea of metaphors. The major characters include Alu, Alu's aunt Toru Debi, Balaram, Shombhu, Debnath, Jyoti Das and Zindi. The Circle of Reason begins with an eight year old Alu, so named because his head resembles a potato. 'It's an 'Alu' a potato, a huge freshly dug, lumpy potato.' (TCR:3) Orphaned Alu comes to live with his aunt and uncle Toru Debi and Balaram in Lalpukur, a village in West Bengal. The village is "nothing but a dumping ground from the refuge from tyrant's frenzies" (TCR: 18) a village "damned to hell and longing" for whose inhabitant's only passion is memory. Alu's aunt Toru Debi is recognized by her singer sewing machine and her mission in life is to perfect the petticoat and blouse. Balaram is the local schoolmaster. Perpetually, armed with the claws, a menacing instrument to measure people's skull. Balaram seeks to understand man and his motives. Alu's skull arouses his curiosity as he puts it, "The array of bumps and protuberances grew cheerfully all over his head and showed no signs at all of dividing into distinct and recognizable organs. It was all very confusing and very exciting." (TCR:18)



He has been a crusader, an inspired individual, organizing campaign after campaign with a missionary zeal. In the Presidency College, Calcutta as head of the Rationalistic Association, he campaigns against dirty underwear, at Lalpukur he launches a drive to rid the village of germs through bucketful of carbolic acid. Then there is Shombhu Debnath, master weaver, restless, unpredictable and fond of heights, who spends most of his time at toddy trees thundering Bairavi, who reluctantly takes Alu on an apprentice. In Lalpukur Ghosh recreates a village which is distinctly apart of Bengal and at the same time universal. These people's life is never dull, never still for a moment. Events gallop past strange seemingly inexplicable events, mysterious happening, nothing is quite what it is. Events rapidly crescendo and Alu's world goes up in flames. He flies to Calcutta, to Kerala and finally to al-Ghazira the mythical land of opportunities. At al-Ghazira, we meet a number of characters who travel in search of material wealth and more opportunities.⁵

Here all the characters are in motion, they cross borders 'with almost the biological necessity if not always the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds'.⁶ Jyoti Das, Rakesh, Professor Samuel, Kulfi and Chuni and enormous jetblack Zindi all meet here in their own quest of life. As in Lalpukur, Ghosh deftly and unerringly brings Al-Ghazira to life through the small dreams and tragedies. The victories and defeats of men and women who have flocked there, thrown together by destiny to live out a shared, near bizarre history. Alu, Kulfi and Zindi abandon al-Ghazira heading westward to the land of sewing machines. They land eventually in El-Qued in the middle of the Sahara desert in the home of Balaram's friend Mrs. Verma, where Alu comes face to face with exhausted Birdman Jyoti Das.

Thus, between death on one hand and hope on other, events fall into some kind of place and answers tentatively emerge. Ghosh has given his own impression and has expressed reactions against the existing norms of society. The problem of human survival has become dependent on finding the connections between a full conception of relationships and of social change. The problems of our country are also what we share with the rest of the world. Driven by poverty, hunger, starvation people dream of a world where they can get a lot of money and impelled by that desire they move to Middle East or many other places leaving their roots.

Published in 1996, The Calcutta Chromosome is considered to be a novel of 'fever, delirium and discovery'. Even many critics have called it a mystery full of thrillers. Like Ghosh's other novels this very novel is also a multilayered novel swinging on the phases of time and place. Even critics have commented on the narrator that he has tried to convey the sense of interpretation of past and present and all time and space. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that time and space are so deliberately jumbled in the novel that "The discontinuity itself becomes meaningful".⁷



The novel is a science fiction and having mysterious elements init. To exaggerate human understanding and recognition the novelist ‘hascontrived to introduce a maze of ideas criss-crossing each other toproject the profound meaning of life through a visible insignificantfaçade of a ‘spine chiller that negates the rational view of science andthe universe’.⁸To excavate the novel one must ‘read the novel a secondtime and also read between lines’.⁹

Works Cited

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