

# **Journey as a Motif in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason***

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Ghosh chooses a circular pattern for this novel, taking clues from Indian aphilosophy. In contrast the Christian belief is that everyone is a born sinner and is doomed. The western belief is that, life is a journey and this journey has a definite initial and final point. The article explores many circles that take place at different levels in the novel as these circles imply different things.

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, has the distinction of being different in structure from the traditional novel. In fact, the novel could be taken as the starting point of a whole generation of new writers often called 'Ghosh generation' (Trivedi 185) who have left a lasting imprint in the novels of eighties making a new epoch in Indian fiction in English. Coming as it were, these novels, published in mid-eighties, made a drastic change in the area of fiction writing. These novels are, therefore, known for their internationalism, experimentation in structure and form, and also doing away with linguistic barriers, which are constant sources of trouble in the earlier ones.

According to Firdous Kanga, author of *Trying to Grow and Heaven on Wheels*, the new writers make their presence felt, with their distinctive approach, along with the rich cultural heritage and language control:

In fact, the two most promising fields for writing in English lie in India and South Africa. Both have the richness of two of the richest of cultures to draw from. Perhaps India has a slight edge over South Africa because of two things – the superb language control of Amitav Ghoshes and Vikramseths and the inescapable tinge of South Africa's apartheid antecedents. (25)

In *The Circle of Reason* the attempts of the novelist are directed at floating the events and characters through a medley of metaphors and ideas. The characters themselves are converted into possible metaphors. The novel, which is episodic in nature, can also be called picaresque in one sense. It presents a journey from Satwa to Rasjas to Tamas, the three parts of the novel. There is a reversal of journey in the novel. Normally one is supposed to travel from Tamas (darkness) to Satwa (purity). But in this novel the protagonist travels in the reverse direction. In tune with his "style" of writing, Amitav Ghosh freely mixes past, present and future in the novel.

He writes in a chain of thoughts. Ghosh describes one incident and if the incident links itself to any past happening he immediately goes to that past incident. This shifting of times in the novel has its own logic. The novel basically tells three stories. The first part deals with the story of Balaram. He is a rationalist, and Louis Pasteur, the French microbiologist has a great influence on Balaram. He is so ideal that many times he becomes inhuman. He does not mix with people. For him people are just objects of observation. His whims lead to his self-destruction. He is also cynical by nature. Alu, the protagonist, is a nephew of Balaram's. He is the only one to survive in the family. The second part of the novel tells the tale of a trader trying to bring together the community of Indians in the Middle East. But these efforts also prove to be unrealistic. The third part is the story of Mrs. Verma, who rejects rational thinking. She tries to create Indian model of community life in the desert. But she is deserted by others. At the end of the novel we find them in search of new horizons, hopes which are not fully formed and imaginations yet to be fulfilled. Perhaps their only plus point is that they are hopeful.

The novel begins with a description of Alu, who is present in all the three sections of the novel. Alu, whose real name is Nachiketha Bose, loses his mother and father in a car accident. He comes to stay with Balaram, his uncle and Torudebi, his aunt. They live in Lalpukur. He does not know them at all. He looks somewhat odd.

It is a kind of unusual event in that village, for only rarely new people come to Lalpukur:

Years later – thirteen to be exact – when people talked about all that had happened sitting under the great banyan tree in the centre of the village (where Bhudeb Roy's life-size portrait had once fallen with such a crash), it was generally reckoned that the boy's arrival was the real beginning. Some said they knew the moment they set eyes on that head. That was little difficult to believe. (Ghosh 3)

Nachiketa Bose comes to be known as Alu because of his head: "...it was an extraordinary head – huge, several times too large for an eight-year-old and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps" (3). People begin to talk about his head differently but Bolai-da says Nachiketa Bose's head resembles a potato also known as Alu in Bengali: "He said at once: Potato." (4). From that day onwards, he is named Alu, and his original name is almost forgotten. He looks neither ugly nor handsome, neither short nor tall, not even dark or fair. Alu displays an amazing ability to pick up various languages. Yet, paradoxically, he cannot speak properly.

Balaram decides to teach him the art of weaving instead of sending him to a school for formal education. Thus Alu settles in Lalpukur, but his troubles do not. Shombhu Debnath, who teaches Alu the art of weaving, is a lowly man in Lalpukur. It is, therefore, not respectable to learn

weaving from him. But Alu not only learns weaving from Shombhu, but also becomes perfect in the art of weaving. The novelist here gives a historical perspective to the skill of weaving. Ghosh exemplifies the past value of weaving:

Man at the loom is the finest example of Mechanical man; a creature who makes his own world as no other can, with his mind. The machine is man's curse and his salvation, and no machine has created man as much as the loom. It 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 with its bloody ironies from the beginning of human time. (59)

It is also mentioned how in the past cloth was traded in global markets:

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 from 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 ports of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe, bound continents together for more centuries than we can count. It spawned empires and epics, cities and romances. Ibn Battuta and Marcopolo were just journeymen following paths that had been made safe and tame over centuries by unknown, unsung, traders armed with nothing more than bundles of cloth. It was the hunger for Indian chintzes and calicos, brocades and muslins that led to the foundation of the first European settlements in India. 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. (59-60)

The novel is divided into three sections "Satwa," "Rajas," and "Tamas" and these sections are dominated by the three gunas respectively. Ghosh derives these from *The Bhagavad-Gita*. Satwa is described as light of consciousness by most scholars and it is called reason in this novel. However, this reason is essentially based on western thought with its components like rational thinking, scientifically choosing between right and wrong, discarding superstitions, progressive attitude, and advanced civilization. There seems to be a conscious effort to bring western and Indian elements together. But ironically, there is a reversal of journey—all the characters move westwards and there is domination of passion and death.

Coming back to Alu, he is indisputably the protagonist, the glue that holds a nomadic novel together, but for much of the action he is the silent-centre around which an abundance of other stories are told. Though Ghosh never departs from the possible bounds, many fabulist

elements are introduced. There is also the use of fantasy that suggests affinities with contemporary magic realism and a range of South Asian narrative traditions. The influence of Sanskrit classics and Bengali literature is also very much felt. This influence is felt towards the end of the novel, when a character attempts to stage a production of Tagore's *Chitrangada*, a ballet based on an episode in *The Mahabharata*.

As mentioned earlier, Balaram is a man of reason. He wants to apply logic to each and every thing he comes across. For Balaram, theories come first followed by truth. Balaram's interest in reason results in establishing a school called "School of Practical Reason and Pure Reason." He also establishes a third branch called "March of Reason," believing in the dictum that every act of life has got a purpose. Ghosh describes him thus:

He had a thin, ascetic face, with clean lines, a sharp ridge of a nose and wide, dreamy eyes. His high, broad forehead rose to a majestic dome, crowned with a thick, unruly pile of silver hair. It was an astonishing forehead: it shone; it glowed; it was like a lampshade for his bulging Higher Faculties – Language, Form, Number, the lot. It was striking face even in repose. Sometimes, when he was animated, it was lit with such a bright, pointed intensity that it imprinted itself on the minds of everyone who saw him in those moments.  
(12)

In fact, Balaram personifies reason. How far an action is relevant to the present-day situations – this is his only parameter for judging things and individuals. He is fascinated by the book *Life of Pasteur*. Pasteur is Balaram's ideal logic and his God. Rational thinking is his only goal in life. But rationality has got only limited success in practical life. Scientific temper, the cause and effect theory, does not work in real situations. Balaram believes only in logic. He cannot look beyond that. He fails to accept even a very small difference from the unchangeable logical path. The story begins with his childhood. Balaram wants to study science and surpass great scientists like Jagadish Bose and Pasteur. But, he is directed to Dr. Radha Krishnan, the teacher of philosophy, by Balaram's teachers as they think that he is good for history.

At Calcutta, Balaram's favourite pass-time is to study heads. He has a compulsive habit of commenting on others' heads. This habit lands him in trouble many times. Gopal is Balaram's most trusted friend. This friendship lasts lifelong but Gopal senses something wrong in Balaram's attitude:

As he watched Balaram go, Gopal had a premonition: a premonition of the disaster he would call upon himself and all of them, if ever he was allowed to take charge of society.

He decided then, with an uncharacteristic determination, that he would do everything in his power to keep that from happening. (53-54)

Baralam's wife, unable to tolerate, puts his books on fire. Alu is able to save just one book – *Life of Pasteur*. *Life of Pasteur* is a significant symbol in this book. Balaram is obsessed with Phrenology and carbolic acid. His great mistake is that he fails to treat people as full humans. For him human beings are bumps to be studied or lives to be cleansed. Alu's world of cotton weaving is projected as a kind of alternate ethos to Balaram's new science. Yet even Alu loses his world to violence, commerce, and destruction. At the end, he remains with his limbs withered, unable to weave. Ghosh uses contemporary history with its most awful confrontations to show how something is achieved at the cost of something else. Alu loses his copy of *Life of Pasteur* – given by Balaram on his death bed – but gets another one from Uma Verma. He consigns this copy to the funeral pyre lit to cremate Kulfi, the servant maid. This copy of *Life of Pasteur* can be considered a concrete symbol inherited from Balaram. This book has out lived its use. Carbolic acid, too, is disposed of in a ritualistic way. Alu learns that it is the human concern behind the action that gives it value. When Uma Verma fails to get cow dung for the ritual of the ground, she uses carbolic acid instead. When Misra objects to this, Uma Verma retorts, "All you ever talk about is rules. That's how you and your kind have destroyed everything – science, religion, socialism – with your rules and your orthodoxies. That's the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human" (442). *Life of Pasteur* plays a very intricate role in the novel. When Alu is first introduced to this book, Balaram is worried about Alu's lack of response. When Balaram lectures about the book, Alu listens to him with wide-eyed silence.

Baralam stops reading when he sees tears in Alu's eyes. When Alu retrieves the book, it is Balaram who becomes wet-eyed. So, it can be considered that the book exists as a bond between uncle and nephew, an extension of the tradition of reason from one generation to the other. The greatest win for a rationalist is to win over someone else for his cause.

The rationality of Balaram wages war against germs, which are the root of all diseases. The analogy is: carbolic acid as a tool of scientific temper tries to finish off diseases, and rationality as the offshoot of scientific temper tries to end the ills of society. These cleansing mechanisms in different forms run as a metaphor throughout the novel. In *Al-Ghazira*, Hajji Fahmy makes Adil and his cousin bathe in antiseptic. Carbolic acid is very much part and parcel of Alu's cleaning programme. Towards the end of the novel, Mrs. Verma uses carbolic acid instead of Gangajal at the funeral of Kulfi. In fact the book *Life of Pasteur* is related to Mrs.

Verma's life also. She began developing interest in microbiology when her father introduced this book to her.

Dr. Misra remarks after sniffing the air:

When the first few mugfals had splashed over the veranda Dr. Mishra began to sniff the air suspiciously. Then, throwing back his head, he burst into laughter. Mrs. Verma, he gasped, tell me, is that carbolic acid in those buckets? Yes of course Mrs. Varma said. He nodded weakly. The world has come full circle, he groaned. Carbolic acid has become holy water. (444)

Mrs. Verma responds:

What does it matters? She cried. What does it matter whether it's Ganga- Jal 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, Dr Mishra? (445).

Ghosh is pointing out to the blind faith of millions of Indians in Gangajal even though the water which was once so pure and germ-free, is now very badly polluted. However, when Kulfi dies, in spite of all efforts by Balaram and Alu to save her, it can be considered the defeat of reason since the course of action does not follow the path of reason always. The book *Life of Pasteur* itself states, "... without the germ 'life would become impossible because death would be incomplete'" (428).

*The Circle of Reason* may be the response of Amitav Ghosh to the unhygienic conditions in India. What seems to have moved the author is the amount of filth and dirt in a country where people always gave utmost importance to purity of soul and surroundings. This seems to be in contradiction to the everyday rituals people perform in their homes and their apathy towards their surroundings. People take their morning baths, purify their homes, and do all types of ablutions. They also observe fast for internal cleansing. But sadly they turn a blind eye to all the garbage and dirt in their holy places and rivers. Alu's concern is simply how to overcome germ and disease. Alu's real name being Nachiketa Bose has its own meaning in the novel.

Nachiketa in Indian mythology is the boy who waits at Yama's door in obedience to the commands of his father. Waiting at Yama's door is symbolically waiting at the door of death. Nachiketa is sage Uddalaka's son. When Nachiketa tries to find out the real knowledge of Brahman, he incurs his father's displeasure. Uddalaka curses Nachiketa to go to Yamaloka (nether world). Nachiketa pleads to Yama to give him divine knowledge. His single mindedness coupled



with disinterested action wins the favour of Yama, who teaches him the Atmagnana (Knowledge of Self). As in mythology fire is the cleansing agent, so in the novel carbolic acid is the cleansing agent. Alu (Nachiketa Basu) also waits at death's door when in Al-Ghazira he is buried under the debris when a building collapses. He survives on the oxygen that he gets through the gaps in the debris. For days he does only one thing – thinking. He wants to adopt that scientific approach in removing the ills of present day society. When he finally comes out, Alu declares that money is the enemy of mankind for “it travels on every man and every woman, silently preparing them for their defeat, turning one against the other” (302).

Balaram's irrational behaviour brings his own doom. His interest in *Life of Pasteur* and the rationalist society is what Ghosh terms “a Pasteurized Cosmos”: “It wasn't talk of reason, it wasn't the universal atom. It was passion; a passion which sprang from the simple and the every day. A passion for the future, not the past. It was that which made him the greatest man of his time, for it is that passion which makes men great” (53).

It is this passion that makes Balaram attempt to clean the surrounding area in his village Lalpukur that brings about his doom, destruction, and death. Though he starts a school he fails to educate the youth to think rationally. The youth of the village are interested in learning practical skills essential for survival. Balaram's knowledge of science and his faith in reason have no base in real life situations. Abstract knowledge without worldly wisdom is bound to bring disaster. This is what happens with Balaram. His behaviour at Saraswathipuja, his passionate handling of cleanliness movement with carbolic acid, and his love for study of heads are ironically described. Ghosh juxtaposes the east against the west with practical learning and tailoring against the abstract ideology of rationalism.

It is Toru-debi's practical sense and belief in the sewing machine that saves Alu twice from disaster. When the machine breaks down, Totu-debi asks Alu to throw it away and bring a new one for her:

Nothing's any use now, she muttered. It's the end. Just one blouse left to go and he's died. She ran her hand over the machine's shining wheel and pulled, with all her strength. The wheel was absolutely rigid. She smiled at them: you see; he's haunted. There's something in him. Suddenly her face lit up, as though something had occurred to her. She tore her blouse away, and her heavy breasts spilled out. She lifted the black sinuously curved machine off its wooden base and settled it on her lap, clucking to herself. Maya darted forward and caught her hands. Toru-debi looked up shamefacedly, straight at Alu. I thought it was you, she said confusedly. Aren't you going to do something? Then all at

once her naked breasts and shoulders collapsed as though an immense weight had been lowered on to them. What's the use? She said. It's the end. Alu felt his throat go dry as he looked at the terrible incandescent desolation in her eyes. Then Rakhal was shaking him, whispering: Run, there's no time to lose. And Maya was beside him, holding his hand: yes, go. I'll look after her; don't worry. In a daze, Alu found his slippers and went to the back door. But before he could slip out Toru – debi shouted again: Alu, come here. For one minute; only one. Slowly Alu went back to her. She stood up and put the sewing machine in his arms. Throw it into the pond, she said. It's dead. She learnt forward and searched his eyes. But you'll get me another, Alu my bit of gold, won't you? (158-159)

*The Circle of Reason* pivots upon a debate concerning the relationship between science, technology, and nationalism in India, and reaches back to the beginning of nineteenth century. Ghosh engages in a dialogue concerning tradition versus modernity which had preoccupied Indian nationalists from Rammohan Roy to Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru and colonial thinkers such as William Jones and Macaulay. Ghosh, by not fully accepting the conventional science / tradition division, problematizes the science-is-west-and-tradition-is-East dichotomy. He interrogates the status and worth of different branches of science in India. He seems to be greatly concerned about the way the media – under the influence of the prejudiced opinion of the west – attributes science to the west and pseudo-science to the east. He makes the important point that India did not receive the benefits of science, technology and medicine entirely from the British as in a one-day process of transfer, but as a result of cross- cultural exchanges, translations, and mutations.

Seen in this context, Balaram's fascination with science generates much of the novel's debate about the materialistic scientific reason of the west: is it tethered to its cultural origin or is it possessed by a universal validity? Balaram takes the latter position, arguing that "Science doesn't belong to countries. Reason doesn't belong to any nation. They belong to history – to the world" (57).

Balaram is a product of western education and, despite his fervent Indian nationalism, he has internalized the notion that western science transcends national boundaries in its search for truths. This is because the British administrators consistently strove to demonstrate that the discourse of reason was – in the Foucaultian sense – their exclusive property. In India, for example, "natives" were stereotyped as illogical dreamy creatures of instinct, while Britain's technological and scientific practices were presented as proof of their superior faculty of reasoning – western science was also portrayed as being objective, culturally neutral, benevolent in intention, and allowing access to "truth." In his pioneering study *Machines as the Measure of*



*Men*, Michel Adas argues that western man from the industrial age onward considered science and technology to be the most realistic indicators of their purportedly superior reasoning abilities. With the Industrial Revolution, western technology and science was perceived as dominant signifiers of “civilization.” This belief justified the colonialist argument that non-western countries were inferior, childlike, and were in need of guidance from that alleged archetype of advanced reason, the west. (120)

This advancement of science and technology helped Britain establish and consolidate power in colonized countries. As Daniel Headrick shows, scientific and technological advances may be interpreted as “tools of empire.”(50) At the same time western science is often interpreted as a discipline founded upon logic, empiricism, and rationalism, even if these goals are not always met. The distinction between science and pseudo-science began to get importance only after the Industrial Revolution. This point is perhaps most vividly illustrated in colonial India where the British administrators’ desire to promote science as a visual spectacle to the illiterate masses of India caused mesmerism to gain temporary acceptance within the main stream science even as late as the mid-nineteenth century.(Gyan 33)

There are a few other major characters in the novel. Balaram’s friend Dantu is a rationalist. The name Dantu has a history. As the novelist describes it:

... his sharply domed head, of course, and his thin, hollow face those two long, peeping front teeth from which he took his name. It’s his bregma, said Balaram. I can see now that it was Veneration that had pushed his skull up so sharply. Besides, he always had the look of a saint. (Ghosh 15)

But Dantu’s saintly look is deceptive. He is actually a politician in the garb of a saint. Balaram’s neighbour and later on his enemy is Bhudeb Roy. Gopal, Balaram’s friend, describes him thus, “He had looked like a fairly ordinary young man then, with thinning hair and a large pleasant face. He was stout even then but far from fat, and in his starched white dhoti and Kurta he had even possessed a certain kind of grace” (23). Jyothidas, Assistant Superintendent of Police, is an impressive character in the novel. He is proud that he looks younger. He is described as:

He is a slight man, of medium height, dark, with straight black hair. He has a long, even face with a rounded chin and a short, straight nose. His only irregular features are his eyebrows, which are slightly out of alignment, one being a fraction higher than the other and slightly more sharply curved, and that tends to make him appear a little surprised even when he is not. His eyes, which he has trained over the years to record the minutest details of plumage and colouring, are sharp and meticulously observant. He is clean

shaven and prides himself on it, for it distinguishes him from his colleagues, who tend generally to be aggressively moustached. He is pleasant- if not goodlooking and he looks younger than his twenty-five years. He is often mistaken for a college student. (133)

He is always after Alu, thinking that Alu is a terrorist. He is the person who accompanies Alu throughout the three parts of the novel. His other passion is watching birds. He is also known as bird man.

Journey as a motif runs throughout the novel and unites the three parts. As G.J.V. Prasad observes, “Characters cross border with almost the biological necessity, if not, always the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds.”(23) This motif is particularly associated with Alu, who is on the run branded as a terrorist by the police and Jyothidas close on Alu’s heels always. Alu moves from Lalpukur to Kerala and then sets off to Al-Ghazira in the Middle East along with a number of characters who travel in search of material wealth and better opportunities. Travel itself is converted into a homeland.

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