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## **Existential Challenges of the Subalterns in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason***

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### **Abstract**

Postcolonial literature has stamped its greatness by mixing up the traditional and the modern in production of art, especially in fiction. In recent times, the transmission of postcolonial literature attracts more hearts, especially when it is read in the view of subaltern concepts. The interest in postcolonial literature lights a burning thirst in the writers which turned their thoughts and technique to innovate new form and style of writing. The novels written in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century have postcolonial subjects, mostly the existential challenges of the subalterns. Postcolonial novelist like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Anitha Nair, Shashi Tharoor, and Amitav Ghosh are the markers of new strategies in producing fiction with postcolonial thoughts and emotions. Amitav Ghosh has created his fictional world differently by using history along with the challenges of subaltern in the

anthropological view. This paper explores existential challenges of subaltern in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Circle of Reason*.

### **Keywords**

Postcolonial Literature; Transmission; Subaltern; Anthropological; Existential Challenges.

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Subaltern Studies turns the postcolonial literature in different perspective to analyse the imperial power and its effect on the suppressed people. The term 'subaltern' is used for subordinates in military hierarchies. The Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, used this term first to refer the industrial labourers. It also refers to a group who are outside the established structure of political representation. Gramsci insists this term to refer any group with inferior status, because of race, class, gender, caste and religion. In postcolonial study, this term 'subaltern' is used to open the mind of oppressed people such as colonized, women, refugees, migrants and oppressed castes.

Subaltern studies was started in 1982 when a group of South Asian scholars in Britain especially Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakraborthy, who started publishing a book length journal *Subaltern Studies* which is entitled by Ranajith Guha. They focus on the local elite and Marxists, the working class to the industrial workers who are the members of subaltern studies. Later, scholars like Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Pandey, Edward Said, David Hadriman and Shahit Amin became interested in this broad study to explore the oppressed condition to the world.

Gayatri Spivak offers a sentence in her powerful essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', "White men are saving the brown women from brown men". This statement is an irony for the subalterns, who are suppressed in the privileged society. Ghosh's novel, *The Circle of Reason*, explains the real and

pathetic condition of brown men and brown women in Al-Ghazira. They totally lose their originality and are being muted under the privileged employers.

Amitav Ghosh is a distinguished contemporary novelist whose novels elaborate the existence of subaltern and their survival in and around the third world countries, especially India, Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, Al-Ghazira and Algeria. Mostly he focuses the contemporary issues like communal violence, existential challenges, migration and loss of lives of human beings. His first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, pictures the third world people who are helpless and forced to migrate to African countries to get a better prospect. It also explores the pathetic condition of weavers - migrating helpless people who are forced to quit their place in different circumstances. Thus, their lives become a question with their voice being muted in order to survive in the oppressed society.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* stretches the geographical and ideological journey of a young weaver, Alu, who is brought up in a Bengal village, Lalpukur. He is mistakenly suspected as a terrorist by a police officer, Jyoti Das. Alu flees westwards to Calcutta, Goa, the fictional gulf state Al-Ghazira and finally to Algeria. He is clearly the main character in the novel and he remains more a kind of silent centre, through which the various discursive threads in the narrative are woven together along with some other character like Balaraman, Zindi, Mast Ram, Kulfi, Abusa, Karthemma, Abu Fahl, Professor Samuel, Rakesh, Maya, Toru Debi, Shombhu Debnath, Bhudeb Roy and Rakhal. Through the intermingling of these different threads the novel also constitutes a mixture of ideas like detective novels.

The novel exposes the unhappy events in the existing society faced by the unprivileged thriving to get progress by moving or migrating to different places. Ghosh strongly explores this through the character of Zindi:

But let something happened outside and that is the end, there is nothing I can do Why because I can give them food, I can give them

roof, but I can't give them work...the house is almost empty now and work is gone...where can I go? (The Circle of Reason)

It clearly portrays the existential challenges of unprivileged people in the economically uplifted country, Al-Ghazira. It is the place of wealth which uplifts the value of human beings' lives by providing different opportunity.

Ghosh divides *The Circle of Reason* into three parts; Satwa-Reason, Rajas-Passion and Tamas-Death. All the three parts have the challenges of survival. The first part, Reason, sketches the challenges at the village, Lalpukur, where the refugees are forced to vacate their place by Bhudeb Roy. It leads that all refugees or the people belong to Reason School are being suspected as terrorists. The second part, Passion, displays Zindi and her people face the challenges for survival in the Arab countries. The third part, Death, presents Alu's journey to different places to find a shelter with Zindi and Boss. The end of the journey leads for a conclusion of Kulfi which does not find a solution for their challenge.

The postcolonial situation and modern men's problems of alienation, migration and existential crisis are explored in different situations. While exploring the existential challenges, problems of individuals are exposed rather than the problems of group as a whole. Alu's existence is a quest rather than the group. He never finds a peaceful shelter till the end because he belongs to the oppressed community in and around his native place.

Traveling across different nations and culture is another challenge for an expatriate. Alu and other migrants from India have met different experiences which lead to adventurous life in Al-Ghazira and Algeria. These places exhibit evidence of migrant workers. Alu's journey through Indian Ocean depicts a number of Indians who leave their unprivileged native for prosperous life-style. For this, they have lost their identity and their roots which lead to have a quest till the end.

*The Circles of Reason* reflects the lives of illegal emigrants including Alu, Zindi, Professor Samuel, Karthemma, and others. They risk their life and resort to dangerous crossing in search of economic stability but it becomes a question for their very existence due to unexpected problems.

But still there was problems, the mechanic complaint no medical benefits, no accommodation, no security at all. It was all big problems...Things like that matter only at home, and foreign places are all alike in that they are not home. Nothing binds you there.  
(The Circle of Reason)

The subalterns' search for their thriving life is a quest by searching a privileged profession. It never fulfils their dreams without any intention.

Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* is only novel which deals the existential challenges of subaltern in the Gulf countries comparing to other expatriate writers' novels. He stands to voice for the Indian migrants who face the economically and culturally different challenges in the Gulf. R.K. Kaul in his article "Another Triumphant Entry – Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" comments,

This is the first novel which depicts the life of expatriate Indians in the Gulf States. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh may be engaged in recriminations among themselves but emigrants from these countries are treated as one ethnic stock by Arabs. The Arab employers look upon their informal dress as less decent and their cooking as unhygienic. Ghosh observes strict objectivity in his presentation. He tells us what the Arab think, without either refuting or confirming their opinion. (247)

The subalterns' existence is a quest in the colonial or suppressed society. It is their fate to face threat from the political and anarchical system of ruling in the colonial and postcolonial India. Ghosh delicately expresses the powerful message of the existential challenges of subaltern in his novel *The Circle of*

*Reason*. The journey of the subaltern never ends and they never find a prosperous life or shelter till the world exists.

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