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Migration and Cultural Diversity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

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Abstract

Diaspora cultures are not oriented towards lost origins or homelands, but are produced by ongoing histories of migrations and transnational cultural flows; the notion of separate, discrete cultures evaporates. The characters in Ghosh's novels cross from within and beyond its borders. They do not dwell in distinct cultures but travel in cultural spaces that flow across borders. Amitav Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* is the story of the victims of history who are forced into exile by incidents beyond their control. This novel displays migration and displacement of different characters, especially Alu, as they come across different challenges in the journey of their lives.

Keywords

Migration; Culture; Displacement; Exile; Borders; Amitav Ghosh; *The Circle of Reason*.

Diaspora cultures are not oriented towards lost origins or homelands, but are produced by ongoing histories of migrations and transnational cultural flows; the notion of separate, discrete cultures evaporates. Renato Rosaldo in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* states: “In contrast with the classic view, which points culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and beyond its borders” (20). Ghosh’s writings replicate the current concern with the porosity of cultural boundaries. The characters in Ghosh’s novels cross from within and beyond its borders. They do not dwell in distinct cultures but travel in cultural spaces that flow across borders. When people from different cultures intermingle, Ghosh is concerned with the process of displacement, confusion and tension.

Amitav Ghosh’s novels are abundant with immigrants, who struggle to create themselves in the cold conditions that vary in cultures, traditions, language etc. Ghosh takes effort to study the characters that are restrained to the foreign land both mentally and physically. The theme of exile and displacement are major concerns Ghosh explored in his novels. Ghosh and his contemporary postcolonial writers extensively portrayed the notion of home or the sense of rootlessness in their works. Due to political, social, or individual factors, the discrete characters live in different parts of the world and still have an emotional, cultural and spiritual bonding to their homeland. Family and other social institutions or relationships of these discrete people do not mingle with the hazy socio-political development in the new place to some extent. So in such sense, diaspora consciousness and identity crisis also prevail in his novels.

Amitav Ghosh’s works provide a transnational understanding of the self, seen as the intersection of the many identities produced by the collision of

languages and cultures; displacement and exile - lives torn between India, Burma, England, and elsewhere; families torn by the violence and psychological turmoil of colonial rule and postcolonial dispossession; a globe wracked by two world wars and their ancillary bloodshed. His fictions are distinguished equally by its accurate, beautifully rendered depictions of characters and settings, and by its sweeping sense of history unfolding over generations against the backdrop of the violent dislocations of peoples and regimes during the nineteenth and twentieth century. His characters are deracinated and dragged into disenchantments due to various incidents evoked by political, social disasters. His characters had lived during the period of Indian independence movements, World Wars, partition of Bengal and all these created a sense of non-belonging in the minds of most of his characters.

Amitav Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* is the story of the victims of history who are forced into exile by incidents beyond their control. This novel is divided into three parts and it tells the protagonist's relation with the people he meets and the places he visits. The three parts- *Satwa*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* are Reason, Passion, and Death respectively centres on Alu (Nachiketa Bose), and his multiple migrations from Lalpukur in Bengal to Kolkata, Kerala, al-Ghazira, Algeria until he plans to return home. The expedition from "Satwa" through "Rajas" to "Tamas", the three parts of the novel, is not a straight forward narrative but it is going back and forth like an "unfolding raga" rotating and repeating notes and sequences of notes, each contextually different. This novel displays migration and displacement of different people especially Alu as they come across different challenges in the journey of their lives. It is a composite tapestry of stories and incidents of characters whose lives go beyond, pull apart, and separate. It is a story of compulsive rationalism that some may hold close as science and others mock as insanity and obsessive manhunts. This novel can also see as a detective story as Jyoti Das follows Alu, a travelogue, a plea for humanistic camaraderie and so on. As its title suggests, this novel closely studies

the philosophy behind reason. The associations of science and technologies with these philosophies are another major concern of the novel.

The majority of Ghosh's writing focuses on exploring geographical and social boundaries. His novel, *The Circle of Reason*, is a complex tale of a young Indian boy, Alu, and his adventures in India and abroad. Alu becomes an apprentice weaver and, after a tragic incident, flees across the ocean to the Middle East, finally traveling to North Africa. During his travels, Alu encounters innumerable eccentric characters of varied nationalities.

The novel shows how colonial power structures and knowledge production strategies become reproduced and subverted when applied in colonial and postcolonial circumstances. It also features the ways in which subaltern people both escape the grip of the political logic of the modern state and fall prey to it. Further, the narrative brings into the fore the ways in which diaspora and migrant connections escape the same logic. In the end, the novel shows how reason is made to abandon its hegemonic position in the name of practical everyday concerns in many-cultured human encounters comprising multiple customs and traditions.

In *The Circle of Reason* Balaram's enthusiasm for "reason" can certainly be read as satire on those intellectuals of Indian diaspora, who enthusiastically embrace the theories of the West, and it surely significant that his greatest heroes are French. Balaram has made his mind "a dumping ground for the west". The novel can also see as a struggle between capitalism and socialism. Balaram stands for capitalism. Alu on the other hand is the epitome of orient. He is not fascinated in the philosophies of Balaram. He continues his weaving in the places wherever he goes. S. Sengupta in his "An Allegorical *Tom Jones*: An Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" says that "Alu's much beloved socialism is in the shambles and he sits "at his loom with his head in his hands" as he realizes that both the sewing machine and the loom have become subservient to money" (39).

Bala Kothandaramn in his “Circular Reasoning: Amitav Ghosh’s Rhetoric” observes that *The Circle of Reason* makes its impact through skillfully – devised thematic, structural and verbal/stylistic patterns. The most important feature is its postcolonial foregrounding of the social materiality of discourse. One critic named this novel as the “epic of restlessness” restlessness that is the characteristic of contemporary “growing internationalism” (71, 79). Bala Kothandaramn considers this novel as “how the writer accomplishes this through the medium of Empire’s language while simultaneously de-centering Empire’s continued cultural hegemony” (152). He further observes that the stories in the novel are not mere stylistic devices to recreate “the engaging quality of the village folk-story-teller’s pictorial representations” as Desai says. But it marks a self-reflexive use of oral tradition in a postcolonial novel.

The Circle of Reason has a decidedly loose plot structure, but this is compensated by an interlocking texture of recurring images and motifs, for instance weaving and sewing machines, migrating birds, or the biography of Pasteur. The main metaphor of the narrative is weaving, which symbolizes the act of narrating or writing into existing stories and realities:

So many words, so many things. On a loom a beam’s name changes after every inch. Why? Every nail has a name, every twist of rope, every little eyelet, every twig of bamboo on the heddle. A loom is a dictionary glossary thesaurus. Why? Words serve no purpose; nothing mechanical. No, it is because the weaver, in making cloth, makes words, too, and trespassing on the territory of the poets gives names to things the eye can’t see. That is why the loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world’s armies of pen-wielders. (74)

The Circle of Reason deconstructs any simple opposition between tradition and modernity, or discrete oriental and occidental cultures. 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 borrowings across borders.

According to Balaram, “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” (CR 55). Balaram develops the idea that the culture is a process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders:

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...All through the centuries cloth, in its richness, and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal, bountiful trade. (55-6)

As the history of weaving has no particular national root, it has compound international routes. As Robert Dixon observes, “it is not a traditional craft opposed in a binary sense to western science, but another part of a diaspora that unravels the distinction between orient and occident” (14). Dixon further states that “Ghosh’s understanding of these routes is also resistant to the framework of postmodern inter-cultural studies” (14). The economic forces are the main determiners of the international trade routes. It can tell the history of imperialism and imperial exploitation. Dixon says that these routes cut across by the asymmetries of economic and military power. That is why Ghosh makes Balaram relate:

Lancashire poured out its waterfalls of cloth and once...peaceful Englishmen... of Calcutta... turned their trade into garotte to make every continent safe for the cloth of Lancashire, strangling the very weavers and techniques they had crossed oceans to discover” (57).

In the novel *The Circle of Reason*, the village Lalpukur is in fact a symbol of traditional India, is itself the product of a diaspora. Diaspora refers to

historical mass-dispersion of people with common roots, particularly movements of an unintentional nature imposed on them. In the novel the people of this village are actually the refugees from East Pakistan before the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. The people of Lalpukur were “vomited out of their native soil years ago” and “dumped hundreds of miles away...borders dissolved under the weight of millions of people in panic-stricken flight from an army of animals” (55-6). “Lalpukur, with its mixture of technologies, its blend of Hinduism and Bruce Lee movies (75), is not a site of tradition, but of hybridization: the village is “churning like cement in a grinder, and Balaram was busy chasing its shooting carboic acid, his hair wafting behind him, in the germ-free air” (75).

The immigrants of Lalpukur lived with the musing of their native land. “Their only passion was memory; a longing for a land where the green was the greener, the rice whiter, the fish bigger than boat” (63). The humanitarian concern of the people of Lalpukur dissolved the borders between the immigrants and themselves as they extended a helping hand to everyone who entered the town. Ghosh says:

The vocation of melancholy is not anger but mourning. When in need they change hour and sell bitter sort of consolation. And all that Lalpukur had to offer was consolation of a sort-refugee. It could never be a battle field; nothing but a dumping-ground for the refugees from tyrant’s frenzies. (64)

Ghosh gives no dates, and does not name large historical events. The narrative generates a sense of historical period more obliquely. The creation of Bangladesh is signified by the slow swelling of the village as starving refugees trickle and then flow across the border, settle around the village, and then move on. While the descriptions of these people are stark, they are also strangely peripheral to the village community, to the relationships, intrigues and battles that give it life. “Most of the people of Lalpukur originally belonged to the remote district of Noakhali, in the far east of Bengal close to Burma. They had immigrated to India in a slow steady trickle in the years after East Bengal became

East Pakistan. Most of them had left everything but their dialect behind. It was a nasal sing-song Bengali...many of them learnt the speech of West Bengal" (29). The people of the village are Bengali, but from East of the border, now formed another nation.

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