

**Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*: a Fiction on Scientific Reason**

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One of the principal themes of *The Circle of Reason* is the concept of reason on which the metaphysic of modernity rests and from which the authority of modern science derives. The novel's interrogation of Reason is achieved primarily through the characterisation of Balaram. He acts as a prism that refracts and magnifies the idea that Amitav Ghose wishes to explore. Through him, Reason emerges as far from a straight forward concept, far removed from the definition proposed by empiricism and positivism. The character represents a transcendent, transparent operation of human intelligence simply making sense of the world as it is through sensory perception and logical cogitation.

It is evident that Balaram is contented to present himself as the embodiment of Reason. He is an archetypal figure of colonial subject as envisaged by colonial ideologues. He is also regarded as a mimic man schooled in the historic achievements of western knowledge. The novel dwells on his experience as a student at Calcutta's prestigious Presidency College, the pre-eminent college of Calcutta university. The college is built and financed by rich Calcutta bhadralok and is a monument to their engagement with western learning and the most important conduit for western ideas in the nineteenth-century colonial India. In the twentieth century, its importance began to decline and it remained a potent symbol of Bengal's, and India's, assimilation into modernity.

Balaram's projection of this assimilation is quite problematic despite his investment in the ideology of science. He possesses an ardent belief in the universality of metaphysic, which binds him to its cultural origins in Europe and its colonial moorings. He expresses:

*Science does not belong to countries. Reason does not belong to any nation. They belong to history-to the world. (Circle of Reason, p-54)*

His statement reveals other dimensions of modernity's metaphysic, namely a grand historical narrative of progress. Following the German philosopher Hegel's conceptualisation of history as the universal unfolding of Reason, Balaram subscribes to the linear narrative of scientific Progress that is indicated by such metaphors as 'Man's ascent to Reason' (CR, 39) or 'March of Reason' (CR 39), which he seriously proposes as a name for a department in his 'School of Reason'. (CR, 117)

Reason is the distinct manifestation of transcendent operation of the universal laws-of nature, society and history. Balaram sees the history of science as a series of heroic discoveries by individual scientific geniuses such as Pasteur. Valley Radot's *Life of Pasteur* is one of

Balram's most prized possessions and a recurring motif throughout the novel. The narrator projects the character in the best light of Reason and science: *Balram began to read him (Alu) the chapter about the turning point in the history of the World -6 July 1885-when Louis Pasteur took his courage in his hands and at the risk of his reputation.....filled a Pravoz syringe and inoculated the poor, hopeless ten year -old Joseph Meister, only that day ravaged by a rabid dog, with his still untested vaccine. (CR, 25)*

One of the social and economic dimensions of Pasteur's science that Balaram overlooks is its implication of colonialism because the discovery of the germ was a key moment in the development of tropical medicine. Balaram's general emphasis on practical science is opposed to research mimics attitudes to science in the colonies. It is fair to point out that Balaram sees "pure and practical Reason as the two sides of the same coin, like two halves of a wheel: without one the other is incomplete and useless" (CR, 117). His humiliation at the airport pushes him away from the research scientists Joliot Curie. In a state of utter disappointment and despondency, he ventilates his feelings on research scientists: *They were all the same, all the same, those scientists. It was something to do with their science. Nothing mattered to them-people, sentiments, humanity. (CR 16)* Even before this episode, Balaram shows a marked inclination towards practical science with the Rationalists at Presidency college when he first expounds on Pasteur's humanitarianism as an answer to the everyday problem of simple people. Despite his School of Reason being composed of Faculties of Pure and Practical Reason, it teaches only practical skills- elementary reading, writing and arithmetic.

Balaram demonstrates his internalisation of colonial ideology of science which emphasizes the importance of the colony as an arena for applied science. In the colonial economy of knowledge, pure and theoretical research is reserved for and exclusively located in the West. It circulates around the colonial peripheries as applied science wrapped in Western flags and stamped with western approval. Balaram assimilates this imagined map of knowledge and institutionalises it in his School of Reason.

The dark side of Reason is a major province of introspection by Balaram. The invocation of phrenology and criminology is far removed from the actual history of science from its representation of grand narratives of scientific progress. The history of science is bound up with false knowledge which once possessed the aura of scientific truth. The scientific truth is now discredited. Phrenology examined the shape and formation of skull and interpreted these as signifiers of personality. Criminology which identified persons with certain markings or stigmata was popular in the nineteenth century. These disciplines were scientifically robust. Such discoveries were particularly popular among colonial scientists. The discoveries were founded on racial and cultural prejudices that were prevalent amongst colonial administrators. These theories were derived from popular stereotypes of primitive, backward and barbaric peoples. The scientific credibility of phrenology or criminology was

established because they reinforced such prejudices by conferring upon them the respectability of scientific truth. Although such pseudo-sciences were applied within Europe with respect to the lower classes and other derivants of middle class norm, they also demonstrate colonial context within which modern scientific rationality emerged. Pseudo-sciences hold up a mirror to science in general and show how all scientific discourse is context-bound and value-laden.

Balaam's faith in these pseudo-sciences is ironised. When Bhudeb Roy seeks for Balram's opinion on the life prospects of his new son, Balaram solemnly declares that his son demonstrates all the signs of a 'Typical Homicidal'. Eventually, the baby dies of pneumonia before he has the chance to kill anybody. It ironically proves the predictions of the astrologer as correct. The novelist deploys irony throughout the fiction in a mode of deconstructing the idea of Reason. In a contrast to the straightforward concept of reason put forward by empiricism, Ghose uses irony to problematise the notion of logic itself. The operation of Reason is far from logic in the fiction. The logic becomes so convoluted and twisted in reversals and paradoxes that the very idea of Reason is founded in logic. Eventually, the logic is thrown into doubt. The writer establishes irony to introduce a series of reversals which demonstrate the paradoxical reason, not reason in logics. As a result, the western concept of reason is deconstructed.

If reason is paradoxical, the history produced by reason is paradoxical. In contrast to the utopian idealism of the Enlightenment which envisaged a 'Pure Reason', *The Circle of Reason* offers a muted assessment of knowledge, evaluating its profit and loss. Both Balram and Alu initiate utopian projects that fall prey to the contingencies and contradictions of time. These ironic reversals and unintended consequences consistently thwart to build a better world. Reason is, therefore, neither an emancipator nor is necessarily oppressive. It is true to believe that Alu's and Balram's projects end in disaster. But such projects could never succeed because they both find rationale for their projects—hygiene and money. The novel interprets the other sides of Reason: desire, hope, despair, madness and obsession. All those elements of life elude the rational analysis of mankind.

The contemporary knowledge on science is intimately associated to the concept of reason. The reasonable analysis on the scientific enquiries and inventions are indispensable insights of scientists and philosophers. The logics, the judgements and the intuitions are ingredients of Balram as a character of scientific reason.

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