

THE SYMBOLIC STATUS AND THE THIRD SPACE IN THE NOVEL *THE CIRCLE OF REASON* BY AMITAV GHOSH

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh, an Indian English novelist and essayist, has gained a significant place in the literary annals of Indian English literature. His novels establish him not only as a creator of diasporic literature, but also an enunciator of human values. The displaced individuals dangle between fulfillment and frustration while negotiating cultural values. The psychological ramifications of history and culture are borne out of an encounter within a new culture. One significant aspect of his novels is that they are all centered on love which knows no barriers.

This paper attempts to perceive diaspora in all its variegated patterns. Hence, an analysis of the displaced individuals has been taken to be fitting before one establishes the main characters as displaced individuals. Also, the paper attempts to categorize the displaced individuals as ones who have acculturated themselves and the ones who feel that they are trapped pathetically in a hostile ambience. The paper makes a different approach in which the very gait of characters achieves a metaphorical signification of a wretched displacement. The basic idea of approach in this chapter is to point out Amitav Ghosh's knowledge of reality as occasioned by a metaphorical perception of language. The metaphorical perception of language demands a going beyond the literary information. Further, the paper expresses an increasing concern with Ghosh's presentation of characters as handicapped by language and communication. The language barrier presupposes, metaphorically a diasporic displacement. This is a linguistic mechanism employed by Ghosh to develop the identity crisis as pivotal in the lived experiences of the displaced diasporans.

Consequently, lack of security, freedom and fixation drives the character into endless misery which motivates alienation and despondency. This lack of stability is an exhibit of a diasporic individual which necessitates the historical representation of reality. Though, this

sense of insecurity could be deemed universal in fiction, a diasporic insecurity is different in that, it makes the characters move about looking for an endpoint. The paper also discusses characters which are psychologically distanced from the mainstream culture owing to the dominance of the natives and their culture. Eventually, Ghosh's treatment of characters has been found to be extraordinarily individualistic and phenomenally different from other diasporic artists.

For the discussion of the central ideas his first novel namely, The Circle of Reason is being attempted. The immigrant's sense of displacement constitutes his socio-cultural dilemma and disillusion in a term attributed to the psychological fiasco. The paper also attempts to establish that a diasporan cannot escape the psycho-cultural dilemma.

While acknowledging the fundamentalist strains one finds in literature, novelist John Gardner defines literature thus: "True art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the Gods and us" (28). In the Indian scenario, ever since the 1930's there has been an increasing strain on the part of the creative artists to portray a world enriched with life's experiences, characterized by a unique social mobility. Herein becomes the relevance of "diaspora", a term which has been associated with expatriate literature. Diasporic literature traverses barricades in order to clinch a new selfhood. It defines and sometimes redefines variegated contacts of time and space. According to Gurbhagat Singh,

Expatriate writing, in its theory and practice, is the work of exile who has experienced unsettlement at the existential, political and metaphysical levels. With this experience, he/she unsettled the philosophical and aesthetic systems. The phenomenon of exile has emerged in our times due to uneven development within capitalism and due to the movement forced by colonial powers. (21)

With the emergence of Amitav Ghosh (1956 ---) diasporic literature took on a new perspective. Amitav Ghosh has been aware of the impact of politics, historically generated on the lives of common people. He posits the view that human relationship is the quintessence of all living. Hence, all the entire bulk of his fiction stands deep-rooted in its stress on human relationship. Amitav Ghosh is known for his mastery over the historical past, from where he excavates events that turn out to be the raw ingredients for his fiction. Also, his sense of history delivers a different message. It is to a greater degree posing his

patriotic fervor and subjective understanding of the Indian mind. Amitav Ghosh expresses his concern in a psycho-social perspective, that is, he deliberates his issues as standing in steadfast relationship of the man, his inner-man and his community. As John C. Hawley writes: “. . . but first and foremost, and overriding all the main ideas that inform his work are the stories, the Dickensian proliferation of characters whose lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times” (1).

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This paper attempts to perceive diaspora in all its variegated patterns. Hence, an analysis of the displaced individuals has been taken to be fitting before one establishes the main characters as displaced individuals. The displaced individuals are categorized as ones who have acculturated themselves and the ones who feel that they are trapped pathetically in a hostile ambience. A different approach is made in which the very gait of characters achieves a metaphorical signification of a wretched displacement. The basic idea of approach is to point out Amitav Ghosh's knowledge of reality as occasioned by a metaphorical perception of language. The metaphorical perception of language demands a going beyond the literary information.

Further, the paper expresses an increasing concern with Ghosh's presentation of characters as handicapped by language and communication. The language barrier presupposes, metaphorically a diasporic displacement. This is a linguistic mechanism employed by Ghosh to develop the identity crisis as pivotal in the lived experiences of the displaced diasporans. Consequently, lack of security, freedom and fixation drives the character into endless misery which motivates alienation and despondency. This lack of stability is an exhibit of a diasporic individual which necessitates the historical representation of reality. Though, this sense of insecurity could be deemed universal in fiction, a diasporic insecurity is different in that, it makes the characters move about looking for an endpoint. The characters are psychologically distanced from the mainstream culture owing to the dominance of the natives

and their culture. Eventually, Ghosh's treatment of characters has been found to be extraordinarily individualistic and phenomenally different from other diasporic artists.

For the discussion of the central ideas, his first novel namely, *The Circle of Reason* is being attempted. The immigrant's sense of displacement constitutes his socio-cultural dilemma and disillusion in a term attributed to the psychological fiasco. This novel is populated with many characters. According to K. Damodar Rao,

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason* marked a break from the traditional themes of the Indian English novel and the form and structure of the well-made novel. In fact, the novel could be taken as the starting point of a whole generation of new writers – often called Ghosh Generation or Stephanine School who have left a lasting imprint on the novel of the eighties setting the tenor for a new thrust in Indian fiction in English. (279)

Also, this novel proclaims a radical break from the older themes of the Indo-Anglian fiction in that, the very structure and the thematic content are new to the genre. The novel is tightly intertwined in variegated structures. The critic K. Damodar Rao rightly says that,

In *The Circle of Reason*, the attempts of the novelist are obviously oriented to floating the events and characters through a medley of metaphors and select ideas. The all-embracing structural principles of magic and irony eloquently 'weave' the total pattern of the novel and ideas, characters and metaphors are explicated through attendant motifs. In fact, the characters themselves are converted into possible metaphors. Their quest is for a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of experience however trivial and absurd it is. (279-80).

The term entitled "The Third Space" is the discussion of the evolution of a new space. While community living is constituted by a particular time and space, the immigrants, who have intruded upon the existing cultural paradigm, create a new space. The creation of a new space is the consequence of swaying between the cultures to which these immigrants belong to, and the culture into which they intrude upon. Thus, while identifying the progression of the immigrant experience, attempts are made to establish the relevance of the term "diaspora".

When Alu was brought to Dhaka, where his uncle Balaram and aunt Toru-debi lived, it was a strange experience for Alu to enter a new situation. The unexpected death of his parents in an accident also adds to his agony and silence. It is difficult and natural for any person to accept the strange situation very easily and here with Alu, it sounds more because of his extraordinary physical look. He looked different from other boys of his age. "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).

The story centres on Alu, the eight year old orphan and his life with his uncle Balaram Bose in Lalpukur. Alu’s physical appearance is succinctly brought out. 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 a little difficult to believe. But still, 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.

(TCR 3). The variegated structures of the novel unfold through Alu’s life with his uncle, with Bhudeb Roy his teacher and in the mixed company of Prof. Samuel and Calcutta whores.

Almost all the major characters in *The Circle of Reason* try to understand and constitute the world and hence motivate their actions through patterning of some kind. In fact the principal quest in the novel seems to be one for the right metaphor. Alu’s stay with his uncle takes a rationalist pattern in that, it has been put in association with intellectually many scientists. Alu arrived in Lalpukur, when Balaram took his share of their inheritance and moved to the village – without so much, as his brother shouted after him, as a thought for the floundering family business. Later, with that vicious prescience peculiar to close relatives, he had even left instructions in his will that Balaram was not to be told of his death, nor asked to attend the funeral. (TCR 4) His life in Lalpukur turns out to be a devilish one. He takes the assignment of cleaning out the refugee shanties with carbolic acid which ultimately destroys Balaram.

According to Pradip Dutta, “However, the novel is too assertive of life to make the kind of statement which says that the fate of humanity is inevitable. Its prophecy warns rather than dictates. By displaying life lived at its fullest, it always communicates a sense of alternate possibilities.” (76) Like a picaresque fictional hero, Alu is on the run.

. . . he passed down a chain of Raja’s chalia kinsmen, scattered over every factory . . . Then it was time to leave the railways behind, time to step into the forests of the Nilgris . . . then . . . He spent the nights secreted away in the Chalia quarters of scattered villages . . . so faster still westwards, down through the mountains, faster and faster. (TCR 157)

Alu attempts to fit himself into a world through a different process. He takes on his weaving profession and begins his search for identity. *The Circle of Reason* opens with Alu, who has a huge head, too large for an eight-year old boy, bulging all over with knots and bumps. Alu, is a young weaver, a child of talents and this leads him into a series of adventures which takes

him from his home in an Indian village through the slums of Calcutta, to Goa and across the sea to the Persian Gulf and North Africa.

Later Alu, in the process of construction work is buried in the collapse of a building. He is saved after four days and now he is a new man with a new finding in his life. As Sengupta observes, A superficial reading of Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), might give the impression that it is a picaresque novel set in the contemporary milieu. It does have an unheroic hero and records various adventures befalling him and his interaction with a host of other characters as he moves from one country to another. But the novel has a deeper level, an allegorical level. (29) Alu's experience still unfolds as he is found in the company of Zindi, Kulfi and Boss in El-Qued, a little town on the north eastern edge of the Algerian Sahara. And here he meets Mrs. Verma, a wonderful personality, who is able to reason out life with an almost perfect rationalist endeavour. This is how Ghosh makes of Mrs. Verma's philosophy of life:

Rules, rules . . . 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. (TCR 409)

After having experiences as a displaced Indian, Alu is back home. Like a picaresque novel, Ghosh indulges in ironic humour now and then as the following paragraph shows:

. . . when Virat Singh, the famous wrestler, the great marble-biceped pehlwan of Bareilly, . . . one attempted to press his suit a little forcefully with her [and] since he was not greatly to her taste, she overpowered him, merely by baring an armpit and blowing gently upon it. (279)

While Alu traverses boundaries, he is exposed to the evil effects of money planning on politics. When Alu keeps only the sewing machine as providing successor, ironically, it also saves him. As he gets buried in the avalanche of the immense building, but the two sewing machines holding up as a steel girder above him, save him. “. . . on the other side, were two sewing machines, of the old kind, of black and solid steel. That must be the only whores of their kind in Al-Ghazira now, real antiques, probably kept for display . . . if it weren't for them our friend Alu would have been flattened days ago” (TCR 240). Ghosh's main intention in the novel is the point out how the displaced Indian becomes the victim of money. He concretizes the craze for power and money at Al-Ghazira in the building of the star. Star epitomizes late capitalism and the rotten politics linked to it.

The contractors who built it didn't care whether it stood or fell – they had made their money anyway . . . Jabal and his friends . . . [will] be happier with the insurance money. Did even

the Amir want it? His money's far away in some safe country and nothing in al-Ghazira matters to him much. (245)

Star falls and Alu is trapped in the debris. His stay inside for four days brings out revelations upon him and he reaches the conclusions that money is the root cause for all evils. For *Star* is built not only with money, power and politics but also with, “. . . too much sand in the cement” (244). *Star* is the result of a dirty system powered by money and activated by politics. This is what Abu Fahl makes of money in the novel . . . “with you it's money, money, money all the time: take money, hand out money, take back money . . . It's a dirty system: it spreads germs like a squid spreads ink” (311).

Ghosh, in the division of the novel into the sections, namely, Sattrra: Reason, Rajas: Passion and Tamas: Death, brings into the focus, the ephemeral nature of money and the permanence of values in this world. In order to establish the true creditability of ethics and values in life, he creates the character of Mrs. Verma. As Sengupta has rightly pointed out,

She comes as a fresh shower of rain in the arid world of reason . . . Modern Science build for man a cage of reason in which he now finds himself trapped. Mankind's salvation now depends on a change of direction . . . There is need to restore to man the qualities of the heart. (41)

Ghosh proclaims the contention that the modern technological man is poised towards money and as drifting away from values. Instead of cleaning up the world, he has in fact dirtied it, “Dirt doesn't be in underwear. It is the world, the world of people which makes dirt possible” (104). Ghosh, in order to make his thematic content intensive in its reach towards the readers, sets out to create a community undergoing a period of experiencing the full impact of materialism and consumerism during the late 1960s, set against this picture of growth and prosperity. He puts to experiment his characters. The novel, eventually projects displaced individuals who live in a community with closed boundaries in which one may seek ironically, security in the company of people who too have shared the same worldly experience of negligible opportunity, poverty and a limited knowledge of the social environment. It is a society into which people may withdraw having felt misplaced or displayed in the secular world. Looking at the novel, Pradip Dutta observes:

The vision of life as a process transforms the restless world of this novel. Restlessness loses its meaning as displacement or instability. It becomes, in Ghosh's hands, a dynamic urge to find a complete relationship with the rich diversity of our world, which is achieved in the organization of the novel. (77)

Alu, in the novel creates a new system of symbolic status in which he alone could participate and which denies the validity and legitimacy of the symbolic arenas from which he regards himself as excluded. In fact, Alu's ventures are an attempts to escape from the competitive

status-seeking of the materialistic culture in which he is isolated and frustrated by the poverty. The secular and the secluded status are rhetorically denigrated within the community. His status, rather is ascribed on the basis of his own picaresque quest for identity, for example in his miraculous escape from the collapsed building.

While diasporic literature might not have the structure or direction which one associates with radical or social movements, it may nevertheless, serve a similar need. Diasporic content is largely a mental construct whose subjective manifestation in displaced arenas gives it credibility. It is highly symbolized, with the eventual option that its members could invest it with their selves quite often fragmented. Sometimes, the characters are sufficiently malleable that they could accommodate themselves into a new culture compartment without feeling their individuality to be overtly compromising which is called as the Third Space.

Thus, in the novel *The Circle of Reason*, the attempts of the novelist are obviously oriented to floating the events and characters through a medley of metaphors and select ideas. The all-embracing structural principles of magic and irony eloquently 'weave' the total pattern of the novel and ideas, characters and metaphors are explicated through attendant motifs. In fact, the characters themselves are converted into possible metaphors. Their quest is for a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of experience however trivial and absurd it is.

The Circle of Reason puts forth a magnificent degree of creative competence. It fuses this talent and understands Ghosh's creative idea. The first and final commitment of the novel has to do with the human experience. It is both physical and spiritual, native and immigrant. The novel presents a paradigm in which space and distance are felt as they extend to be more and more important. A new space in a distant society constitutes a new ritual of control demanding a man to live a strange yet strategically diplomatic life. Alu, the main stay of the novel, suffers from some genetic defect which makes it practically impossible for him to leave his native nest and join the new asylum. What he wants in life is the achievement of the autonomy that would enable him to work out either a tolerable or even a tentative relationship between native and immigrant worlds.

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