

The Theme of conflicting Political ideologies in Amitav Ghosh's *Circle of Reason*

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Abstract

Human beings have been surrounded by one or the other kind of political ideology ever since they came out of forest and started living in social structures of various kinds. Starting with small scale tribes and groups, the world has witnessed the play of Feudalism, Imperialism, Socialism, Capitalism, Democracy and Globalization. The clash between and among these socio-political structures has changed the course of societies and the cultures of the world. With this clash and change the human history has been pacing its way ahead. Amitav Ghosh in his novel Circle of Reason, along with other issues anthropologically takes account of conflicting political ideologies and changing socio-political structures in human society with reference to India, Algeria and a fictitious oil town al-Ghazira situated around Algeria. The present research paper attempts to study the theme of conflicting political ideologies in the novel; Circle of Reason.

Keywords: Political Ideology, Culture, Diversity etc.

Ever since human beings organized their lives in socio-political structures the political ideology of one or the other kind has governed, directed, motivated or disturbed the lives of societies and individuals. The confrontation of individuals with political ideologies or the confrontation between and among different political ideologies has been the part of social experience. The conflict of this kind takes place because the individuals, social groups, or nations believe in different socio-political structures. In the novel *Circle of Reason*, Amitav Ghosh shows different political ideologies clashing with one another. The story begins In Lalpukar; a village in Bengal. Balram a fresh graduate leaving the job of a clerk joins a school of a politically respectable man, namely, Bhudeb Roy. Bhudeb Roy is a pseudo social worker. In the name of running a school he wanted to have his control over the village politics. Balram was an erstwhile rationalist turned socialist. In Lalpukar he opens his own school of reason when Bhudeb Roy's school is closed down due to the factors mentioned ahead. In this school of reason people come and learn various subjects; The Reason was taught by Balram himself. Along with this weaving was also introduced as a subject. This earns more respect for Balram.

By and by differences arise between Balram and Bhudeb Roy. Bhudeb Roy was politically active. He could not tolerate anybody going against him. Bhudeb Roy and Balram become enemies. Their hostility to each other is not personal but a cultural conflict between two ideologies: one the Fascist-cum-authoritarian whereas the other one is free and clean thought. Bhudeb Roy represents the Fascist one whereas Balram represents free and clean thought. Due to some more factors a chain of attacks and counter attacks on smaller scale gets started between them. Balram gives shelter to a person named Shombhu Debnath, who has been shown as having suspicious relation with Bhudeb Roy's wife. Now Bhudeb Roy wanted to teach lesson to both, using his political weight he presents Balram as a would-be-extremist. When Police come to raid Balram's residence they give him warning to come out but he doesn't listen. In the spur of the moment police throw a fire ball at Balram's residence, which eventually hits a pile of crude hand-made bombs which Rakhal; Shombhu Debnath's son had prepared for the use in emergency. The whole house is blown into an explosion. Everybody is wiped out except Alu, as he had been sent out to get some more hidden bombs.

Rakhal was not interested in adopting his father's profession of weaving. He was young, impulsive and rebellious. Somehow he comes in contact with militant communists and learns making hand-made crude bombs. Thus here Ghosh brings to our notice that the Indian political system of around 1960's in the name of democracy was still being controlled and bent by the erstwhile feudal lords. Because of which it was countered by militant communism. In reality the radicals and the government need to dialogue and sort out the things so that the justice prevails but the continuous fight between the two has been going on since long.

What exactly is '*Extremism*', has never been clear in terms of knowledge. Most often the concept has been conveniently used. The State has always brought it in use to suppress the dissenters. The writers such as; Salman Rusdhie, Mahashweta Devi, and Arundhati Roy have critically probed this issue. Ghosh in his own way cursorily mentions it in his present work. In the story Bhudeb Roy becomes vengeful of Balram and Shombhu Debnath, he projects Balram as an extremist and sets police after him. After the explosion at Balram's house when Alu's body was not found, Jyoti Das, an intelligence officer is set chasing him upto al-Ghazira; a fictitious oil town situated around Algeria. Alu is let alone in the end only when Jyoti Das is convinced of his innocence. Ghosh mentions government's crackdown efforts at the extremists in first part of the book which brings it to light that a State may jump into action even at the slightest hint of a dissent. Under such conditions the government's first goal is to crush the dissent. Justice, right, and wrong are reserved for trial.

After narrating the pathetic socio-political story of India, Ghosh takes us out to show the imperial machinations of England and other nations in the **Middle East nations**. In here among many small scale nations Ghosh depicts a fictitious town al-Ghazira. The old political system of al-Ghazira is shown as feudal. The Malik of the town was installed on the seat after his father's death, and he stayed in old fort. The Malik allowed whoever came to al-Ghazira

after receiving tax. Everything was going alright until the British had found oil in some of the countries around al-Ghazira. Now they wanted to enter al-Ghazira. So they sent an officer to negotiate and get a treaty signed by Malik. Malik did not want to sign any treaty because he had heard what had happened to the princes of India. The British officer threatened Malik of war. In order to teach a lesson to the British officer Malik thought of a plan that eventually failed. The officer got very angry and threatening to attack the town left. But before he could act upon his threat, Malik with the help of Jeevanbhai and Noori, made up a story and avoided the untoward action by British. Ultimately Malik had to sign a treaty.

By and by the influence of the British was on the rise and that of Malik on the wane. Malik for most of the time remained shut in his old fort. Oil attracted the British and which eventually changed the political system of al-Ghazira. Empiricism brought capitalism, which led to the changed socio-political life of al-Ghazira. **The feudal and the empirical political ideologies** clashed for a long time and later the Capitalism consolidated in the garb of Democracy.

An oil town factory started outside al-Ghazira. Later on in the story, the Britishers wanted a piece of land which was considered sacred by *Mawalis*; a social group of people who hailed from around Egypt and earlier worked for Malik. They were called as *Mawalis* of Malik. They believed that their great ancestor; the old Sheikh Musa was buried at the place which now the Britishers wanted. The merchants of *Souq*, a business complex in al-Ghazira, held fairs on the same place on all the great feast days. Even Malik also loved that piece of land. When Malik did not listen, British made use of Malik's step brother, Amir. They provided him with great power and curtailed the powers of Malik. By and by Malik's political hold weakened and Amir became the controller of the town. Britishers declared Amir and his friends as democratic leaders of the town and thus Malik's control over al-Ghazira came to naught. The Britishers with the help of Amir took control of the piece of land they wanted and built a building which was named *an-Najma; the Star*. Later al-Ghazira as an oil country earned a lot of money and things gave way to change. When Hajj Fahamy; an old respectable and well settled migrant in al-Ghazira has finished relating the story of *an-Najma*, he says, the building fell because nobody wanted it. Neither Malik, nor the merchants of the Souq, nor did the *Mawalis* want the building. Even construction workers who worked there did not pay any attention to the material quality of it. Amir did not give attention either. Ghosh indirectly criticizes the advancing capitalism for the collapse of the *Star*. Feudalism was definitely not a healthy social or political system, with the advance of education and thought of equality democracy spread across the world but ultimately it started functioning as an instrument of Capitalism only. Ghosh brings in this argument in the story of *Circle of Reason*.

When the commercial enclave the *Star* fell, Alu the protagonist in the novel had been working at the basement as a painting labourer. The building fell over Alu but by sheer luck he was saved, as he was caught between two strong sewing machines and the slab fell over

the machines with Alu safe between them. For four days he was stuck there. After many efforts Abu Fahal and the people of Ras; the area where Zindi's house was located rescue Alu. During those four days Alu had meditated over the poverty and the dirt of Ras. He had even made some plans to tackle them. His miraculous survival and the rumours associated with that make Alu a centre of curiosity. People think him to be some messenger of God. They take him to Hajj Fahmy's house to listen him. For the first time Alu speaks so openly and fluidly. Jeevanbhai while narrating the story to Jyoti Das and his friend says; *"...I saw that very crowd absolutely silent, listening to a man, hardly more than a boy, talk and that, too, not in one language but in three, four, God known how many, a khichri of words...Arabic with Hindi, Hindi swallowing Bengali, English doing a dance... but there again you have a mystery for everyone understood him, perfectly, like their mother's lullabies."* (COR, 301)

Here Alu's speech is a Bakhtinian cacophony of voices and languages, a decentred heteroglossia. Alu does not speak in any one language, thus he avoids being hegemonic and speaks with the mix of them. He discards the power centric position of a language. While talking to people in this episode he weaves knowledge which is free of one linguistic form and so is free of a hegemonic position. He doesn't speak with one individual but with a group, which is full of diversity. His is not a linear communication; there is space for the listeners as well. And together they make a dialogue. Alu uses a mix of languages whereas the listeners use silence to answer him. Here one finds conflict between a rightist dominant political ideology and a subversively leftist one. The prior one believes in constructing knowledge through hegemonic linguistic codes whereas the latter takes a countering position and attempts to construct knowledge without the hegemonic linguistic codes.

Alu talks about Louis Pasteur and his mission to deal with germs. He says that Pasteur took all the efforts just for the sake of purity and cleanliness. According to Alu Pasteur had discovered the germs but still he lost the battle because he never asked himself where the battle ground of germs was. Alu says money is the answer. Money brings all the germs and the dirt. So he says now nobody should carry the money with him/her. He thinks of a plan and says now they would run a movement against money. They would earn the money and would deposit it with Professor Samuel, who would work as their accountant. He would deposit the money in bank and would buy the things on their behalf. Whenever people would need money in cash for the purpose of going out of their locality they would have to place a demand and they would be given the required money in an envelope. A sociological movement is started by Alu. Through this episode in the novel Ghosh criticizes the extremist tendency in socialism. In this social model of Alu people could work and earn as much as they could but they were supposed to spend it together. It was a kind of cooperative society. Because of this they could get the things at cheaper rates. Alu strikes a balance between socialist and capitalist framework. Very soon people find the results. Now they could save more money than they did earlier. Very soon they get control of a grocery store where they

regularly went for their daily needs. Now the owner is made the manager of the store. The power of the society starts reflecting. For some days everything goes on quite happily until the day the people of Ras decide to go on a shopping trip. On the way they plan to visit the fallen site of *Star*, they wanted to have a look at the site where Alu had been trapped under the rubble between the two sewing machines. If possible they wanted to gift those machines to him by taking them out of the rubble. When Jeevanbhai hears of it he thinks that it was a good opportunity for the old Malik to come out in public and lead the rally. Forid Mian; the tailor at Jeevanbhai's shop informs the police which in its turn suspects that perhaps some extremists were going to attack the site so they use the tear gas to disburse the mob. lathi-charge and the consequent stampede brings an end of the entire mini socialist movement. Jyoti Das, has been chasing Alu since he left Lalpukar, now sets forth to catch him in Algeria since Zindi has taken Alu, Kulfi and Boss with her to there. Through the story of Alu's sociological movement Ghosh makes a point that Socialism is never tolerated by the ideologies that believe in discrimination in terms of class, caste, gender and of other sorts. That is why it will always be plagued either by Feudalism, Fascism, imperialism or Capitalism.

The theme of conflicting political ideology is one of the dominant themes in the novel *Circle of Reason*. It has been shown in the national as well as international context. In order to support it one finds examples where Ghosh discusses the chaotic atmosphere of the world around the major historical events. Ghosh, in this novel while discussing the theme of conflicting political ideologies depicts that such happenings are part of living. Here very briefly he points out that the time around 1914 itself was culturally chaotic. In the early part of the story it has been mentioned that Balram didn't know his exact birth date, when he had to choose a date at random from his birth year 1914, he had great difficulty as he thought that the reason was most embattled in that year. People, cultures, nations, races and political ideologies were at war with one another. Across the word a kind of chaos had broken loose.

Balram could have chosen a date as many of his friends in college would have, to mark one of the many terrorist strikes against the British in Bengal. In distant Europe there was always the declaration of the First World War, and its assortment of massacres and butchery. Or there was the day in early August when an American judge in San Fransisco, arbitrating on the second-ever application by a Hindu for citizenship in the United States, took refuge in prehistory and decided that high-caste Hindus were Aryans and therefore free and white. And, equally, there was another day in August when the colonial government in Canada rewrote a different prehistory when it turned the eight thousand Indians on board *Kamagatamaru* back from Vancouver, after deciding that the ancient racial purity of Canada could not be endangered by Asiatic immigration. Or, at much the same time, there was the date of the launching of a drive by the imperial government to recruit Indians for an

expeditionary force to join Algerians and Vietnamese and Senegalese in defending the freedom of the western world from itself. (41-42 COR)

Here Ghosh cites the incidences from across the world at random, indicating that the irrationality was quite rampant around the period of First World War. The cultural polarization had become extremely acute. In a way Ghosh wants to say that, when people, nations and cultures do not use reason combined with humanity at large, they throw themselves and others onto the road of confusion and chaos.

The partition had demarcated the boundary-line between India and Pakistan. Two separate political and social cultures were born. These two cultures have always encountered. The war of 1971 was a horrible example of the differences between the two. Amitav Ghosh in this novel cursorily mentions the scene of the time during war period. Planes zoomed over the bordering villages, people lived under the shadow of death, hoards of people migrated from the would-be Bangladesh to India. As a national policy the Indian Villages and towns near the border were receiving the migrants. They tried to help them by all the possible ways. The migrants were hoarding to Lalpukur every day. Bhudeb Roy had opened his farm for setting temporary shacks. Balram, being a student of science sensed that this overcrowding and living in open may cause serious epidemic. Thinking this he voluntarily undertook the mission of sanitizing the entire village. Initially he himself shelled out the money for buying disinfectants, but later even the migrants and others joined him to give funds and keep the village away from epidemics, which had already started in other villages and parts where no such efforts were taken. Here Amitav Ghosh has fictionally recreated the picture during 1971 in bordering areas. The people witnessed the two conflicting political ideologies that of India and Pakistan.

Every society is political and it has its ideology with many other ones conflicting with it. This is the part of living at all geographical locations. Amitav Ghosh through the novel *Circle of Reason* generalizes this idea and anthropologically takes account of clashing ideologies and changing socio-political structures in human society with reference to India, Algeria and a fictitious oil town al-Ghazira situated around Algeria.

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