

Rationality and Irrationality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

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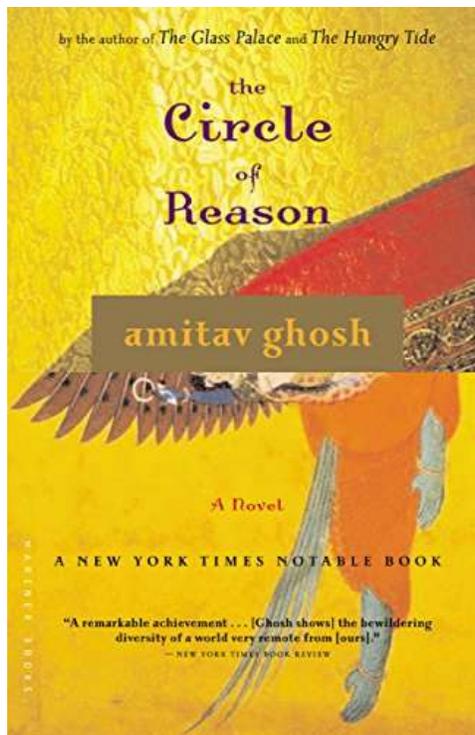
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Abstract

The present study explores rationality and irrationality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*. The novel is written regard philosophies of reason or defense of reason. Science and technology are interlinked with these philosophies and defense. Defense scientifically leans aside rationality. Irrationality leans aside superstition. Hence the study examines the rationality and irrationality activities of the very significant character Balaram, who is portrayed as a rationalist, at the same time he is considered not a rationalist. The dual role of Balaram concretely depict about the need of scientific knowledge. He is a man of reason who applies logic to every small thing. The trouble with him is that theories come first and truth afterwards. He is interested in

the school of reason and pure reason. He believes that every act of life has a purpose, so he establishes a third branch called March of reason.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason*, Rationality, Irrationality

Introduction

The Circle of Reason is the most significant novel by Amitav Ghosh. It represents the problems of modern man, alienation, migration and the existential crisis in life along with rationalism. Ghosh had divided the novel into three sections and called Satva: Reason, Rajas: Passion and Tamas: Death. The novel symbolically depicts about three phases of human life. The novelist has constructed the novel with rationality and irrationality themes through his characters. At the same time, irrationality finds place in the middle of the novel. The novel basically tells three stories. The first part of the novel deals with the story of Balaram. He is the rationalist and is influenced by the life of Louis Paster. As Ghosh points out rationality is the only thing that will make people behave logically. People must come to the practical theory. Rationality allows investigation, exposure and experience in life. However, it might bring a vast change in the minds of the people to avoid their blind beliefs. “As a child is born, slowly but surely she/he is taken into the cult of the illogical. Investigation, first-hand exposure and experience are not allowed. *The Circle of Reason* is a revolt against this trend.” (Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study Tiwari P. 3) So, new readers cannot find rationality or irrationality at the first reading in this novel. One can certainly recognize rationality as the driving force of the novel. As a thinking Indian, the novelist is bothered about the unhygienic conditions prevailing in the country India. Ganga River has gone dirty through the irrational activities of people. “So many folds exist within the Indian view that to take the Sanskrit Brahminical cult as the authentic representative of it will lead us to new wrongs.” (Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study Tiwari P. 4) So, the intellectual growth only can bring knowledge and rationality among the people.

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The Circle of Reason deals with two elements, historical and mythological. There are basically three stories. As the first part portrays the story of Balaram, a rationalist and is influenced by the life of Louis Pasteur, he is considered as an idealistic man to the extent of being inhuman. He does not have any involvement with the people. “Balaram is a freak. He claims to be a rationalist. He admires scientists like Jagadish Bose, Meghnad Saha and above everyone else Loius Pasteur.” (Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study Tiwari P. 11) The people mentioned above are his ideals. Balaram personifies reason in this novel. Reason is at war with religion which provides a full-length debate in this novel. Balaram is attracted by the book, Life of Pasteur. Pasteur is his ideal, logic is his God. Rational thinking is his only goal in life. Amitav Ghosh is mature enough to point out the end of rationality in practical situations. Scientific temper, the theory of cause and effect do not work in real situations. Balaram’s case is that of firmness of logic. He does not look beyond reason. It must be all so rational for him. He does not accept a hair breadth’s difference from the upright, straight, unchangeable logical path. Balaram is the character of stiff stuff. He never compromises on rationality as the only theory of life, which wins him a life-long friend, Gopal. Gopal also is connected with the rationalist

society. Though Ghosh calls him a rationalist and a believer in science and reason, he acts in a very irrational way. He is interested in the science phrenology. It is a study of the size and shape of people's heads in the belief that one can find out about characters and abilities from this. His favorite hobby is learning heads, phrenology which is no longer considered a science.

“It wasn't talk of reason, it wasn't the universal atom. It was passion: a passion which sprang from the simple and the every day. A passion for the future, not the past. It was that which made him (Pastuer) the greatest man of his time, for it is that passion which makes man great. (*The Circle of Reason* P. 50)

Balaram tries to clean the surrounding area in his village Lalpukar that brings about his doom, destruction and death. He starts a school called the school of reason but fails in his attempt to educate the village youths to think rationally. They are interested more in learning eagerly tailoring and weaving, the practical training of learning the skills for survival. Balaram fails in educating Alu, the protagonist of the novel, since he refuses to attend his school. But Alu has reading interest and reading the books from Balaram's library.

Rationality of Balaram is juxtaposed with premonition. Premonition comes true sometimes, but rationality does not die. The biggest victory for a rationalist is to win over someone else to her/his side. This rationality wages a war against irrational germs, which are set against the tool of scientific temper, trying to finish the disease of irrationality, and rationality is thought to be the off-shoot of scientific temper which tries to end the ills of society. The irrationality is dealt with at end of the first section of the novel; Mrs. Verma uses carbolic acid instead of Ganga Jal. Hence Carbolic acid becomes holy water, not Ganga jal (sacred water of river Ganges). So, Mrs. Verma retorts, “what does it matter whether it is Ganga Jal or Carbolic acid? It is just a question of cleansing the place, isn't it? People thought something was clean once, now they think something else is clean. What difference does it make to the dead, Dr. Mishra?” (*The Circle of Reason* P. 411) Hence, the novelist points out that Ganga Jal. even though it is the water of the life giving river, is badly polluted.

In spite of the irrationality in the novel, the novelist calls Balaram a rationalist and a believer of science and reason, even Balaram acts in a very irrational way and he is interested in studying about heads, phrenology which is no longer considered a science, he is failed in his nature. As an amateur phrenologist, Balaram gives a verdict on the future of Bhudeb Roy's son. Balaram irrationally refers to the child as the exhibit through scientific reliance. He gives a dire prognosis that the baby is a born criminal, and says, “He produces almost exactly the structure of the Typical Homicidal. With careful nurture you may perhaps be able to hold him down to mere felony, but no further, I fear no further. Pray, Bhudep-babu...pray that you may not be his first victim.” (*The Circle of Reason* P. 24) But the baby dies after a month. It indicates what the specious logic of biological determinism fails to take effect.

The irrational activity of Balaram erupts on Puja celebrations. His knowledge of Science and his faith in reason have no base in real life situations. At the time of Puja festivals many people perform cleansing work. From being a rationalist, Balaram suddenly puts on irrationality that he is juxtaposed east against west, with the practical learning of weaving and tailoring against the abstract ideology of rationalism. But Toru-debi's practical sense and belief in the sewing machine saves Alu's life twice from the disaster created by Balaram's ideology. When the machines stop working, Toru-debi hopes it into Alu's hands and asks him to throw it away into the pond and get and get a new one for her.

“Nothing of any use now, she muttered. It's the end... She ran her hand over the machine's shining wheel and pulled...She stood up and put the machine in his (Alu's) arms. Throw it into the pond, she said. It's dead...get me another, Alu, my bit of gold, won't you?” (*The Circle of Reason* PP. 147-148)

Alu runs into the forest along with the machine, he suddenly finds that fire has broken out at Balaram's house, his home and wants to go back, but is prevented by Bolaida, who thereby saves his life. The fire was caused by Balaram's attack on Bhudeo Roy with the help of Rakhal. Ha was prepared:

“Balaram had spent the night in the canvas shelter he had rigged upon the dust path which ran past his house to Bhudeb Roy's. it was surrounded by a circle of heavy oil-drums with an opening where the circle met the path, which ran to the front door of his house. ...That was all. His stomach churned: but would it work?” (*The Circle of Reason* P. 138)

Balaram and everything and everybody around him is engulfed by the fire. It is the rationalist and the scientific mind of Balaram that brings about his destruction and death. Pastures has discovered life-saving drug but the knowledge of Balaram brings death. Here Ghosh points out that the folly of obsession by his limited knowledge of scientific inventions of the Western science. Agni (fire) is a purifying agent; fire is used for the work of cleansing; the fire is used to clean even in hell. This kind of myth is connected to our story. Carboic acid is also a purifying agent. At Kulfi's death, paste for Puja is made of Carboic acid instead of ghee. The novelist points out that Indians are living in unhygienic conditions, so the novelist responds to appalling dirt and filth in a land, where people have always talked of purity of soul as well as surroundings. The behavior of the people insisting on taking early morning baths, purifying their homes with cow dung and keeping fasts for internal cleansing are pointed out. And still, they turn a blind eye to all the garbage and dirt in their holy rivers and holy places.

Conclusion

The Circle of Reason calls for unconventional reading. The structure of the novel just symbolizes the chaotic state of today's society. The country India is the symbol of rationality and irrationality. Rationalists also turn out to be irrational sometimes due to selfishness or pressure.

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One should understand that science and its experiments may bring solution for a problem. Irrationalism does not always bring resolution to problems. Rationalism is the belief of scientifically proved reason. Irrationalism is mere belief and the novel moves within these two motifs. For that, the author submits many things as evidence through his characters and events in a vivid manner. No doubt, the novel presents a very good message for society that science is more useful than superstition. Ghosh has tried to weave together the different stories through references to sewing machines, carbolic acid, life of Pasteur, money and dirt, purity and cleanliness, rationalism and irrationalism along with science.

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