

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 10 : 1 January 2010

ISSN 1930-2940

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N. Jaishree, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle Of Reason* **A Study of Diaspora**

N. Jaishree, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

An Elder Statesman among Indian Writers in English

We view Amitav Ghosh as an “elder statesman” among Indian writers in English. His work has received wide critical acclaim: winning several prizes and major nominations. His novels deal with interesting themes set against historical backdrops.

Ghosh's roots are in journalism and academic writing, investigations and analysis, a revelation of subterranean connections and patterns. But first and foremost, and overriding all the many ideas that inform his work, are his characters whose lives engage us and take us to some richly imagined places and times.

The Circle of Reason

Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, follows the fortune of a young weaver, Alu, who is brought up in a Bengal village. After a false accusation that he is a member of a violent extremist group, he flees westwards, first to a fictional Gulf state and later to Algeria.

Elements of the Story

The first section of the novel contains a number of incidental observations on Indian migrations. Balaram's birth year 1924, for example, reminds the narrator of crucial moments in the history of Indian emigration to the West, the Canada's colonial government decided not to admit “eight thousand Indians ... after deciding that the ancient purity of Canada could not be endangered by Asiatic immigration.”

Ghosh also provides several instances of internal Diasporas in this part of the novel. The people of Lalpukur, for example, had been “vomited out of their native soil” in the carnage connected with the partition of India; within the narrative time of the novel they witness once again the spectacle of people being “dumped hundreds of miles away” because of the civil war that led to the emergence of Bangladesh.

The Story of Alu, the Wanderer, Seeking a Home

Ghosh's diasporic consciousness comes out most clearly in the central section of the novel where Alu has to roam all over the India and the Middle East. Within India, Alu moves first to Calcutta

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and then to the south, always just managing to elude the police and Das till he finally reaches Mahe, the southernmost part of India's west coast.

Having reached land's end, Alu, still trying to evade arrest by the Indian police, takes the ultimate diasporic move – he leaves the country behind and sails over the Indian ocean to Al-Ghazira.

Hazards of Migration

Alu's journey across the Indian Ocean on a mechanized boat allows Ghosh to depict the risks endured by thousands of Indians who leave their native land in search of a prosperous future. Illegal emigrants hazard their lives voyaging on frail vessels.

Alu's particular boat also bears witness to the wide range of social types who make the dangerous crossing in pursuit of economic security: among the passengers are a professor, a travelling salesman, and a madam and her girls, one of whom is even pregnant.

Dreams and Desperation

Ghosh takes time to emphasize the desperation and the dreams that move these people. A pregnant woman, for instance, had been lured to al-Ghazira by someone who has made her innumerable promises –“Your child, Your child will be this, it will be that, it will have houses and cars, and multistoried buildings; it will be a Ghaziri by birth.”

Zindi, the madam on the boat, also describes her success in attracting people to her establishment in Al-Ghazira: “I can find any man a good a job. And as for women they find me and come running”.

The Archetypal Nature of the Journey

As the boat bearing this batch of hopefuls approaches the quintessential Middle Eastern boom city of Al-Ghazira, Ghosh emphasizes the archetypal nature of its journey. It is doing what hundreds of other boats have been doing for a century and a half “carrying ... an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital”.

Death of Individuals and Their Dreams

The Al-Ghazira section of the book offers fresh evidence of Ghosh's fascination with a diasporic consciousness and the precarious lives led by migrant workers.

This section begins with a description of burial of Alu in the rubble of the building – The Star. The multi commercial complex collapses due to false workmanship. When Alu is buried in the debris of a newly built commercial complex that collapsed, he is saved by an antique sewing

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machine on which a huge slab of falling concrete comes to rest “just a hair away from his nose” (TCR).

A Chronicle of Al-Ghazira

Al-Ghazira, in fact, is a phenomenon of which Ghosh is one of the first chronicler: the exodus of thousands of men and women of the Third World to the Middle East in search of an alternative, and viable, future.

A cross-eyed egg-seller is said to be able to see Cairo and Bombay simultaneously. Disabled persons, Filipino faces, Indian faces, Egyptian faces, Pakistani faces, even a few Ghazira’s faces. a whole world of faces.

Indeed, certain parts of Al-Ghazira have the cosmopolitan hustle and bustle of a contemporary vanity fair. It is almost as “though half the world’s haunts had been painted in miniature along the side of the single street of the city”.

Although these faces and the places have filled the desert spaces of the Middle East, they have not been able to make Al-Ghazira into a home, because there were problems everywhere, no matter what you were paid, and because “foreign places are all alike in that they are not home. Nothing binds you there”.

The Magic Realism and the Protagonist

Alu is indisputably the main protagonist, the glue that holds a nomadic novel together, but, for much of the action, he is the silent centre around which an abundance of other stories are told.

Many of these include fabulous elements and, although Ghosh never departs from the bounds of what is strictly possible, the use of fantasy suggests a world-view that has affinities with both contemporary magic realism and a range of South Asian narrative traditions.

Ghosh is adept at twisting and turning his narrative line. Eventually the story climaxes in the al-Ghazira section with a confrontation that will see Alu, an idealist like his uncle, being routed by the forces of the capital. Alu’s campaign to destroy the power of money which Alu has identified the root of all evil, is crushed. However Zindi manages to extricate Alu, herself and Kulfi and Boss, two other members of the household, from the mess created by Alu’s quixotic scheme, and eventually they all end up in the little town of El-Qued at the northeastern tip of the Algerian Sahara.

Return to Realism of a World Full of Suffering and Injustice

In El-Qued, the fugitives come across the Vermas, two Indian doctors who have taken up jobs in the Algerian desert. Mrs. Verma is delighted to see the fugitives, because Kulfi appears to be just the woman she wanted to cast as the heroine of her production of a Bengali dance drama.

In the desert town of El-Qued The Circle of Reason is completed. Mrs. Verma, brisk and nonsensical, manages to disabuse Alu of the dream of a world purified by rational methods. The most important thing, we learn, is to “try to be a better human being”. The only hope is “to naje di di wutg wgat we’ve got.”

Not surprisingly, at the end of Ghosh’s first novel, his major characters resume their travel again, disburdened of false dreams. Zindi and Alu head for “home” via Tangiers. Das joins them as he moves forward for a migrant’s life in Germany. He will accompany Alu and Zindi till Tangiers, where migrating birds fill the sky as they make their annual flights.

A Story of Metaphors – The Journey

The characters are converted into possible metaphors. Their quest is for a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of their experience. however trivial and absurd it is. The characters achieve this appropriation of their significance through their creative capabilities while the novelist himself realizes this through magic and irony and by diverting some of his story telling abilities to the characters who move in exotic settings.

The story abounds in bizarre moments but is basically a serious attempt to deal with man’s delusive quest for reason within the context of contemporary Diaspora that has taken countless Third World workers and professionals across continents in quest of a better life.

Not that Ghosh’s treatment of these themes is unfailingly interesting. At over four hundred pages, the book is bound to strike most readers as overlong and overwrought. Ghosh focus is at times blurred, and he fails to sustain the narrative pace on more than one occasion.

The journey as a motif runs throughout the novel and unites the three parts of the novel. Characters cross borders “with almost the biological necessity, if not always with the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds”.

This motif is particularly associated with Alu who is on the run having been branded an extremist by the police and moves from Lalpukur to Kerala and then sets off to Al-Ghazira in the Middle East along with a number of characters who are in search of material wealth and more opportunities. Travel itself is converted into a homeland.

Reference

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N. Jaishree, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Department of English
Sri Eshwar College of Engineering
Kinathukadavu 641 202
Coimbatore District
Tamilnadu, India
shakes55@rediffmail.com

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