

Amitav Ghosh's The Circle of Reason : A Critical Study

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh adopts the technique of magic realism, history, anthropology, thriller, science fiction, medical science, memory, Indian and European myths, and legends, to write his four novels. His canvas is so vast, so complex, and so interesting that his neglect by critics and scholars is lamentable. He is not an imitator. He is a first class innovator, a first class novelist, a combination of some rare fictional qualities, which mark him out as a different sort of novelist. He is a post colonial critic of contemporary events. With his four novels, he has carved out an unenviable position in the history of Indian writing in English.

In *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh thematises the journey from “*Satwa*” through “*Rajas*” to “*Tamas*,” in three parts. Here also we encounter reality, but it is metafictional and in it “‘reality’ is also constructed and mediated ... (and) is to the extent ‘fictional’ and can be understood through an appropriate ‘reading’ process.” (Patricia Waugh, 1984, p. 16.) We ought to remember that Arnitav Ghosh is a social anthropologist. His background thus helps him in foregrounding the “literariness” of ethnography. As James Clifford puts it in the preface to *Writing Culture*, “the literariness of anthropology-and especially of ethnography is much more than a matter of good writing Literary processes ... affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered.”(James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 1986,p. 4.)The fact that Arnitav Ghosh has been able to move freely in his writing between anthropology, history and fiction is symptomatic of the extent to which traditional boundaries between those disciplines have themselves broken down.

Another anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, writes about the impact of anthropology, *the science, upon History, the discipline*. He says:

There seem to be some historians ... who think that anthropologists present static pictures of immobile societies scattered about in remote corners of the inhabited world, and some anthropologists ... think what historians do is tell admonitory, and then, stories about another episode in Western Civilisation: ‘true novels’ (in Paul Veyne’s phrase) designed to get us to face-outface-facts. (Clifford Geertz, 1990, p. 321.)

Then he goes on to write about Big and Little. Historians write and act big and anthropologists write of small, well-bounded communities. Historians accuse anthropologists of nuancemanship, of wallowing in the details of the obscure and unimportant, and to anthropologists accusing historians of schematicism, of being out of touch with the immediate ... of actual life .. Or perhaps it is about High and Low, Dead and Living, Written and Oral, Particular and General, Description and Explanation, Art and Science. To the historical imagination, ‘we’ is a juncture in a cultural genealogy, and ‘here’ is heritage. To the anthropological imagination, ‘we’ is an entry in a cultural gazette, and ‘here’ is home What has undermined them has been a change in the ecology of learning that has driven historians and anthropologists, like so many migrant geese, onto one another’s territories.(Clifford Geertz, 1990, pp. 321-324.)These geese turned vagrant by such inducements are not limited to anthropologists and historians. They have been joined by others, novelists and literary theorists, among them, Amitav Ghosh is one such novelist.

The Circle of Reason is an epic of restlessness. The immediacy of experience of reality is juxtaposed with history, of the eastern world, particularly, Egypt. Around the bare outlines of

the plot which moves over continents, are clustered an infinite number of stories ranging back and forth in time. By showing life as a journey larger than death, *The Circle of Reason* makes death find its identity in the horror and sadness which embalms this process. It concerns the picaresque adventures of Alu, a weaver from a small village near Calcutta, who leaves home to journey across the Indian Ocean to the oil town of the al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf. Why? The answer is connected with Alu and his uncle, Balaram, in the village of Lalpukur. Critics read Alu for tradition; Balaram for progress, Balaram's quest for Reason has made his mind "a dumping ground for the West." (Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason*, p. 53.) Robert Dixon remarks:

His (Ghosh's) Ph.D thesis at Oxford was a history of weaving and the cloth trade between Britain and India in the nineteenth century. In each of his subsequent texts, weaving is a synecdoche of that "intricate network of differences" in which all cultures are enmeshed with their neighbours. When Balaram decides to make the young Alu a weaver, he tells him a history of the technology of weaving that evokes cultural instability and borrowing across borders.

According to Balaram, "... (the loom) has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognises no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together." (*The Circle of Reason*, p. 55.) Balaram develops the idea that culture is a process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders:

Indian cloth was found in the graves of the Pharaohs. Indian soil is strewn with cloth from China. The whole of the ancient world hummed with the cloth trade. The Silk Route from China, running through central Asia and Persia to the parts of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe, bound continents together for more centuries than we can count All through those centuries cloth, in its richness, and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal bountiful trade. (*The Circle of Reason*, p. 55-56.)

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the themes of quest and journey are as old and eternal as this earth is. Traders in cloth, in India and China, and several parts of the world, were in quest of equal and bountiful trade and, for that, they journeyed to all parts of the world, and bound Asia, Africa, Europe to one bountiful thread of trade. The Reason destroys Balaram. Phrenology is an expression of Balaram's quest for a unified theory to explain the Universe. But Balaram's is a losing fight, and every effort of his ends in disaster. Alu's journey to al-Ghazira, escaping from the police, characteristically resumes his craft of weaving.

Again, in the novel, Ghosh shows the influx of foreigners like refugees from East Pakistan after the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. It results in the migration of the original people of Lalpukur to other parts of West Bengal in quest of livelihood and, in their place, the journeying of Bangladeshi into Lalpukur in quest of safety. Amitav Ghosh is an eternal pilgrim, with a load of books and mind full of explorations.

In Amitav Ghosh's fictional works, important characters are always journeying to real places, into history books and archives in quest of something which is the subaltern in character and anti-west in its execution. For instance, Alu travels to al-Ghazira, a Middle East town. Tridib travels to Dacca, to be killed there by a communally-charged mob. Like the work of the *Subaltern Studies* scholars, and unlike the work of other diasporic Indians such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, Ghosh's "The Imam and the Indian" and the scholarly article "The Slave of MS.H.6" seem to avoid European theoretical models, grounding their method in a rigorous elaboration of archival and field research which offers itself as series

of extended metaphors for allegorical interpretation. One wishes that Ghosh's fictional works continue to chart the path in future, avoiding the flamboyance of Rushdie and the mythic sweep of Shashi Tharoor.

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Socio-Political Concern : A Study of Sarojini Naidu's Poetry

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Sarojini Naidu, one of the celebrated poets of modern India, was born on February 13, 1897, in Hyderabad (Deccan). Her parents were Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya and Varada Sundari. Her father wanted her to be a mathematician, but she became a poet instead. She had her first poetical experience in 1890. After a year, she matriculated with merit from the Madras University. During 1892-1895, she stayed at home writing verses.

As, in 1894, she fell in love with Govindarajulu Naidu, the parents arranged to ship her to England in September, 1895, on a special scholarship from the Nizam of Hyderabad. The same year she saw the private publication of *Songs*. During 1895-1898, she studied at King's College, London, and at Girton College, Cambridge, and met Edmund Gosse, Arthur Symons and other members of the Rhymers' Club, and also visited Italy.

Sarojini Naidu, with four volumes of poetry to her credit, carved for herself a permanent niche in the annals of English poetry. She wrote verses that are entirely English in matter and form, but was advised to turn to her native land for themes. Exquisitely did she sing about the beauty of the Indian landscape, about the common man and woman, about the Hindu-Muslim unity, and about the subjugation of India. Mr. Sampson does not dispense justice to her when he states: "Some of her songs are little more than exotically sentimental utterances that might have come from an English writer who knew the East by hearsay; but others give vivid vignettes of native life and some embody the spirit of Oriental devotion. In general her work is more remarkable for its command of English than for any revelation of India." (George Sampson, 1961). But critical opinions, in general, have been in Sarojini's favour right from the beginning of her poetic career. Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse and members of the Rhymers' Club showed her the path, and she never swerved therefrom. The bright result was that she found a place in so many anthologies and selections of verses. Even *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (Oxford, 1916) honoured her by including three of her poems, namely, "The Soul's Prayer", "In Salutation to Eter-nal Peace", and "To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus".

Poetry came to Sarojini, as we know, as "a natural gift", and she could not help writing it when the mood overpowered her. She largely inherited it from her parents, who too loved poetry and composed poems. What she got by birth was certainly nurtured by her home atmosphere and by her stay in England during the formative years of her life. Apart from Symons and Gosse and the Rhymers' Club, she was also influenced by the Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley.

The first thing that strikes us in reading Sarojini's poetry is her exquisite melody and fine delicacy of feeling and expression blended with freshness and exuberance of spirit. She is primarily- "a singer of songs" and "a song-bird", "the Nightingale of India" and "Bharat Kokila". Prof. Vishwanathan is correct "when he points out that it is a closed mind that thinks that she is not a song-bird. (K. Vishwanathan, 1909). She does not seek to grapple with life's problems as does the philosopher. For her there are only situations that make her nerves tingle and stir her into quivering song. Life for her is not a riddle to be solved; it is a miracle to be celebrated and sung. Its endless variety excites her, its colours dazzle her, its beauty intoxicates her. (P.E. Dustoor, Sarojini Naidu). Her response to it is immediate. Some people may interpret

it as her weakness, but in this lies also her strength. In this lies the secret of her perennial youthfulness. In the opinion of Mr. Mathur, Sarojini is “a supreme singer of beautiful songs, songs bathed in melody and thought.”(B. S. Mathur. pp. 115-116.) We find a moving melody in her Indian folk-songs.

There can be no two opinions about the predominance of lyrical impulse in Sarojini's poetry. Her poems are mostly “short swallow-flights of fancy”. Some are full of the rapture of Spring; some others lead us into a world of inner ecstasy and spiritual elation; many others quiver with the passion of love. There are some poems which lead us into the heaven of India's luminous past. In her poetry, “the lyric appeal is various -and wonderful and full of the magic of melody”.(Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, p. 21.) Some of the notable lyrics are: “The Festival of Memory”, “Palanquin-Bearers”, “To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus”, “Wandering Singers”, “Guerdon”, etc. It has also been suggested that the metrical accomplishment' is part of Sarojini's lyricism.(S.M. Punekar, p. 72.)

It is difficult to conceive of a true lyric poet with narrow sympathies. Mrs. Naidu has very wisely kept her antipathies, if any, out of her poetry. Her sympathetic interpretation has covered a wide range of themes. Poems such as “Corn-Grinders” and “The Pardah Nashin” are evidently inspired by sympathy with the humble and the sufferer. . The same spirit inspires the third and 'fourth stanzas of “At Twilight”. With all forms of natural and innocent joy, on the other hand, she feels herself one with the vital rhythm of the world, and' becomes almost a 'part of the expanding life of birds and flowers. Her sympathetic attitude towards the different religions of the world is reflected in “The Call to Evening Prayer”. She has written many poems on Muslim culture. She also depicts the Hindu way of life in her poetry. In' fact, she seems to be “at home everywhere and at all kinds of gatherings”.(Diwan Chand Sharma, “Sarojini Naidup. 479.) This speaks of “the greatness and richness of her personality.”(Diwan Chand Sharma, “Sarojini Naidu”, p. 481.)

Sarojini's poetry undeniably belongs to the Romantic school, but it is the romance that in its most passionate mood leaves no ashes in the mouth. Although she did not become, as Edmund Gosse hoped, a Keats for India, she succeeded in becoming a far more vital and compelling entity than a reflection of Goethe or Keats; she became herself, with her own highly individual Equalities. She has added to literature “something Keats-like in its frank but perfectly pure sensuousness”.(H.H. Anniah Gowda, p. 29.) But there is hardly any trace of derivative impulse in her work except for the use of a few conventional words.

Above all things, Sarojini's genius, as contrasted with that of Toru, is “wholly native”. (S.V. Mukherjea, 1959, p.22.) It belongs to India. It is in accord with the rich heritage of the country. It is deeply attuned to the lofty ideals and the immemorial harmonies after a long story. Sir Edmund Gosse tells us that Sarojini's earliest poetical efforts were about robins and skylarks and English landscapes and that he suggested to her that she should give to the world “some revelation of the heart of India some sincere penetrating analysis, of Native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East, long before the West had begun to dream that it had a Soul.”(Edmund Gosse, p. 5.) It was, unquestionably Mr. Gosse who showed her the way to the **Golden Threshold**. And ever since that guidance Sarojini Naidu wrote nothing which does not owe its origin to an exclusively, Indian or Eastern inspiration. With her eager sensibility, she was always ready to receive impressions from all sides of the richly coloured Indian life that throbbed around her. The commonest of sights and sounds, the shrillest of street cries, the humblest of her fellowmen, all had for her some mysterious meaning, some peculiar intimation. Out of the simple chants and homely joys of her people, she “fashioned a subtle, melodious measure, capable of an astonishing range of notes and rhythms.”(S.V. Mukherjea, loc. cit., p. 23). The

bazaars of Hyderabad, the palanquin bearers, the weavers, the snake-charmers, the wandering beggar minstrels: all' inspired in the poetess a strange, rich mood. She has portrayed all walks of Indian life in the glittering pages of her poetry.

There is a wonderful descriptive power in Sarojini. She describes a scene a situation with accurate detail. Her descriptions are vivid and poetic. Her method of description is natural, with a without comment are reflections according to. the requirement. Instances of purely descriptive poems are: "Indian Dancers" and "Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad", while those, of description mingled with reflection are: "The Indian Gipsy" and "June Sunset".

Apart from this, Sarojini has employed various other methods of expression too. Often she expresses her own personal feelings, as in poems "love and Death", "Caprice", and "The sours Prayer". Her love poems are direct utterances of her feelings and moods. At times she speaks dramatically, through the mouth of another person, either in monologue or dialogue. Most of the Folk-Songs in The Golden Threshold are examples of the dramatic method. At other times, the method of direct address is used, such as in "Memorial Verses", "In Salutation to. My Father's Spirit", and "Ode to H. H. The Nizam of Hyderabad".

Sarojini has written many nature poems. Though she cannot be called a Wordsworthian in her attitude to Nature, she is deeply stirred in the presence of natural scenes and sights, soft loveliness and colour and melody of things. Her nature poetry is glugged with soft, delicate, hundred-hued blossoms, with honey sweetness, and a hundred toned music of the birds. This mostly happens in her spring poems which form a major part of her nature poetry. A keen sense of beauty never misses her. There are striking similes, metaphors. Images and rhythmic phrases in her poems.

Sarojini's poetry throbs with the passionate love of the Motherland. Some of the beautiful patriotic poems by her are: "To India" and "The Gift of India". For a few poems. she drew inspiration from national leaders like Gokhale, Tilak, and Umar.

Sarojini wrote many poems dealing with the problems of life and death. "Life", "To the God of Pain", "Damayanti to Nala in the Hour of Exile", "The Poet to Death", "To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus", "Dirge" "Love and Death", "Death and Life", "The Soul's Prayer", "A Challenge to Fate", "In Salutation to the Eternal Peace", "Invincible" : all are the poems of life and death. The poetess was much attached to life and sang glory of it. But sometimes she was possessed by fear and pain. Although she would not invite death for release, She also hurled challenge to Fate and Death.

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