



THE ROOTLESS IN FOREIGN LANDS: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE CIRCLE OF REASON*

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ABSTRACT

*Rootlessness, displacement, migration and quest for identity are some of the Interrelated problems in our contemporary society that draw attention to all the branches of modern academic discourses and evoke adequate sociopolitical and literary responses. The postcolonial Indian English novels explore these issues with enormous critical insight and myriad of interpretations. Amitav Ghosh as a leading voice in the contemporary literature of Indian deals with these interwoven issues against the backdrop of a massive socioeconomic transformation and historical discourses. His heavily researched and richly textured first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) projects these major areas with immense critical illumination and sensitive human approach. He deals with the problem of rootlessness alienation and transcontinental migration in the above novel and relates them to the larger ebb and flow of history, marginality and subalternity. Thus the ordinary people on the move is his central area of fictional exploration against the perspective of globalization and postcolonialism. Hence in this paper I will attempt to discuss Amitav Ghosh's treatment of the rootless in the foreign lands along with the problem of subalternity and ordinary people's migration from place to place, from one country to the other.*

Keywords: *rootlessness, displacement, subalternity, migration, alienation and postcolonialism.*

Introduction:

The problem of rootlessness or the quest for root or identity has been a recurring topic for literary discussion and debate in Colonial/Postcolonial, especially South-Asian literary discourses from the latter half of the last century. This problem has obvious socio-political connection. People migrate to foreign lands or territories due to several socio-political or personal needs. The incessant flow of human beings sometimes as indentured laborer or

marginal migrants, is a topic that has received much sympathetic literary attention in South-Asian diasporic literature. In the contemporary writings in diaspora the theme of cultural alienation, powerlessness, “Otherization” in the foreign lands and a desperate yearning for the homeland frequently recur and mark them with a melancholy tone if not a grimly pessimistic spirit. Since 1980’s, Indian novelists in diaspora like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhaty Roy, Jhumpa Lahari and others have brought the rootless people’s search for identity to the centre of literary attention. In their writings the problem of marginality has often being discussed against the perspective of identity crisis, struggle of restoration to root and the nostalgia for the homeland.

The subtle relation between space and identity is a complex issue in the life of the immigrants. In this article I would like to probe this problem as presented in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*. Idil Bozkurt in his doctoral dissertation “*Migration and hybridity: Stereoscopic vision in the novels of Rushdie, Mukherjee, and Ghosh*” writes in this context:

The interplay between space and identity acquires a complex nature in the case of migrants who have experienced dual (sometimes triple, quadruple) socialization. Although a migrant is an uprooted individual, his identity is not free of cultural imprints. We should keep in mind that identity formation is a process; identities are not ‘rooted’ once and for all. (Stereoscopic Vision and Hybridity: The Problem of the “New”, p.14)

As a social anthropologist Ghosh penetrates into conventional historical records and aims at extracting the complex relation of humanity and history. How powerfully the cataclysmic events of history affects the lives of the rootless individuals, becomes a major concern in Ghosh’s fictions. Through the lives of the poor indentured laborers, the workers, and the migrant women. Ghosh attempts to write fictionalized history beyond the conventional discourse of elitist historiography.

In his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1987), the issue of rootless migrancy or the problems of rootless marginals is dealt with intense human sympathy and thoughtful critical insight. This complex social and anthropological issue constitutes the crux of the story in *The Circle of Reason*. The theme of rootlessness or the crisis of identity is unfolded through the metaphor of journey which is central to the structural epicenter in the novel. The metaphor of quest or journey is a major diasporic concern and a recurring perspective in the fictions since 80s. A researcher of social anthropology, Ghosh views this problem in the larger dimension of the evolution of human society. The characters, places and incidents in his novels are presented through a wonderful juxtaposition and fusion of imaginary and real – local and the global.

The Circle of Reason records the journey of its protagonist Alu whose actual name is Nachiketa Bose, from a village (Lalpukur) to Calcutta, then to Mahe and finally to the Middle East – to an imaginary oil town Al-Ghazira. In fact, Alu’s wander across the subcontinent and the Middle East is a replica of the archetypal quest for the root. It is a realistic as well as a symbolic journey from darkness to light, from ignorance to illumination. Apart from Alu there are other dispossessed men and women in the novel who are also in quest of a stable identity and habitation. At one point in the novel this rootless wanderers are brought to a common platform from which their collective struggle begins.

Kavita Daiya in her essay on *The Circle of Reason and The Shadow Lines* writes: Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Circle of Reason* offers a grim exploration of the oppressions of migrancy, where reason and capital become metonymic, circulating forces in the world. Focusing on a motley group of migrants drawn from various parts of India on an imaginary land Al-Ghazira and then Algeria, the novel marks the search for meaningfulness of those whose lives are displaced by globalization, and whose very bodies bear the violent marks of this passage, this history. Professor Daiya approaches these questions of rootlessness and migrancy through the perspective of minoritization in the face of globalized society. Instead of looking into the problems of rootless migrancy as a representative metaphor of humanity in crisis, she ventures into the issue in the context with the difficulties of feminine migrancy.

She isolates the issue of female migration and marginalization from the general mass movement across the globe. She simultaneously relates the questions of feminine migration to the larger issue of class, race, colour and several other minor agencies. I have referred to Kavita Daiya’s article to substantiate my analytical focus on *The Circle of Reason* – the agency of rootless individuals and the displaced migrants. Therefore, Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason* projects a serious exploration of the oppressions of migrancy and home seeking individuals.

In the state of migrancy and search for new root/identity, an individual or a group find themselves caught in a dichotomy between the lost world and the world they are heading. It is not only a transitional phase of historical or physical trauma but also a kind of psychosomatic torment. They neither can return to their root, nor completely delete from their memory, their cultural imprints which they have left behind. Idil Bozkurt writes –

However, rather than replacing the old identity with the new, the migrant experiences the coexistences of the old self and the new self. It is as difficult for the migrant to return back to his/her “roots/origins” once the change is initiated as it is to be totally assimilated to the point that s/he actually becomes Other. (Migration and hybridity: Stereoscopic vision in the novels of Rushdie, Mukherjee, and Ghosh writes in this context p.15).

The problem of the rootless or the migrants remains Ghosh's central concern from the very beginning of the novel. Before focusing on the story of Alu, the rootless protagonist of the novel, Ghosh's own discussion on the problem of Indian migrants to Canada can be recalled. It is a part of a larger diasporic consciousness to the problems of alienation and rootlessness in foreign lands.

Balaram Bose, Alu's uncle and the worshiper of science was born in 1914, a crucial year in the annals of world history. This year the First World War broke out and entire Europe was swept by the whirlwind of hostility among nations. Ghosh instead of focusing on the cataclysmic nature of World War I, refers to a problem in the history of South Asian immigration to Canada and other countries. The Indian immigrants to Canada encountered a problem as the government of Canada denounced eight thousand Indian immigrants to be illegal infiltrators and declares them as illegitimate. Several charges of militant activities were brought against them and their condition was miserable as that of dispossessed refugees. Ghosh writes:

All that Balaram knew was that he was born in 1914....It was a difficult year to choose from, for Reason was embattled that year. Balaram 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 Francisco, 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. (The Circle Of Reason,P.41)

Let us go back to the rootless condition of the protagonist Alu(Nachiketa Bose) who starts his journey from the village Lalpukur after the massacre of carbolic acid in the village, and after being dispossessed from Balaram's house. He becomes a hopeless wanderer, desperately in search of a home and a stable identity. As a rootless wanderer he moves from place to place first to Calcutta then to several cities of South India and finally reaches Mahe. According to Bhudeb Roy's allegation Alu was suspected to be a notorious criminal and was desperately chased by police, particularly by Joity Das the inspector. Alu undergoes an arduous journey to evade the arrest. From Mahe –the coastal town in the South Western part of the subcontinent, Alu finally moves to the imaginary oil town Al-Ghazira. The chapters titled 'going west' and 'becalmed'are central to the book and to the metaphor of diasporic drive. Like other rootless figures in Ghosh's fictions, migration to foreign lands apparently seems to

be a passport to haven and a respite from the socio-economic oppression and cultural deprivation in the homeland. But migration in quest for identity brings down fresh hazards to their lives.

As Alu sets out in search of new root, his apparent antagonist Jyoti Das also sets out for the West to arrest the suspect. With the arrest warrant Jyoti Das reaches Mahe after 3 days of wearisome journey by train. Alu's travel also becomes rigorous and tormenting because of the want of money and shelter and the increasing boils on his legs. While he was in Calcutta, Gopal, one of Balaram's friends offered him eight thousand rupees that was given to his custody by Balaram. This amount enabled Alu to start for the West and finally to become a boarder in the boat *Marriamma*, ready to set sail for Al-Ghazira. –

The bundle was thrust into Alu's hands. Alu opened it and found the few clothes Gopal had bought him, Gopal's own copy of the Life of Pasteur and 8,000 rupees. Gopal smiled in embarrassment. Your uncle had left it with me, to invest. It's yours now. Alu looked at him and Gopal looked away. But Alu didn't argue. He bent down and touched Gopal's feet. Gopal hugged him once, blindly, and then he was gone, back to the flat in Hazra Road, to send his wife away and wait for the police alone. (The Circle of Reason, P.168-169)

The search for Alu by the police at Mahe ends in utter despair as inspector Dubey learnt from the prisoner that their suspect had narrowly escaped the arrest and now a boarder in a boat all ready set sail for Al-Ghazira. The news came as a bolt from the blue to inspector Das and Dubey who was strolling in anger, but the former was calm:

Looking straight into the prisoner's eyes, he laid the tip of his cane on the bridge of his nose. Come on, where is he now?...He's on a boat for al-Ghazira, the prisoner said in halting Hindi. Mariamma. It left two days ago....In his disappointment Dubey smashed his cane on the floor, so hard that it splintered and broke. Das patted him on the back: Never mind, you'll get your report anyway." (Ghosh.p.175)

The next chapter titled 'becalmed' is the symbolically focal point in the text. Here Ghosh introduces us with the boat 'Mariamma' carrying a number of migrants from different parts of India. They are going to Al-Ghazira with different purpose at hand. Some are in search of a prosperous future in the Middle East, while some others have different motives. They have their different social backgrounds and marks of individual cultural roots. The composite group of Migrants constitutes a fresh community in the boat based on solidarity, fellow feeling and harmony. Ghosh is deft in describing these migrants with their individual traits of characters and interaction with fellow migrants. This description pre-figures the journey of the Girmitias in the Ibis in his recent novel *The Sea of Poppies*(2008). There too the migrants come from cross sections of the society and are all in the same boat bound for Mauritius.

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 pregnant. While describing the state of migrancy, Ghosh is aware of its hazards. Illegal immigration creates a problem for not only the immigrants but also to the socio-political setup of the country they are about to settle in. 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.

In the chapter 'becalmed' Ghosh introduces us to the rootless individuals who are out into the sea for Al-Gahzira in a state of oscillation between hope and despair, fear and confidence, certainty and uncertainty. Ghosh's story telling ability is at its pinnacle while the principle characters are introduced in a state of mutual interaction. Among the boarders there were two male migrants apart from Alu – Rakesh and Professor Samuel. They had developed a mutually cordial relation among themselves. In this small boat they had managed to accommodate themselves with much trouble but with little dissatisfaction. Ghosh writes :

Alu and the two other male passengers, Rakesh and Professor Samuel, had found themselves a place to sleep not far from the bucket, in the narrow space that was shielded from the wind by the cabin. There they had erected a rainshelter, a sheet of tarpaulin which was harnessed to the cabin at one end and to the deck-rails at the other.”(p.182)

The women migrants under the supervision of Zindi were accommodated inside the cabin. Hazards of venturing out into the sea on a boat were no less frightening and accompanied them from the second day of their journey. At first there was a disturbance in the engine, and the boat came to a sudden halt. Alu and the other male migrants were confused but it was overcome.

Alu squatted beside Hajji Musa: What's happened? Hajji Musa, in his perfunctory Hindi, scratching his skeletal ribs, answered: Don't know. Let's see. We'll have to let it cool before we do anything. (p.183)

In the boat there were a group of women migrants illegally being transported to Al-Gahzira to work as sex workers under Zindi's supervision whom they called Zindi didi. Zindi is an enterprising woman whose attitude towards these rootless women is somewhat ambiguous and ambivalent. She wants to employ them in her business on the one hand, and on the other, takes them to be her family members:

And, as for women, why, when I get to India I don't have to do anything. These women find me and come running. Take me, Zindi – no, me, Zindi-didi – don't take

her, she's got lice. They go on like that. But I don't take them all. I take only the good girls – clean, polite, hardworking. That's why I have to go to India myself to look... the whole of al-ghazira knows that Zindi's girls are reliable and hardworking...And so I get a little extra, too, not much. It's not a business; it's my family, my aila, my own house, and I look after them, aa the boys and girls, and no one's unhappy and they all love me. (p.194)

Satendra Kumar in his essay Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason : An Epitome of Human Suffering and quest for Identity*, comments: "Mariamma's migrant women's condition is the most illustrative of migrancy's paradox of opportunity and oppression, betterment and loss." (The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh: An Assessment, Om Prakash Dwivedi.p.19).

The male Migrants, particularly Professor Samuel is in a state of doubt as to whether these helpless women will be sold in the Middle East for high profit. Ghosh projects these women migrants into the centre of attention. They are driven out of home for sterility or for a failure in marriage and procreation. Among these women there is Karthamma who is pregnant and her labor pain starts on the boat. There is a tussle between Zindi and Karthamma as the later is unwilling to give birth to the baby without the proper birth rituals of her home land. At this point Ghosh sympathizes with this marginal woman Karthamma who is caught in the dilemma between her desire and compulsion:

She won't let the labor start. She's sitting on the floor and kicking and fighting. She's stuffed her hands into her womb, right in, up to her wrists. Maybe she's trying to kill it. (p1)

Kavita Daiya in her essay "No Home But in Memory": Migrants Bodies and Belongings, Globalization and Nationalism in *The Circle of Reason and The Shadow Lines* writes:

The different perspectives of both Zindi and Samuel together express the complexity of the different discourses in which the migrant woman is simultaneously situated and objectified. Concurrently a commodity, a laborer, a daughter, as a "prisoner," and a "slave," where does this female migrant stand in the celebratory discourse of migrancy as a celebrated site of newness, or migrancy as "a metaphor for all humanity"?" (Amitav Ghosh : critical perspectives edited by Brinda Bose. P.40)"

At last the Migrants reach Al-Ghazira and their renewed quest for root begins there. The migrants including Alu, Rakesh and Prof.Sammual settle in the household occupied by Zindi. Zindi employs most of them in fruitfully profitable occupations. Her attitude towards her members is at one time utilitarian at another familial. The events that take place afterwards and the problems that the migrants confront, complicate their quest for identity. Ghosh in focusing upon the unheeded episodes of history turns the table on Western hegemonic

discourse. His attempts at making the silent narrative eloquent bring to the core, the problem of marginal people ever oppressed and silenced by the conventional historiography. The living experiences of Zindi, Alu, Kulfi, Karthamma, Jivanbhi (A Gujarati merchant settled in his trade in Al-Ghagira) are all the product of Ghosh's fertile imagination rendered vibrant in the world of his fictions.

In dramatizing the complex working and reworking of postcolonial rationality in the context of diasporic drive, *The Circle of Reason* brings into the centre of its narrative, the quest of rootless marginals at home as well as in the foreign lands. Emigration and immigration across the Diaspora constitutes the motive force and determining factor in this novel. Ghosh in his anthropological exploration travels across the world with ceaseless enthusiasm and his novels in general, and *The Circle of Reason* in particular, remaps the world and reread history to highlight the subterranean episodes.

While discussing the problem of rootlessness and migration in *The Circle of Reason*, Shubha Tiwari in an illuminating article writes –

The Circle of Reason has both historical as well as mythological elements. Mythical references have been moulded to reflect contemporary conditions in a true new historicist fashion. The present literati seems obsessed with the idea of migration. Migration, diasporic feelings, rootless and a new kind of sensibility born out of these factors – these things are unique to our age. (Amitav Ghosh : A critical Study, edited by Shubha Tiwari. P.9)

There is a subtle difference between the migration in the past and the migration in the present complex era. Now a days' migration or the quest of the dispossessed people incorporates several other problems and complications such as alienation, loneliness, as well as socio-economic and political hazards. The individual migrant has to confront serious socio-psychic alienation. Sometimes he receives a strange response as a member of Otherized community in a foreign territory. This is the case with the protagonist of this novel Alu who at first is a stranger in Zindis pre-settled community and a helpless victim to the turn of fortune. Tiwari further writes in the same article :

Since the beginning of the human race, migration has been a major phenomena.... What is new, typical and unique of our age is loneliness and sense of vacuum that comes with individual migration or migration of comparatively smaller groups. Since time immemorial, the human race has been obsessed with ideas of belonging, heritage, clan, inheritance and native soil....Everyone is away from the roots – where have all the roots gone? (Tiwari, p.10)



The section describing the incidents of Al-Ghazira is replete with significant turns in the life of dispossessed migrants. Alu is buried under the debris of a massive building named Star which collapses all of a sudden while Alu was working inside along with other labourers. This creates confusion and terror among the members of Zindi's house. Some are apprehensive whether Alu is alive, while others express their conviction that no damage has been done to him. It is a huge sewing machine which prevents the debris from falling on Alu's head. Thus following a great commotion and tension Alu is rescued after a few days. In the midst of fragmented identity and scattered socio cultural life and community existence, the work of weaving remains a constant source of pattern and order. The sewing machine or weaving is an ever present metaphor in the story from the very beginning that suggests a sign of order and harmony in the midst of instability, confusion and disorder. Ghosh makes this metaphor powerful enough in order to provide a safe guard to the rootless individuals in their ceaseless quest for lost identity and stability. Robert Dixon in his review of the novel deals with the allegorical implication of this episode of Alu's burial along with its historical and mythical connotations. Dixon remarks as follows –

Alu's burial is symbolic of the breakdown of traditional set up of indigenous civilization of colonialization. It can be interpreted otherwise Alu, an individual with extraordinary gifts lost in the dilapidated building, symbolizes the modern man's confusion and loss of root in the complex labyrinth of modern global network. Same is true of Alu's companions including Rakesh who entered the collapsed building to rescue Alu. Robert Dixon comments: "they find themselves lost in the postmodern space of collapsed glass and concrete doom." This reminds us of Saleem Sinai in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* when he is lost in the Sundarbans. The action of the novel operates on more than one level – realistic, metaphorical, symbolical, colonial-cum-postcolonial, postmodernist.

In his attempt to emancipate history from western hegemonic discourse Ghosh takes the help of his knowledge of social anthropology, the flow of culture, civilization, trade and commerce across the Globe. Anshuman A. Mondal in his article "Allegories of Identity: 'postmodern' Anxiety and 'Postcolonial' Ambivalence in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land and The Shadow Lines*". (Journal of Commonwealth Literature 38, no. 3 (July 2003): 19-36) writes: Amitav Ghosh, in his attempt to recover "lost" and "parallel" histories from the silences of a totalizing European historiography, "those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave on the world," shares some affiliations with poststructuralist theory in so far as the theoretical orientation of his differential history problematizes the "givenness" of history, and the political and cultural valuations that arise from it. This necessarily involves a critique of historicism since his aim is to subvert the teleological logic of such master narratives in which Europe's 'Others' – the colonized, the subaltern, the Slave – were silenced and their histories integrated into the universalist grand narrative of European History. The subterranean currents of history, and the life of ordinary individuals are

instrumental for Ghosh in his recuperating and restructuring the narrative. G J V Prasad in his essay “Re-Writing the World: The Circle of Reason” remarks –

Ghosh thus explores historical moments and constructions in order to give form, and thus content, to his own narrative impulses and gives us complex pictures of interpenetrating lives of individuals, the interaction between their individual narratives (Brinda Bose.p.58).

This fascinating quest of the author as well as the quest for identity of his protagonist is often set against the complex evolutionary process of nation building. Nationalism is both a comprehensive and confusing concept which includes both the breaking and rebuilding of a nation against the binary of colonialism/post colonialism. The individual narratives of disempowered people thus operate as the genuine catalyst in Ghosh’s project of remapping the world beyond the arbitrary shadow lines, and revisiting history outside the claustrophobia of Eurocentricism. In the little narratives of Alu, Zindi in *The Circle of Reason*, Tridiv and the Grandmother in *The Shadow lines*, Doli, Uma and Rajkumar in *The Glass place*, Deeti and Kalua in the *Sea of Poppies*. These apparently insignificant stories are adroitly handled by the author and strewn together to weave the garland of humanity made vibrant through interaction with the broader canvas of history.

Alu take different pattern for identity and human dignity in keeping with the change of locale and geographical areas. His odyssey starts from Lalpukur and enters a new phase in Al-Ghazira. There as a member of Zindi’s emigrant family he has to depend on other’s will. After his burial under the debris and his subsequent rescue, he is a changed man, utterly transformed by the sufferings and meaninglessness of a chaotic and arbitrary turn of events. In keeping with the metaphor of his journey from innocence to experience, he passes the phase of Sattva(purity) to Rajas(activity) and finally to Tamas(darkness).

In the third stage the quest takes a decisive and positive turn which puts Alu on the right path to self-discovery. In the concluding section of the novel we see Alu in the midst of a small group of Indian emigrants or fortune hunters like Dr. Mrs. Verma, Dr. Mishra and some others. We also see Jyoti Das Alu’s antagonist in the group. They are now in a little town El-Qued in the desert Sahara. Jyoti Das’s chase after Alu no longer holds good and the antagonists are discovered face to face pining for the love of a single woman Kulfi. Zindi-al-Tiffaha the former mistress of the fortune hunters are also with them. kulfi dies of a sudden heart attack due to intense psycho-physical hazards that she encountered during the preparation for the staging of a play *Chitrangada*.

The novel ends on a note of renewed hope for the displaced marginals including the protagonist who are out for a new territory or for a journey back home/to the severed native land where they expect to find a better means of existence free from oppression, tyranny,

socio-political stress and strain. With a refreshed enthusiasm Alu, Zindi along with the child of Karthamma(Boss) resume their quest for more stable roots, 'to fresh wood and pastures new'.

Alu and Zindi, with Boss in her arms, walked up through the steep, narrow streets of the Medina to the high battlements of the Kasbah. From there they could see the ferry clearly, cutting swiftly across the Straits, towards the Mediterranean. But Boss was looking the other way, towards the Atlantic, and soon they were looking there, too, scanning the waters. They saw nothing except sleepy, crawling oil-tankers. So, drowsily warmed by the clear sunlight, they settled down to wait for Virat Singh and the ship that was to carry them home.

Hope is the beginning. (Ghosh, p.457)

The end of the novel metaphorises the complete unfolding of a raga (of song) that completes the blossoming of a flower with the petals opening one after the other. Ghosh's novels unlike Rushdie's ends on a note of renewal of hope and resurgence of complex evolutionary process. It is the celebration of humanity and potentiality that Ghosh establishes in the midst of local, national as well as global disaster. Thus *The Circle of Reason* is Amitav Ghosh's first yet stunningly vibrant response to the problem of rediscovering identity and the issue of alienation of rootless migrants in the perspective of emerging new Indo-Anglican novels envisioning the promise of a modern and renaissance India.

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