

**Migrancy, Displacement and the Quest:
A Transnational
Approach to Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason***

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The themes of displacement, rootlessness, alienation and identity crisis or identity construction have been a recurring issue for literary discussion and debate in the contemporary postcolonial literature, specifically in South-Asian diasporic literature. The problem of such issues is reciprocally related to socio-political and economic connection. The incessant flow of common people's migration to foreign lands and continents as indentured labourer or marginalised migrants due to socio-political, economic and personal needs has always been accepted with sympathetic outlook. The writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Rohinson Mistry, Jumpa Lahiri and others have dealt with these problematic issues with polite, critical and penetrative insight in their texts to draw the literary attention. In this article, I would like to discuss these diasporic and transnational problems as revealed in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* with Ghosh's capability of admixing of humanity and history and how the powerful historical events affect the lives of distressed, marginalised and rootless individuals in a framework of fictionalised history beyond the conventional discourse of elitist historiography.

The Circle of Reason records the journey of distressed migrants within the subcontinents and then onwards, not only restricted to the multicultural grounds of the west, but also to the oil-rich Middle East. In this novel, the first group of migrants appears in Lalpukur, where the protagonist of the novel, Alu, the eight year old boy, comes to live with his uncle Balaram and aunt Mayadebi. These migrations are exhilarated by a double displacement, the first in the aftermath of the partition of 1947, and second during the Bangladesh war of 1971:

Vomited out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away, they had no longer left. Their only passion was memory; a longing for a land where the green was the greener, the rice whiter, the fish bigger than boats; where the rivers' names sang like Megh Malhar on a rainy day—the Meghna, the Dholeswari, the Kirtinosh, the Shitolokhka, the majestic Arialkha, wider than the horizon. (Ghosh 59)

This memory that traverses boundaries and dwells in nostalgia is a memory of 'their native soil'; it is a longing for a place that could have been home. The intensity of their longing is ignited by a depiction of the horror of the material conditions which the refugees encounter.

He saw people eating surrounded by their children's shit; the tin roofs were black with flies; in the lanes rats would't yield to human feet; there were no drains and no clean water, and the air was stagnant with germs, pregnant with every known disease. (Ghosh 61)

Home remains as a site, an ineffaceable present and impossible return for many of the subaltern characters in this novel. *The Circle of Reason* traces the journey of the protagonist Alu whose real name is Nochiketa Bose, from the village, Lalpukur to Calcutta, then to Mahe and then to the Middle East and finally to West, especially Algeria. Alu's wander throughout the subcontinent and the Middle East is a kind of eternal quest for identity and habitation that always

remains as a mirage to him and the other marginal migrants. It is a very symbolic and realistic journey from dark to light and from ignorance to knowledge that sometimes relates the Picaresque trend and Bildungsroman trend. The rootless wanderers are brought together in this novel to exemplify their collective struggle on the same platform for a solid ground of their livelihood. In the world of migrancy, alienation and quest, an individual or a group is always put in a dichotomy between the lost world and the new and strange world which they have to accept without any alternative. In such state, they not only experience the historical and physical trauma but also a kind of psychosomatic torment. They can neither hark back themselves to their own root and wipe out from their mind nor can accept the new world properly. They are sometimes called 'nowhere beings'. Idil Bozkurt writes—

However, rather than replacing the old identity with the new, the migrants 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 she/he actually becomes Other. (15)

Balaram Bose, Alu's uncle, portrayed as an eccentric visionary who is obsessed with phrenology and Louis Pasteur, was born in 1914, a very crucial year when the First World War broke out and the whole Europe was blown by the gust of the hostile attitude of the nations. Ghosh instead of emphasising on topsiturdydom condition of the First World War, refers to the problems of South Asian immigration to Canada and other countries. The Indian immigrants had to face several problems as the government of Canada considered the eight thousand immigrants to be illegal intruders throwing them in the vortex of pain and suffering. Ghosh writes:

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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. (41)

Let us go back to the deplorable condition of the protagonist Alu who, having faced several problems starts his journey from his native Lalpukur due to the massacre of carbolic acid and ultimately his transformation into a suspected terrorist according to Bhudeb Roy's allegation against Alu as a notorious criminal, chased by the police inspector Jyoti Das. Alu is forced to leave his own native place in Lalpukur and move on a journey of migration and escape aboard a ship called *Miriamma* with a motley crew and passengers. These marginal immigrants, now Alu's companions, follow a course of journey, guided by the demands of the unskilled and semiskilled labourers in the Middle East to get economic solidarity following the rise of oil price in 1973, a movement that marked the shift from the modern to what David Harvey calls 'cultural turn to postmodernism', from the Fordist-Keynesian to 'new system of production and marketing, characterised by more flexible labour processes and markets'. The rise of oil prices in the rich countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) created a kind of economic

network in making migration necessary and securing economical benefits. Lal, the Indian police officer, posted in Al Ghazira while searching for Indian suspected terrorists warns not to reveal much information to the Middle East Authorities:

Nothing, Lal said drily. There is nothing we can do. It's very tricky situation. We can't alert the Ghaziri authorities. It would be a disaster if they found out that Indians are involved in this business. They'd probably stop giving visas to Indian workers.....That would mean a drop in remittances and therefore in the foreign exchange reserves back home and so forth. (Ghosh 285)

The chapters titled 'going west' and 'becalmed' are very central to the text and to the journey metaphor of diasporic sensibility. Migration to foreign lands like other distressed migrants in Ghosh' fictions, seems to be a passport to heaven apparently and an escape from the socio-economic oppression and cultural deprivation in their native land. But the quest for identity disturbs the saneness of their settled mentality and brings forth new hazards to their lives. Alu, being chased by Jyoti Das, the Assistant Commissioner of Police, sets out a new and fresh journey in quest of new root or identity by throwing away his all past towards West. He undergoes a rigorous, tiresome and tormenting journey due to the lack of money and proper shelter. The amount, eight thousand rupees which he got from Gopal, one of Balaram's friends enabled him to begin journey to the West and ultimately to become a boarder in the boat *Marriamma* which is ready to 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. (Ghosh 168-169)

The chapter entitled 'becalmed' is typically a central issue in this novel. Here, Ghosh has quite brilliantly delineated the boat 'Marriamma' that carries variegated migrants from different corners of India to Al-Ghazira. The migrants with different purposes and motives are gathered together from different kinds of social, cultural and economical backgrounds in this boat without any discrimination on the ground of same feeling, emotion and tenacity. The description of the boat pre-figures the journey of Girmittias in the Ibis in his later novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Among the passengers in the boat 'Marriamma' are a professor, Samuel, a travelling salesman and a madam and her girls, one of whom is pregnant. Here, Ghosh has hinted at the problem of illegal immigration that creates a problem not only for the immigrants but also to the socio-political setup of the country where they are about to settle in and of the risks endured by the immigrants in quest of their prosperous future. Ghosh has presented in this chapter the well contrasted ideas such as hope and despair, joy and fear and certainty and uncertainty. Ghosh's narrative ability attains its achme point through the presentation of the characters in their mutual interaction. Apart from Alu, other two male characters namely Rakesh and Professor Samuel develop their mutual relation by sharing their points of view.

On the other hand, Ghosh, quite politely and sympathetically, has delineated the deplorable plight of the women migrants through their intentional and unintentional journey to the unknown lands with transnational experience. The group of women who are the sex workers under the supervision of Zindi, treated by them as Zindi didi, are moved to Al-Ghazira to find them economically secured. Zindi's attitude towards them is sometimes ambiguous and ambivalent because on one hand, she engages them in her business and on the other, she considers them to be her family members. We read:

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, and 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. (Ghosh 194)

Professor Samuel, a male migrant is doubtful regarding these women who are driven out of their house for their sterility or failure in marriage and procreation, whether they will be sold or not in Middle East for great benefit. Karthamma, a woman migrant suffers from her birth pain on the boat; refuses to give birth without the proper birth rituals which she assumes will guarantee a better and safe life for her unborn son with legal life and citizenship. In this state, Ghosh with a sympathetic attitude has portrayed her who is in dilemma between 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." (190)

Ultimately all the migrants with their several ups and down in the course of their journey reach the middle East country Al-Ghazira in quest of a new meaning of their lives. But so many problems which the migrants face put them in crucial situation that make their trial to get root impossible. Al-Ghazira is beset with several hazards that create the significant turns in their lives. Primarily Alu is buried under the debris of massive building named Star which breaks down while Alu and other labourers were working in side this building. This incident creates a confusion and fear in the minds of the members in Zindi's house. At last Alu was rescued by a huge sewing machine after a few days. In the midst of the doubtful identity and socio-

cultural life, the work of weaving remains a constant source of pattern and order. Ghosh has presented this machine metaphor as a safety-valve to the distorted migrants in quest of their identity and stability. Robert Dixon in his review of the novel deals with the allegorical implication of the episode of Alu's burial 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, and postmodernist.

Ghosh has projected the concept 'identity crisis' and its quest in the backdrop of the critical process of nation building. The concept 'Nationalism' is both comprehensive and confusing with the process of breaking and rebuilding against the binary of colonialism and postcolonialism. Through the presentation of the individual narratives of the marginalised and disempowered beings, Ghosh goes beyond the arbitrary of shadow lines and reinterprete the history beyond the periphery of Eurocentrism. Apart from Alu, Ghosh has put some leading characters of his other novels such as Tridiv and Tha'mma in *The Shadow Lines*, Rajkumar ,Doli and Uma in *The Glass Palace* and Deeti and Kalua in *Sea of Poppies* in the territory of his project.

At last, the course of journey of the migrants take them away to Al-Ghazira to Algeria, northern part of Africa where Alu is put on the right track to self discovery. Jyoti das along with Alu becomes a global traveller. At the ending portion of the novel, we find Alu along

with the others such as Dr. Mrs. Verma, Jyoti Das and Kulfi in search of a new zest of life shedding off all kinds of suspects and enmity. Tragedy comes when Kulfi dies of a sudden heart attack due to immense psycho-physical tormentation which she had to face during the time of preparing the stage programme of a play *Chitrangada*. The novel ends with a note of hope and new zest of life for the rootless and marginalised migrants who escape for a new ground and now about to come back homeland to get a better means free from strangeness, oppression and socio-political and cultural stain. With a profound optimistic zeal, Alu along with Zindi and Boss, son of Karthamma retain their quest for new vistas, '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 457)

Thus, *The Circle of Reason* is a celebration of humanity and potentiality in the midst of local, national as well as global disaster. It is a vibrant response of reconstructing identity and the themes of rootlessness, alienation, migrancy and displacement in the perspectives of new emerging Indo-Anglican novels bearing the stamp of modern and Renaissance India.

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