

## INADEQUACY OF HUMAN BELIEF IN AMITAV GHOSH'S 'THE CIRCLE OF REASON'

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Amitav Ghosh is a novelist of immense repute. He appeals to our universal instincts. His novels, like the plays of Shakespeare, like the novels of George Orwell, E.M.Forster deal with the dissonance in the human psyche, with good and evil, with such primal things as love, hate, animosity, vengeance, violence, age old family feud, the desire for union, the need for separation, the quest for normalcy, the need for renunciation, with something incalculable in each one of us which may at any moment rise to the surface and disturb our normal balance, with mysteries, uncertainties, complexities of human existence and relationship. Naturally, he is for many of us what E.M.Forster was for Lionel Trilling,

“the novelist who can be read again and again and who after each reading gives what few writers can give us, the sensation of having learned something.”(*E.M.Forster: A Study*, 1943)

It gives me special satisfaction to talk about Amitav Ghosh here, for a consideration of his novels is useful in the troubled world in which we find ourselves today, in the midst of cruelty and strife and hatred and madness that surround us on every hand.

Nationalism, political freedom and international relations are the major themes of Amitav Ghosh's first two novels, *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*. In *The Circle of Reason*(1986), his highly regarded debut as a novelist, Amitav Ghosh talks about unity and diversity, in weaving which brought welcome changes all over the world, in history which “is hope as well as despair”-in a living belief that the world of greed and destruction may be transformed by Reason, that Reason may make it one and bless it with diversity. We can't cease from weaving- weaving which is Reason, which makes the world mad and makes it human. The central character of the novel, Alu, is a weaver. Ghosh talks about loom as something which has the ability to unite people. Loom appears not only as an instrument but also as an idea behind history. Loom united human race at times; it divided at others; it brought victories to some, defeat to others.

“Man at the loom is the finest example of Mechanical man; a creature who makes his own world as no other can, with his mind. The machine is man's curse and his salvation, and no machine has created man as such as the loom. It has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognises no continents and countries. It has tied the world together with its bloody ironies from the beginning of human time.” (p.55)

The novel is divided into three parts –Satwa (Reason), Rajas (Passion) and Tamas (Death) and tells three stories. The first part deals with the story of Balaram, a rationalist, influenced by the life of Louis Pasteur. He is more interested in treating people as objects of

observation rather than getting involved with them. His obsession with the science of phrenology takes his whims to extremes and makes him self-destructive. Alu, his nephew is the only one to survive in the family when his house gets blown up because of his feud with Bhudeb Roy, a local politician. The second part of the novel tells the tale of Zindi, a worldly, practical and zestful trader who tries to bring together the community of Indians in the Middle East. The third part is the story of Mrs. Verma, an Indian doctor living in Algeria, who tries her hand at creating Indian model of community life in the Saharan desert. All the three parts of the novel are linked. Alu is seen in all the three parts, first as the nephew of Balaram, second as a weaver in Al Ghazira and third as a person running away from the police for a crime not committed or unknown.

Ghosh believes in order, harmony, in unity of the world- not in its division into continents and countries. He lays stress on “connection”. It is connection with people and places which bring positive changes in the life of an individual. He loves to see individuals rising and prospering through connections. The world can become a better place to live when we start thinking of changing individuals into a better human being.

“Why do we always think of changing the world and never of changing people? Surely, surely, if we succeed in making even one person, just one, ask of himself how can I be a better, cleaner human being, we will have changed the world; changed it in the best of possible ways.” (p.104)

The novel also exhibits Amitav Ghosh’s annoyance with the Indian culture when it tries to work on divisive and discordant lines. Mrs. Verma wishes to make the local people in Algeria know and understand Indian culture and literature through a stage performance on Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘Chitrangada’. Her efforts are commendable but the questions which keep dovetailing in analytical minds are: Do we only need to exhibit our rich culture, talk about our literature in a foreign land? Is it not important that we show to the world the real picture of the country? Dr. Mishra, one of the characters in the novel says,

“Why don’t we give them a more realistic picture of ‘our culture’? Why don’t we show them how all those fancily dressed-up brides are doused with kerosene and roasted alive when they can’t give their grooms enough dowry? Why don’t we show them how rich landlords massacre Untouchables and raze their villages to the ground every second day? Or how Muslims are regularly chopped into little bits by Hindu fanatics? Or maybe we could just have a few nice color pictures of police atrocities? That’s what ‘our culture’ really is, isn’t it Verma? Why should we be ashamed of it?” (pp. 379-80)

Amitav Ghosh believes in building a new rational world. It is possible only when we start working on positive lines and start doing things with whatever we have. At the end of the novel, we Alu and Zindi leaving the Saharan desert in search of newer horizons, unformed hopes and ideas. Hope is their only asset. The sermons of profane rationalism that nurtured Alu gets blown up and consigned to the flames. He was forced to live a life on the run from his own native land, and now he finds himself free to return and make a new beginning. But it is clear that making a new beginning is not going to be easy for him, he will have to work with the fragments he has. As one character in the novel says,

“Nothing’s whole any more. If we wait for everything to be right again, we’ll wait forever while the world falls apart. The only hope is to make do with what we’ve got.” (pp. 416-17)

We see that Amitav Ghosh commits himself to the whole world of nationalism or internationalism. He neither defends separation or the habit of drawing lines nor defends it openly or completely. His position appears to be that of a realist or agnostic and he takes this position chiefly because of the complexity of human nature or situation, because of the inadequacy of human belief or conviction. Human nature is a riddle, perhaps the greatest puzzle that God has created for man on this earth. In fact, no man can ever explain or justify any of his action. Amitav Ghosh states or describes human situations all around the globe as he sees them and instead of jumping to conclusion he leaves it to his readers to draw them. We also see him laying stress on the helplessness of man in a hostile world. He appears to be whispering in our ears:

‘There is a divinity that speaks our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.’  
(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene2)

Ghosh never fails to remind us that human thinking, human understanding is fallible. No man or woman can ever claim perfection about his or her thought and action. The greatest tragedy of man in this world is that he lacks the ability to understand what he does. We are perhaps, grievously mistaken, arrogant when we assume or take it for granted that we owe anybody his life. Our sufferings and troubles, Amitav Ghosh tells us have their routes in our arrogance.

Amitav Ghosh has the ‘negative capability’ of a true artist, the capacity mostly discernible in the works of Shakespeare and Keats. Obviously, he finds his sole wisdom in learning ‘mysteries, uncertainties and doubts.’ He is as much interested in ‘enchantment in lives’ as in the ‘tidy ordering of Euclidean space.’ The concept of separation or segregation, appeals to Amitav Ghosh exactly in the same way in which his commitment to the whole world of good and evil. Ghosh appears to have discovered for himself that love and hate for things and people spring eternal in the human breast.

#### **References:**

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