

THE MYSTIQUE OF MAGICAL REALISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S: 'THE CIRCLE OF REASON'

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Magic realism is an all-embracing term that is used to describe various contemporary works, yet a certain aura of mystique seems to surround it. More than anything else, it can be defined as “an attitude towards reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures” (Flores: p.113). Magical realism calls into question the structures of rationalism and reality that are used by dominant cultures to craft history. The mystique of magical realism is that it works to replace what is missing. While the term ‘magical realism’ in its modern sense first appeared in 1955, it was originally coined around 1925 by a German art critic named Franz Roh to refer to a painterly style known as ‘Naue Sachlichkeit’ or the ‘New Objectivity’. The theoretical implications of Roh’s ‘magical realism’ greatly influenced European and American literature. It was adopted during the 1940’s by Latin American authors who combined the theories of Roh and Bontempelli with French ‘surrealist’ concepts of the ‘marvelous’ and incorporated indigenous mythologies with traditional mimetic conventions. From the 1960’s to the present day, there has been a strong current of ‘magical realism’ within the general movement of post-modernism.

Magical realism is often considered an off-shoot of Post-modernism. There are several features such as metafiction, self-reflexiveness, eclecticism, erasure of boundaries, intertextuality, redundancy, parody and multiplicity which are typically attributed to post-modernism but they can also be used to describe literary magicalism. Much like post-modernism it tends to work against dichotomies such as ancient v/s modern in favor of pluralism. It thrives on being eternally in the present by distorting time and space. Moreover, both magical realism and post-modernism share the themes of displacement, disorientation and fragmentation along with post-colonial discourse in which jumps in time and focus cannot really be explained with scientific but rather with magical reasoning. Authors like Gunter Grass, Michael Turnier, Louis Ferron and Angela Carter are widely considered post-modernists but might “just as easily be categorized ...magic realists” (Wikipedia: p. 49).

Amitav Ghosh has been credited for successfully mastering the genre known as ‘magical realism’ which was largely developed in India by Salman Rushdie and in South America by Gabriel Gracia Marques. Ghosh is seen as “belonging to this international school of writing which successfully deals with the post-colonial ethos of the modern world without sacrificing the ancient histories of separate lands”(Anita Desai:149). Amitav Ghosh has used magical realism very discreetly in his first novel ‘The Circle of Reason’. He has fused fact and fiction perfectly with magical realism. In accordance with the tenets of magical realism which “presume that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and faith of the community, that s/he is historically

constructed and connected” he has reconceptualized society and history from a different perspective to formulate a fictionalized history (Zamora: 285).

In his book ‘German Art in the 20th Century’ Franz Roh presented the differences between realism and magical realism in the following manner:

REALISM MAGIC REALISM

History Myth/Legend
Mimetic Fantastic/Supplementation
Familiarization Defamiliarization
Empiricism/Logic Mysticism/Magic
Narration Meta-narration
Closure-ridden/reductive Open-end/Expansive
Naturalism Romanticism
Rationalization/Cause and Effect Imagination/Negative Capability

Roh suggested that this is how magical realism “turned daily life into eerie form” (Roh p.84). The present paper traces how Amitav Ghosh’s ‘The Circle of Reason’ inscribes what might be termed a magical real sensibility of the commonplace and wild coincidence.

Magical realism is a genre where magical or unreal elements play a natural part in an otherwise realistic environment. Although, it is most commonly used as a literary genre, it also applies to films and visual arts. Magical realism is popularly considered “a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains reliable tone of objective realistic report” (Oxford dictionary: 2008). ‘The Circle of Reason’ is noticeable for a fine blend of **fantasy and realism**. Alu is indisputably the main protagonist that holds the novel together. The extraordinary head of Alu is a matter of wonder for the villagers of Lalpukar. This head was “huge, several times too large for an eight-year-old and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps” (p.83). While everyone is busy comparing the head with other suitable objects and bring it in a perspective, it is Boloi-da who gives Alu his life-long name as well part of his identity, “No, it’s not like a rock at all. It’s an Alu, a potato, a huge freshly dug, bumpy potato. So, Alu he was named and Alu he was to remain” (p.3). On an allegorical plane Alu is someone rooted in soil and therefore in identity. But, as is visible by his wanderings, Alu seems only to satirize his name.

Ghosh describes the element of fantasy in Alu’s head that “big spectacle-shaped lump which covered a large part of the back and sides. His head was large enough to contain a multitude of organs and yet its boundaries were too shadowy to say which... Balaram knew a witch’s brew could be bubbling in that lump – Destructiveness perhaps, mixed with Amativeness or secrecy and peppered with Compiativeness or Acquisitiveness” (p.9).

The attribution of moral qualities to different parts of Alu’s head and their workability in the miraculous happenings in the novel are like the magician’s ‘ghetto’ in ‘Midnight’s Children’. The grotesque boils in Alu start appearing sometime after the death of Balaram. One night Alu showed Gopal “two boils the size of duck’s eggs; one on his leg and the other under his armpit... Gopal embraced Alu that night and laughed. Let them be, he said. They have nothing to do with you; it’s only Balaram trying to come back to the world” (p.155). These boils multiply till the body of Alu is covered with them. The boils represent and symbolize not only the spirit of

Balaram but also the cry for justice of the oppressed masses. However, these boils miraculously disappear at the end of the four days of meditation when Alu lies under the debris of the Star.

Magical Realism is the capacity to enrich our idea of what is real by incorporating all dimensions of imagination, particularly as expressed in magic, myth and religion. Amitav Ghosh's 'The Circle of Reason' abounds in **mythological elements**. He moulds mythical references to reflect contemporary conditions in a true new historicist fashion. Just as 'Ganesh' is the myth central to 'Midnight's Children' 'Nachiketa' is the myth central to 'The Circle of Reason'. Alu's real name is Nachiketa. In mythology, 'Nachiketa' is the boy who waits at Yama's doors in obedience to his father. Waiting at Yama's doors naturally means waiting at the door of death. He sincerely pleads to 'Yama' to give him divine knowledge and succeeds in getting knowledge about the true nature of 'Brahma' (Bramha gyan). Likewise, Nachiketa Bose (Alu) also waits at the door of death, when, in Al- Ghazira he is buried alive when a building collapses. Without food and water he does one thing and that is thinking. When he finally comes out like 'Nachiketa', he has a realization that "money is the enemy of mankind, for it travels on every man and woman silently preparing them for their defeat turning one against the other" (p.281).

Magical realistic plots characteristically employ **hybrid** planes of reality that take place in "inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, Western and indigenous" (Daniel: 130). They establish a deeper and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate. The present era witnessed a new hybrid school of global theory known as 'globalization' in which knowledge and information, goods and services move freely across the borders. 'The Circle of Reason' follows Indian characters from a Bengali village to an Egyptian town to an outpost in the Algerian Sahara. After learning weaving in 'Lalpukar' Alu travels across the Indian Ocean to the oil-rich town of Al-Ghazira. Reaching there, Alu resumes weaving which shows that the loom is common everywhere. It has tied the world together. Besides, Balaram is a perfect example of hybridity. The scientific reason with which Balaram is obsessed combines Hindu ideas of 'purity' and Western notions of 'cleanliness' with Louis Pasteur's 'micro-biology'. His vision of social progress through weaving suggests both Gandhiji's national sufficiency and a global multi-national economy in which technology "recognizes no continents and no countries" (p.57).

'The Circle of Reason' is characterized with a remarkable **fluidity of time**. Amitav Ghosh's fictional world is one of restless narrative motion. Ghosh is adept in making a conflation of time and space and of 'distinct times and distant places'. He treats national borders and conceptual boundaries as permeable fictions to be constantly transgressed. The novel is a journey from 'Sattva' to 'Rajas' to 'Tamas' –the three parts of the novel though the journey is lopsided because traditionally, the protagonist Alu should have gone from 'Tamas'(darkness) to 'Sattva'(purity). Amitav Ghosh freely mixes past, present and future in this novel. He describes one incident and if the incident links itself to any past happening, he immediately goes to that past happening. So, the whole fabric of the novel keeps floating, going forward and backward. He believes that since present is born out of past, why shouldn't one go back to past which a great reservoir of memories, dreams and desires is. In Al- Ghazira, Alu's charismatic socialism links the eradication of germs with the elimination of money. Reason and the past both circle back in the form of Balaram's favorite book 'The Life of Pasteur' which has also travelled from Bengal to Algeria.

'The Circle of reason' evinces Ghosh's strong fascination with **diasporic** consciousness and is obsessed with feelings of rootlessness and migration. Almost all the major characters are

travelers in diasporic exiles. There is nothing in this novel that can be called a home. Initially, located in a refuge village, the novel oscillates between Bangladesh and Calcutta and then reaches the Middle-East via Kerala. It culminates in Al-Ghazira which is a fictional desert with shifting sand dunes situated somewhere in Algeria.

Ghosh also provides several instances of ‘internal diaspora’. For instance, the people of Lalpukar had been “vomited out of their native soil” during the partition of India. Later on, the people are once again “dumped hundreds of miles away” due to Civil war which resulted in the formation of Bangladesh.

The Al- Ghazira section of the book offers fresh evidence of Ghosh’s titillation with a diasporic consciousness and the precarious lives lived by the migrant workers. Amitav Ghosh’s ‘The Circle of Reason’ is noticeable for the elements of **social realism** especially in the portrayal of the Middle East. In contrast to the utopian myth of a ‘New World’ of wealth and opportunity Ghosh provides a pessimistic description of the experiences of undocumented migrant workers in Al- Ghazira. This may be seen as an example of social realism, both because it is a detailed account of the activities of the working class people which are represented as being heroic and also because it broadly accords with research into labor conditions in the Gulf creating an impression of verisimilitude. In a scandalizing passage migrant workers, who have been shipped to Al-Ghazira are described as follows:

“ Those ghosts behind the fence were not men , they were tools- helpless, picked for their poverty... they were brought as weapons to divide the Ghaziris from themselves... to turn them into buffoons for the world to laugh at”(p.251).

The expectations of reaching an ‘Eldorado’ and rosy dreams of good life are brutally dashed by the exploitation, miserable condition and xenophobic abuse which are common conditions of migrant existence. It is epitomized by the example of Karthamma, a pregnant Keralan woman who is convinced that if she can get to Al Ghazira, her child will have “houses and cars and multi-storeyed buildings”(p.177). When her labor starts, she resists it with all her strength and between screams demands the papers that she believes will confer Ghaziri citizenship and rights on her baby. However, on arrival, the migrants find that the chimerical hopes of inexhaustible prosperity and opportunities in the oil rich Al-Ghazira are totally deceptive and unfounded. Work, there is much more scarce than the Gulf’s reputation suggests: “[t] here are hundreds, thousands of chhokren [boys] begging... begging for jobs” (p.180). Many of those who manage to find work suffer terrible misfortune. These undocumented workers are made to work in unhealthy and dangerous conditions. “The litany of calamities” (p.201) due to faulty equipment or material on the construction sites proves to be an affirmation of Peter. N .Woodward’s research into migrant labor in Saudi Arabia.

Magical realism is often considered ‘**politically charged**’ and contains an “implicit criticism of society, particularly the elite” (Lindstrom, N: p.194). It can be read as a political treatise which attempts to undermine the western originated ideology of binaries. Amitav Ghosh is never vary of making comments of politics and power equations within India. The first part of the novel is predicated on reason, the metaphor for India’s early experiment with scientific approach to all the ills plaguing the country. With the construction of dams and nuclear reactors, it suggested the birth of a nation cradled in Nehruvian rationalism, socialism and scientificism. The second part of the novel ‘Rajas: Passion’ shows India’s passion for socialism and egalitarianism. The premature growth of socialism as the panacea of all the ills of the country meets its demise in the third part of the novel titled ‘Tamas: Death’. While Saleem is a crumbling

figure of nation's allegory, Balaram is a victim of his own reasoning and scienticism and represents a sad figure of the vanishing tribe of the Nehruvian period.

But, Ghosh's focus is also on re-colonization and neo-colonization of the globe by multinational companies. The tools of Balaram for self-reliance are carbolic acid, loom and sewing machine which remind us of Gandhiji's 'Charkha'. Ghosh effectively shows how socialism and democracy have been betrayed in this land. At times, he is angered by the harm and insult given by the colonizers and yet, at other times he is unsparing in his attacks on hypocrisy and lack of sincerity of the colonized. At one point, Mrs. Verma shouts at Mishra: "Who sabotaged Lohia? Don't think we have forgotten- we have seen you wallowing filth... while high theory drips from your mouth, we have heard you shouting about the misery of the masses, while your fingers dip into their pockets" (p.380).

Even the mechanics of organizing political meetings is not spared. The politicians are not sincere, nor are they charismatic any longer. They hire workers and through them an audience is arranged. Bhudeb, in shameless political exhibitionism holds a meeting under the Banyan tree. His men have gathered people from the entire village. But Balaram, the man of reason is bent upon disrupting their meeting. Even without sufficient volunteers, he manages to disturb the meeting with buckets full of carbolic acid. On the other hand, Bhudeb's sons and henchmen hang his life-size poster on the tree. Ghosh here subtly portrays the coming 'advertising' culture of Indian politics. It also points towards feudalism within the so-called democratic set-up of the country.

Linda Hutcheon calls Amitav Ghosh's 'The Circle of Reason' "historiographical **metafiction**" (p.31). Metafiction attempts to blur the line between fiction and reality. It has no agenda and "its emphasis is on the creative process, the play of language and the freedom to oppose convention" (Ben Stoltzns: pp.165-166). In 'The Circle of Reason' Amitav Ghosh's language often assumes magical incantation: "A loom is a dictionary glossary thesaurus. Why? Words serve no purpose; nothing mechanical. No, it's because the weaver, in making clot, makes words too, and trespassing on the territory of the poets gives names to things the eye can't see. That is why the loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world's armies of pen welders" (p.74).

Magic Realism is indeed a way of showing reality more truly with the help of various magics of **metaphor**. 'The Circle of Reason' is indeed a story of metaphors. The characters are converted into possible metaphors. Their quest is for a specific structuring of their identity in the totality of their experience, however trivial or absurd it is. They succeed in their search through their creative abilities while the novelist himself realizes it through magic and irony and by diverting some of the story telling abilities to the characters. The metaphor of the loom tells a story as surely as the metaphor of the carbolic acid tells another. The use of carbolic acid by Balaram to disinfect Lalpukar is as much a classic instance as the use of Carbolic acid in place of Ganga jal on the dead body of Kulfi. Dr Mishra remarks "Carbolic acid has become holy water" (p.411).

In 'The Circle of Reason' **convention** is a post-modern way, fragmented, provisional and openly subjective. The collusion of orthodoxy and unorthodoxy in the last part of the novel results in a magical contortion of reality. The serious business of cremating Kulfi in the desert assumes mock-serious proportions when Dr Mishra says, "Poor Mrs. Bose... Didn't she know that she ought to have made a gift of cow to a Brahmin before dying? All she had to do was to call out for me; I've always wanted a cow... She'll be stuck on the banks of 'Vaitarni', with no cow to lead her across it into the underworld" (pp.407-8). Towards the end of the novel, Mrs.

Verma is shown using carbolic acid instead of Ganga Jal: “What does it matter whether it is Ganga Jal or carbolic acid? It is just a question of cleaning the place isn’t it? People thought something was clean once, now they think something else is clean. What difference does it make to the dead, Dr Mishra?”(p.411).The story of the book comes to an end when defying all efforts by Balaram and Alu, Kulfi eventually dies. Her death is the defeat of reason because the course of action doesn’t move along rational lines as the author says, “Without the germ, life would become impossible because death would be incomplete” (p. 396).

Though, the title of the novel seems to belie any magical content, the contradiction inherent in it cancels the rational in favor of the cyclical. Magical realism is indeed, an attitude on the part of the characters towards the world. They think that that they are moving in a straight line, but they are actually going round in that non-productive circle that life too mysteriously imposes on them. Surely, “if you can explain it, then it’s not magical realism” (Wikipedia).

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