

# **NEW DIRECTIONS IN POST COLONIAL LITERATURE**

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## 8. MOTIF'S RUNNING THROUGH AMITAV GHOSH NOVEL 'THE CIRCLE OF REASON'

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The first novel by Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason*, was published in 1986. It attracted some critical attention, including an endorsement from the influential critic and novelist Anthony Burgess. This work could be characterized as an episodic, picaresque novel in three parts (e.g. Mondal 2007, 7). The parts are linked by the protagonist, Alu, who flees the Indian authorities after being falsely accused of terrorist activity, the intelligence officer, Jyoti Das, who is trying to capture him and a book, *The Life of Pasteur*, by René Vallery-Radot. The general motif running through the novel is that of weaving as the method for creating connections by intertwining various discursive threads.

*The Circle of Reason* has a decidedly loose plot structure, but this is compensated for by an interlocking texture of recurring images and motifs, like for instance weaving and sewing machines, migrating birds, or the biography of Pasteur. The main metaphor of the narrative is weaving, which symbolizes the act of narrating or writing into existence stories and realities: So many words, so many things. On a loom a beam's name changes after every inch. Why? Every nail has a name, every twist of rope, every little eyelet, every twig of bamboo on the heddle. A loom is a dictionaryglossarythesaurus. Why? Words serve no purpose; nothing mechanical. No, it is because the weaver, in making cloth, 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-wielders (*The Circle of Reason* :74)

In another instance, the history of weaving is presented as the counter-history of Western history of scientific and technical

development and expansion (*The Circle of Reason* 57-8). The novel shows how colonial power structures and knowledge production strategies become reproduced and subverted when applied in colonial and post-colonial circumstances. It also features the ways in which subaltern people both escape the grip of the political logic of the modern state and fall prey to it. Further, the narrative brings to the fore the ways in which diasporic and migrant connections escape the same logic. In the end, the novel shows how Reason is made to abandon its hegemonic position in the name of practical everyday concerns in many-cultured human encounters comprising multiple customs and traditions. This happens through the dismantling of the discourses of modernist binary constructions (reason/religion, science/tradition, and so forth). I shall examine this process of the disintegration of linguistic totalities in the article on the novel (IV.1.)

Although the novel features many cities and villages from India to Africa, places as such have relatively little significance for the sections featuring oral representations, or stories that come through in Ghosh's novels. In one of his essays Ghosh comments on the place-connectedness of the Western novel genre and sets it against such Eastern epics as *The Thousand and One Nights*, which give more value to story-telling than place: "In these ways of storytelling, it is the story that gives places their meaning (Ghosh 1998b), he states and compares them with Joyce's Dublin or American regionalists like Faulkner, whose works would be inconceivable without their specific locations. It seems that although the novel as a genre always needs a location, in these times of constant and rapid changes of place the story is of equal relevance, or even more important. At least this is so in Ghosh's way of writing. In his novels the stories can be freely and fluently adapted to various local circumstances that his texts also need to describe to become narrated as novels. In this way, he juxtaposes the Western novel genre with other ways of story-telling (oral stories, poems etc.). And Ghosh's manner of giving weight to the settings of his novels is such that it emphasizes the connections, the relations

between places and their interconnectedness, not only the separate or distinct places themselves. His description of place/s, then, can be seen as a strategy for connecting two different ways of representation: the delineation of grand schemes and the depiction of the local and particular.

The goal of Ghosh seems to be to merge the place-dependent representative model of the novel with the story-dependent models of poems and various types of oral stories. This strategy makes the construction of many-sited novels easier: if a certain place does not dominate a narrative, it becomes possible to narrate for instance the journey of the originally Western scientific idea of purity (symbolized by Pasteur's discovery of germs, and the carbolic acid used against them in *The Circle of Reason*) from an Indian village to an Arabian oil-town and on to the Algerian Sahara. In Ghosh's novels, places are significant as the crossing-points of various socio-cultural discourses and historical trajectories, but no original, pure society or place from which these discourses spring can be found in his texts. If something appears to be original and pure (nation, race, religion, identity), the narrative will soon reveal that purity to be an illusion. Of course, the change in the position (or even definition) of place is related to the changing world order. In the contemporary world, places are increasingly inhabited by people from a myriad of national, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, all denominators which have lost much of their place-related definitive power.

In contrast with traditional archaeology, genealogy concentrates on particular events rather than world-embracing systems. In the novel, world-embracing systems come into being as the natural off-springs of connections between particular circumstances. But, like archaeology, genealogy remains detached from the individual human intentions expressed within those particular events. Therefore it does not idealize or vindicate anyone, which Foucault saw as an asset compared to more traditional historiography. In the novel, the numerous alternative versions of the same events (for instance the collapse of the shopping

centre, *The Star*) are narrated in a style which is characteristic of the discourse and narrator in question, but at no point does Ghosh prioritise any one of them. It can be said that in a way the narrative adopts a neutral position in relation to these various viewpoints by giving equal space to all of them. In *The Circle of Reason*, discourses interact in several functional circumstances: proponents of the discourses of science, religion, socialism, capitalism, tradition and modernity are described in the settings of an Indian refugee village, an ancient market area (the Souq), a modern oil-town and a village in the Algerian Sahara. And the narration is certainly not restricted to the internal developments of these various discourses. On the contrary, the borders between the discourses vanish and they seem to merge into one another creating new relational fabrics. *The Circle of Reason* are reminiscent of the connection between Man and nature and animals that is developed further in *The Hungry Tide* (2004). And the fact that the travelling in this first novel mainly happens within the colonies is, in addition to being reminiscent of the strategy adopted in *The Glass Palace* (2000), consistent with the thematics of ignoring the Oriental/Occidental polarisations, or the typical postcolonial theme of migrating between the colonies and the West. An interest in science comes through quite prominently in all novels by Ghosh, but is most obviously thematised in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), as is the motif of a quest (Yoti Das tailing Alu in *The Circle of Reason*). Most of Ghosh's novels contain this theme of searching and finding/discovering something. But the most important and prominent theme in the writing of Ghosh is the transcending of the discursively constructed cultural differences, lines and borders for the good of common humanity and interaction.

To conclude, these differences may be conceived spatially, temporally or culturally, and they may be related to class, race or ethnicity, but the on-going mission of Ghosh seems to be to indicate their constructedness and to bring to our awareness other ways of constructing the world based on ethically informed connections.

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