

Magical Realism in Amitav Ghosh's The Circle of Reason

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Abstract:

Magical realism is often considered an outcome of Post-modernism. There are several features such as metafiction, erasure of boundaries, intertextuality, self-reflexiveness, eclecticism, 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 verses modern in favor of pluralism. It flourishes on being eternally in the present by distorting time and space. Moreover, both postmodernism and magical realism share the themes of displacement, fragmentation and disorientation along with postcolonial discourse in which jumps in time and focus cannot really be explained with scientific but

rather with magical reasoning. Amitav Ghosh has been credited for successfully mastering the genre known as 'magical realism' which was largely developed in India by Salman Rushdie. Amitav Ghosh has used magical realism very tactfully in his first novel 'The Circle of Reason'. He has combined fact and fiction rightly 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 he is historically constructed and connected. He has reconceptualized society and history from a different perception to formulate a fictionalized history.

Keywords: Post-modernism, metafiction, intertextuality, self-reflexiveness, eclecticism, redundancy, displacement.

Introduction:

Magical realism is a genre where magical elements play a natural part in an otherwise realistic environment. Magical realism is popularly considered a kind of modern fiction in which fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains reliable tone of objective realistic report. *The Circle of Reason* is noticeable for a fine mingles of fantasy and realism. Alu is 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.

Magical Realism is the capacity to enhance our idea of what is real by incorporating all dimensions of imagination, chiefly as expressed in myth, magic and religion. Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* abounds in mythological elements. He moulds mythical references to reflect contemporary situation in a true new historicist fashion. Just as 'Ganesh' is the myth central to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* 'Nachiketa' is the myth central to Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*. Alu's actual 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 honestly pray to 'Yama' to give him divine knowledge and succeeds in getting knowledge about the true nature of Brahma.

The Circle of Reason is characterized with an incredible 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. The novel is a journey from 'Sattva' to 'Rajas' to 'Tamas' –the three parts of the novel though the journey is lopsided because conventionally, the protagonist Alu should have gone from 'Tamas'(darkness) to 'Sattva'(purity). Ghosh freely blend past, present and future in this novel. He depicts one incident and if the incident links itself to any past happening, he instantly goes to that past happening. Therefore the whole structure of the novel keeps hanging, going forward and backward. He thinks that since present is born out of past, why shouldn't one go back to past which a great tank of dreams, memories and desires is.

The Circle of reason shows Ghosh's strong attraction with diasporic consciousness and is obsessed with feelings of migration and rootlessness. Almost all the chief characters are travelers in diasporic exiles. At first, located in a refuge village, the novel swings between Calcutta and Bangladesh 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's *The Circle of Reason* is noticeable for the elements of social realism particularly in the depiction of the Middle East. In contrast to the utopian myth of a 'New World' of wealth and opportunity Ghosh provides a pessimistic depiction of the experiences of undocumented migrant workers in Al- Ghazira. This 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 following:

“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).

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 scienticism. The second part of the novel ‘Rajas: Passion’ shows India’s passion for socialism and egalitarianism. The premature growth of socialism as the solution of all the ills of the country meets its demise in the third part of the novel titled ‘Tamas: Death’.

Amitav Ghosh’s focus is also on re-colonization and neo-colonization of the globe by multinational companies. The tools of Balaram for independence are carbolic acid, loom and sewing machine which remind us of Gandhiji’s *Charkha*. Ghosh successfully shows how democracy and socialism have been betrayed in this land. Even the mechanics of organizing political meetings is not spared. The politicians are not sincere, nor are they fascinating any longer. 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 describe the coming’ advertising’ culture of Indian politics. It also points towards feudalism within the so-called democratic set-up of the country. Linda Hutcheon comments’ Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*’ historiographical metafiction (p.31).

Magic Realism is definitely a way of showing reality more truly with the help of various magics of metaphor. *The Circle of Reason* is really 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 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 example 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 is the last part of the novel results in a magical expression of truth.

In short, Amitav Ghosh has rightly blended over the fact and fiction with magical realism. He compares with his magical realistic plots with postmodern, diasporic and with identical themes. Ghosh has effectively handed over the concept called ‘magical realism’ which



was largely developed in India by Salman Rushdie. Amitav Ghosh belongs to the international school of writing which he deals with the post-colonial traits of the modern era without omitting the ancient histories of all lands. Ghosh has successfully blended the fact and fiction with magical realism and with culture and tradition.

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