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### Myth And History In Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle Of Reason*

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#### Abstract

The Novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is a unique combination of myth and history. Myth mediates the immediate temporality. Myth offers itself to subversion to highlight contemporary socio-cultural history. However, the fictitious element, if not a dominant one plays equally an important role to present actuality. The text embodies the concept of new-historicism which defines the literary work as producing representations of reality into an imaginary object. According to this concept, the text is 'over determining' in nature and it is a product of certain signifying practices, whose source and referent is history itself. The literary work is the product of a certain Produced representation of reality into an imaginary Object. 'The textual real' is related to the historical reality, not as an imaginary transposition of it, but as the product of certain signifying practices, whose source and referent is, in the last instance history itself.

**Keywords:** myth, history, Upanishad, rationalism, post-modernism.

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#### 1. Introduction

In *The Circle of Reason*, history is present in its double absence, in the form of ideology. The ideological environment thus, portrayed in agreement, in its whole or parts with the historical environment; aligns with the sociological laws of human development. The Myth of Nachiketa plays a major role in mediating and communicating truth in a modernist sense, more so in an authentically modernist way. The subversion of science and religion towards the end ends up in a post-modern vein with its attendant ambivalence. As Bala Kothandaraman says, justifying the title:

The title of the novel 'Circle' has structural ramifications, not the least of which is subversion of its own ultimate concern-Reason (156).

According to her, the signifiers in the text are channelled through a powerfully charged discourse challenging valorization in terms of language and literary genre. Besides being an artistic artefact, the text is also an objective artefact. The post-modernist quality of text lies as mentioned earlier in the subversion of reason. The text, unlike the other two covered in this study, is more mimetic than

digenetic. It reverses the very reason, which it chooses to enthrone earlier, in as much as Louis Pasteur's book is thrown by Alu in the funeral pyre of Kulfi.

Anita Desai strongly feels that stories are not mere stylistic devices to recreate 'the engaging quality of the village-folk-story teller's pictorial representation, nor do they always produce Marquez a 'magical realism' (149).

The mimetic nature of the novel is obvious in the realistic note, on which the story runs, especially in the first part. However, the very fact of it being a post-modernist new novel catching the spirit of times cannot just be obliterated. As Shyamala Narayanan says:

The Circle of Reason reminds us of *Midnight's Children* in the use of language and realism, yet it is not as powerful because the outer and inner reality is at a low level (44).

The Circle of Reason prompts critics and reviewers into focusing on reason. The lead character of part one Balram Bose is committed to rationalism. He endeavours to inculcate and spread the practice of reason. The TLS reviewer captioned it as 'Rational Capers' (382) which is very suitable. In her critical analysis of the novel Shyamala Narayanan expresses her opinion:

The three gunas are almost irrelevant to the understanding of the novel; this is ultimately concerned only with reason, and its symbols, the loom, the sewing machine and the book (53).

Apart from the above three symbols, others are carbolic acid, money, queues, etc. are significant in their own way and lend added strength and stability to the text. The myth deployed for the purpose is the ancient Indian, Upanishad myth of Nachiketa, son of sage Uddalaka known for his perseverance. He makes persistent efforts to oblige the dictum of his father, who offers to give him to Lord Yama. Nachiketa impresses upon Lord Yama and receives enlightenment on the true nature of Brahman. He learns the real nature of the two realms and the primordial truth of Brahman. It is pertinent to present a brief outline of this myth.

Having incurred the displeasure of his father, Nachiketa becomes the subject of his father's wrath. He was cursed to undergo the mortification of nether world-yamaloka. Lord Yama, lord of righteousness, pleased with the sincere pleadings of Nachiketa conceded to the wish of imparting divine knowledge to him. Nachiketa learned Brahman from Lord Yama. Nachiketa won the heart of Yama with his commitment to the chosen cause. His sense of dedication coupled with disinterested action to achieve the desired end. Before long, Nachiketa rejects the offer of heavenly pleasures a boon about to be conferred on him by Lord Yama. The lord of death makes the offer in a bid to test the power of endurance and unerring ability of the young sage. Nachiketa understands the real nature of the soul or 'atman'. He learns that the invisible form of Brahman is in the visible form of 'Agni'. The real cause of worshipping Agni is to purify the surroundings.

Nachiketa Bose is the mythical pre-figuration of the mythical Nachiketa. The modern Nachiketa knows the truth to be present in scientific reasoning. He grows up under the guidance and tutelage of his uncle Balram Bose. Balram's obsession with reason results in the use of carbolic acid to cleanse the unhealthy surroundings. This is aimed at the eradication of environmental pollution. Carbolic acid is symbolic of cleansing unhealthy and undesirable practices in society. The older Bose constantly endeavours to maintain good hygienic conditions in the village and around. He starts the School of

Reason with a missionary zeal after resigning from the job of a school teacher, which he holds in the village school of the landlord Bhudeb Roy. Bose earned the displeasure of Roy by placing his nephew Alu as an apprentice at Roy's rival Shombhu Debnath, an expert weaver. Maya is Shombhu's daughter. Maya's affectionate gesture enables Alu to become the master craftsman. He imbibes the art and science of weaving swiftly. Shombhu himself educates Alu about the art and craft of weaving. The novel as stated in the beginning is mainly concerned with the concept of reason, thematically. The tussle is between rationality and irrationality. The tussle ensues between two sets of people implying the semis of good and evil. Balram, his friend Dantu and Gopal Day represent the forces of reason. The slick students of the city led by Maithili Charan Mishra stand for irrationality. What begins as an intellectual discourse in the first generation in their college days in the city of Calcutta ends in life's laboratory of the experiential world. In the second generation their children take up respective positions, that is to say, Alu, Mrs Verma remain on one side and Murali Charan Mishra on the other.

The scene of action shifts to al-ghazira, an imaginary gulf city. Alu, hunted by Jyothidas arrives in al-ghazira with the help of Zindi. His providential escape from the debris of a collapsed multistoried building 'star'; kulfi's death, Alu and Zindi returning homeward complete a full circle. Myth plays a major role thematically and structurally.

A myth introduced by a modern novelist into his work can pre-figure and hence anticipate the plot in many ways. The myth will offer the novelist a shorthand system of symbolic comment on modern events. 'Pre-figuration', is a useful word to describe this relationship, since it suggests coming before and hence offering a comparison with a whole configuration of action and figures (11).

Amitav Ghosh recreates the mythical character of Nachiketa with allegorical significance adding postmodern variation. Plot pre-figuration and character pre-figuration vie with each other to lend constitutive coherence and thus, impart stability to the novel. There is a conscious effort to reverse the role of the mythical or legendary story to comment upon the contemporary situation and thereby render a value judgment on the existing historical situations of contemporaneity, with the apt aid of irony. This leads to a paradoxical position between the character pre-figuration and the plot pre-figuration. These two are at variance with each other in the novel.

The mythical narrative as usual makes a continuous retelling of the story. In such a narrative strategy the constitutive elements are very much fixed. The characters are towed dimensional retaining the source of the Nachiketa myth. The text devises a specific modality to transform the entire story into a new being, reminiscent of the techniques of a new novel. Amitav Ghosh could successfully break down the barriers between the traditional tale and the modern version, making the myth more flexible to serve the fictional purpose. The story steadily moves away from the traditional form and treads entirely a new trajectory. It is not a mere juxtaposition of myth and fiction on one hand and myth and history on the other, but he could skillfully weave the two strands of myth and history into the fabric of the text and bind it with the common bond of fiction. Besides there being a mythological correspondence in theme and form, there is a psychologically evoked pattern of allegory with its accent on ethicality. That it has a constitutive distinction is very obvious. As Harry Slowchower points out, "This new function of the hero as a commentator of social order through his own acts makes him rebellious" (36). This technique of deliberately and consciously using myth to symbolise correspondences in contemporary literary texts is called pre-figuration. Amitav Ghosh adroitly introduces this technique into the making of the text.

Nachiketa is the personification of perseverance. Balram is the embodiment of reason. The relevance of their action to the modern Indian situation is all that matters. The twin ideas of reason and religion are debated and discussed to reach a full circle of reason. The story centres on the protagonist of the second part Nachikata Bose, who has a vegetable-like existence. The opening passage reads:

The boy had no sooner arrived, people said afterwards than Balram had run into the house to look for claws (TCR, 4).

Alu is an orphaned child, whose head is like a lumpy potato, hence, acquires the said nickname Balram and has the habit of measuring everybody's head with his claws or callipers. He is keenly interested in phrenology. He gauges the intelligence of a person or persons. The scene of action in Part-I is Lalpukur, which is an archetypal Bengali village. The novel owns post-modernist self-reflexivity. This is exemplified in the argument of Balram Bose and his friend Gopal when they are at a melodramatic movie. Balram holds the opinion:

What you heard is rhetoric, how can rhetoric be real or unreal? Rhetoric is a language flexing its muscles. You wouldn't understand. You have spent too many years reading novels about drawing rooms in a language whose history has destroyed its knowledge of its own body (TCR, 53).

The conversation goes back to the 1930s. When all of these were students of the Presidency College, Calcutta, the incident gives the necessary structural base for harnessing the theme of validity of reason as concluded in the second generation of their children towards the end. The plot pre-figuration is concretized and consolidated in a very systematic manner. One among them is Balram Bose the lead character of part-I, a school teacher who launches his tirade against unhealthy practices in society. Lie begins his "Battling against germs". This is reported in newspapers. His obsession with carbolic acid attracts the attention of the police, who in connivance with the local landlord dub him an extremist and try to eliminate him. His entire house gets engulfed with fire, on being shot by police, ignited by the drums of carbolic acid. The sacrifice of the senior Bose knows no parallel. Balram pays a heavy penalty for his courage of conviction to fight against germs which cause epidemics. A sloka from Kathopanishath used in the same context of Nachiketa myth bears upon the occasion:

Hanthache manyathe hanthum, Hathaschena manythe hatham, ubhouthouna vijanitho, Nayam hanthi nahanyathe (54).

The flames that engulfed the housemates of Balram, and the consequent perishing of all except Alu prove the Upanishad dictum to be true. The notion of 'I am slaying or being slayed' is wrong. "The soul will not kill, nor will it die, know thou that I am Athman" is its message. A similar message in verse is given by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in Bhagavadgita or song celestial but with some slight change in the first line. This message of God mentioned in this context is a part of the teaching of Lord Yama to the mythical Nachiketa, upon which Nachiketa renounces all pleasures of the temporal world and gets attached to the duty enjoined upon him. The enjoyment of worldly pleasures "Preyosoukhya" leads to bondage. The real pleasure lies in 'Sachidananda' or eternal bliss consciousness, which could be attained through "Shreyo Soukhya". This alone ensures salvation according to the enlightened teachings of Lord Yama to young Nachiketa. It looks as though Amitav Ghosh takes a cue from the myth of the past, in the matter of characterisation of Alu and Balram, who attain the state of 'Sthitha Pragnya' as enshrined in the song Divine.

There is an attempt at awakening the masses on rational lines. Social change is possible only when the mass of people realise and reap the rich benefits that flow from the twin realms of science and the scientific method. "Reason discovers itself through events and people" (38), says the novel. Gopal proposes to write the biography of Balram Bose, along with it the story of reason. "Reason rescues man from barbarity" (46) is the motto of rationalists. Gopal lends Balram a copy of Mrs. Devonshire's translation of Rene Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur*, which he secures from a shop on College Street.

Gopal and his friends start a Rationalist Society. The difference between the Science Association and their own society, Gopal tells rationalists, is that they do not consider science alone science something which is pursued in the seclusion of laboratories. The aim of rationalists is to apply the principles of rationality to every aspect of human life. The application of scientific principles to their own lives, to society, religion and to history is their sole purpose. This argument of rationalists develops them into a unique organisation.

The rationalists argue that there are certain very 'curious parallelisms' (46) between the ideas of ancient Hindu sages and modern science. It is the self-styled purveyors of religion, who exploit the credulity of the commoners and cheat them of their rightful earnings and rob them of their human rights. They degrade to the level of opening independent counters of each new god 'as a steady new source of income' denigrating the very concept of religion:

As for the real Brahma, he was without attributes, without form, nothing but an essence in everything and in nothing (TCR, 47).

The Universal Egg of Hindu mythology according to rationalists is a kind of Cosmic Neutron. They propose to begin all their meetings with prayers and salutations to the cosmic atom. The enlightenment of mythical Nachiketa at yamaloka referred to earlier runs parallel to such intellectual discourse. The novel discusses the social materiality of the situation at multiple levels. One of the significant aspects of the discourse is the kind of Education that should be imparted to the children is Education for life and education to rouse the social consciousness of the common people to raise their living standards and uplift them from the nightmarish depths of poverty, ignorance and disease. Balram, being a school teacher is best suited for the job and acts as the mouthpiece of the author when he says :

... won't be immoral. Children go to school for their glimpse into the life of the mind. If I thought that my teaching is nothing but a means of finding jobs, I'd stop teaching' tomorrow (TCR, 52).

## **2. Conclusion**

Education is aimed at answering everybody's everyday problems of life, particularly those of ordinary lot. This cannot be done merely through cogitations about the cosmic reality. Man does not live by bread alone. He needs several other forms of knowledge to resolve day-to-day problems in life. A man should invariably be able to understand the myriad aspects of life and aim at developing an all-around personality. The history of Louis Pasteur's life exemplifies this truth. Pasteur's father was a tanner. Pasteur had learnt science in the laboratory of life. He didn't come to science by thinking about the cosmic atom. He lived and worked in the experiential world of his father, who was a poor tanner. He left his studies of crystallography to take up the challenge of the brewers of France to discover what it was that made beer rot. This is how he came to discover the 'infinitesimally small germ' and the harm or good it causes to human life.

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