

# An Introspective Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

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*The Circle of Reason* (1986) by Amitav Ghosh charts the geographical and ideological journey of a young weaver, Alu, who is brought up in a small Bengal village. After being falsely accused of terrorist activity, he flees westwards to Calcutta, Goa, the fictional Gulf state of Al-Ghazira and finally to Algeria. Alu is clearly the main protagonist in the novel, although for large sections of the narrative he remains more a kind of silent centre, through which the various discursive threads in the narrative are woven together. Through the intermingling of these differing threads the novel also constitutes a generic mixture, containing features of the picaresque novel, magic realism, the novel of Ideas, the detective novel and Hindu epic.

As can be inferred from the title, the concept of reason as conceived in Western modernity is the central theme running through all three parts of the novel. Reason is linked in the narrative with the idea of the purity of the poles in the Western binary constructions. The text brings forth several settings in which hybridised versions of reason are sketched. The first part features Alu with his uncle and foster father, Balaram, in the village of Lalpukur. Balaram, who is the teacher in the village school, is devoted to a trans- or supranational idea of reason and science. He is a devoted practitioner of phrenology, which he sees as a way of combining the outside and inside, body and soul, of people. Balaram is also inspired by the work of Louis Pasteur, and launches a campaign towards germs and superstition in the village to win the inhabitants over to his idiosyncratic vision of the purity of reason and sciences. In the second part, Alu continues the thematic of preaching reason by ending his characteristic silence and forming a mock-socialist group which aims to get rid of both germs and the personal ownership

of money among the motley crowd of the inhabitants of the Souq, an ancient multicultural trading area in Al-Ghazira. In the third part, the original inspiration for purity and reason in the novel, Balaram's copy of *Life of Pasteur*, is cremated with the body of one of the characters in a scene that calls for the adaptation of ancient rituals to the demands of the practical present.

In what follows, we will examine the dismantling of binaries in the novel through the theme of purity, first on the plot level and then on the level of narrative strategy. The narrative technique of the novel is symbolized through the concept of weaving, which is strongly thematized in the narration. I shall end by introducing aspects of the theoretical discussion on the relationship between the politics of difference and the ethics of connections to find out how the novel situates itself in relation to this debate.

In the novel the transcending of the lines between traditional and modern ways of life, between scientific and religious worldviews and between natural sciences and humanism is effected through the gradual dismissal of the concept of purity. The idea of purity is closely linked with the idea of pure origin and pure distinct essences, which lie behind the typically Western rationalist ideology of binary constructions. Purity also refers to universalized discourses like that of Western sciences, or of Orientalism. The concept of purity implies that there must exist entities that are separate and distinct from one another, each possessing certain characteristics the opposites of which are to be found in the other entities. By this means the entities are conceived as 'pure': they are free of the traits apparent in the other entities. This is basically how binary constructions are formed. And the narrative aims at the deconstruction of these binaries, as well as the universalized discourses built on them.

The theme of purity runs through all three parts of the novel. In the first part, "Reason," there is a quest for purity on a scientific and practical level, as Balaram disinfects the village of Lalpukur with carbolic acid to destroy the germs brought in by recent refugees. The concept of purity is also deconstructed through the hilarious student organization called the Rationalists, who blend ideas from the Hindu religion with Western natural science ("the Brahma is nothing but the Atom" (47)) and launch a campaign against dirty underwear. There is also the suspicious 'science' of phrenology, which defies the purity of the mainstream natural sciences in its capacity to treat both the inside and outside, the mind and the body of human beings.

The third part also contains the revelation that life would be impossible without germs (i.e. 'impurity'). This revelation comes from the same book that has triggered all the preceding quests for purity in the novel, René Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur*. This book can be seen as

the offspring of Western rationalism and reason, which in the novel are symbolized by the concept of purity. Consequently, this reason has now come full circle: it has destroyed itself in deconstructing one of the premises of Western modernity that gave birth to it. The notion of purity behind the idea of binary constructions has been declared insufficient, implying that the poles of binary constructions are not distinct but rather interconnected: they cannot exist without one another.

One of the binaries that dissolve in the third part of the novel is that of the mind versus the body. In a sense, this issue has been approached already in the first part, where Balaram complains that “what’s wrong with all those scientists and their sciences is that there is no connection between the outside and the inside, between what people think and how they are” (17). He justifies his interest in phrenology by saying that “in this science the inside and the outside, the mind and the body, are *one*” (17).<sup>1</sup> According to phrenology, the shape of a person’s head indicates the nature of his or her character. In other words, by examining the body, one can examine the mind. This comment on the perhaps artificial separation of various branches of science, whether natural (body) or human (mind), into distinct, ‘pure’, islands is taken further in the last part of the novel, where Mrs Verma, who is a microbiologist, contemplates the origin of the microbes she examines in her work. She first draws a parallel between a microbiologist and a car mechanic, comparing bacteria with rust and “grime or dust somewhere in the machinery” (412). She then equates the body with a machine and states that “at least the surgeon sees the whole machine, even though it’s all shrouded and chloroformed, face covered and weeping mothers hidden away, every trace of its humanity blanketed” (412). This sentence, bringing together natural science to do with body (surgeon, machine, chloroform) and human sentiments to do with mind (weeping mothers, blanketed humanity) anticipates the next step in Mrs Verma’s reflections:

And when you find something in a specimen can you really help wondering sometimes where all those microbes and bacteria and viruses come from? Whether they can really, all of them, be wholly external to our minds? And just as you let yourself wonder whether sometimes they are anything other than a bodily metaphor for human pain and unhappiness and perhaps joy as well you cut yourself short, for it dawns on you yet again that ever since Pasteur that is the one question you can never ask. (412)

She concludes by observing that the “tyranny of your despotic science” forbids the doctor in a general practice from telling some of the people who come there to complain about their bodily

pains that “there’s nothing wrong with your body—all you have to do to cure yourself is try to be a better human being” (413). In this way, the problematic of mindbody relations broadens into the problematic relationship between natural sciences and humanist ethics.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this “tyranny” of the science is once again the result of the idea of purity, of distinct sciences that construct the world according to certain premises and that therefore cannot see anything these premises will not allow them to see.

The argument in the third part between Dr Mishra and Mrs Verma is seemingly on whether to cremate the body of Kulfi or not, but this too is framed by the issue of purity. Dr Mishra’s arguments are that the officials will not allow for cremation, and, more importantly, that the situation does not meet the requirements the old scriptures set for proper cremation. The victim is not suitable and they lack the necessary accessories for cremation. To prove that they cannot go along with the burial in the first place, Dr Mishra chooses to stand for the purity and persistence of the precepts of the Hindu religion: he wants the cremation to follow the rules set by ancient religious doctrines of the “scriptural times” (407). The comic tone of the novel, well-meaning and full of positive energy embodied by the character of Balaram in the first part, takes on a dark and cynical nature with Dr Mishra’s ironical comments in the third part. Mrs Verma is ready to modify the ritual to allow for restrictions caused by the situation: ordinary wood is used instead of sandal wood, carbolic acid is used as holy water and butter for ghee. The use of carbolic acid nicely brings together the cleaning ‘rituals’ of ancient religion (holy water) and modern science (carbolic acid). When Dr Mishra complains that there are certain rules that have to be followed Mrs Verma answers: “All you ever talk about is rules. That’s how you and your kind have destroyed everything—science, religion, socialism— with your rules and your orthodoxies. That’s the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human” (409). Consequently, this modified version of ancient Hindu burial takes place, in spite of Dr Mishra’s arguments.

The narrative clearly avoids taking sides in questions that have to do with the East-West divide (or with any divide, for that matter): the Hindu religion is here seen quite as pure, distinct and rule-bound as Western science. When Dr Mishra exclaims that the whole cremation is a shameful travesty, Mrs Verma justifies her action by saying that the times are like that: “Nothing’s whole any more. If we wait for everything to be right again, we’ll wait for ever while the world falls apart. The only hope is to make do with what we’ve got” (417). Kulfi has to have a funeral, and for this reason Mrs Verma and others have to abandon rules and purity

and allow for the fact that they are Indian migrants living on the edge of the Algerian Sahara in Africa. In the modern migrant world of strange and sudden connections and situations, wholeness and purity have to be abandoned. That is why *Life of Pasteur* is burned along with Kulfu's body: both Alu and Mrs Verma have understood that in the modern world its message concerning the defence of mankind against the germs, the Infinitesimally small, the impure, and by an obvious analogy the subaltern and the other, is no longer valid. On the contrary, the various purities, whether we think of them as nations and people (both in the East and West), or as modes of knowledge in forms of various sciences and religions, have to open up to new influences and start to interact with each other.

Against this background it comes as no surprise that the links between the tripartite narrative structure of the novel and its thematic contents introduced above can be constructed in various ways that supplement one another. As D.A. Shankar has observed, the tripartite structure is reminiscent of Indian philosophy and the three qualities that make individuals what they are: *Tamas*, *Rajas* and *Satwik*. These form the order of the soul's upward evolution (Shankar 1994, 583). This implies that it is possible to see the narrative as a kind of picaresque *Bildungsroman*, where Alu moves through different stages as his journey continues. In the novel, however, the order of the stages is reversed: *Satwa*: Reason; *Rajas*: Passion; and *Tamas*: Death. Obviously, it is possible to interpret the novel through both sequences. If we follow the first one, the original order from the philosophical tradition, and look at the first part of the novel under the thematics of death, we notice that the death of Balaram and others in the explosion in Lalpukur actually starts Alu's journey, both physically and mentally. Death, in other words is the end, but also the beginning. And if we examine the last part under 'Reason', we can conclude that the revelation following the dissolving of the concepts of purity, distinct essences and binary constructions in general in a sense brings reason with it, although this reason is very different from, indeed almost the opposite of, the one based on the ideology of Western modernity.

In *The Circle of Reason*, the subjectivity of Balaram, for instance, is presented as the meeting point of Western scientific discourse and local influences. At this level, Balaram can be realized as a poststructuralist discursively constructed subject who is only a knot in a universe of discourses. But as he is situated in the specific historical circumstances in the novel he becomes much more corporeal: the poststructuralist subject effect is strategically situated in a certain socio-political context, which in a sense essentializes it. The use of strategic

essentialism, then, implies that we need to use certain aspects of the hegemonic discourse we are in fact deconstructing just to make sense of the surrounding social and political situation. This is an ambivalent approach: with the notion of strategic essentialism we are trying to have it both ways, as it were: “neither the pure contingency of nothing but strategy without the comfort of identity effect; nor a naïve essentialism that believes in itself” (Radhakrishnan 2003: 161).

As with Spivak’s model, ethics is doubled in the narration of the novel: it is both transcendent and situationally specific. While the level of transcendent ethical communication appears at the level of content, as it were, the situational fraught ethics is apparent in the narrative strategy, which allows several historically and politically located discourses and subjects to surface and create connections without losing their heterogeneous nature. Deconstruction works both ways between the hegemonic scientific discourse of modernity and the subaltern activity and discourse. The idea of purity, of pure essentialist binaries, becomes gradually deconstructed, as becomes the idea of the purity of subaltern rituals and cultures. The narrative weaving of these two strands creates an ethical-political whole where deconstruction appears as an ethical practice used strategically to create connections. In a similar vein, the narrative both marks out the historical terrain of subalternity for all to see *and* realizes subalternity as the allegorical vanishing point of representation as such. As Radhakrishnan explains:

there is no pure way back to the indigenous or the precolonial except through double consciousness. We have all been touched by the West. The important question is not about ontological purity, but about strategies of using the West against itself in conjunction with finding one’s own “voice.” [...] Spivak’s position is that “we are both where we are and what we think,” and if in a sense, as a result of colonialism, “where we think” is the West as well, it is quixotic to deny it. The way out is bricolage, transactional readings based on bilateralism, and multiple non-totalizable interruptions. (2003: 157-158)

This is why the ontological purity of subalternity as a whole is deconstructed in the novel, for instance through the denial of pure origins (the village of Lalpukur and the Souq) and the breaking of the inviolability of the old rules and rituals. However, this is an instance of an ethically functioning affirmative deconstruction, because the deconstructed totalities are not left adrift, but are tied to newly formed narrative trajectories that form new connections

between people and ideologies. In the end, then, no pure subalternity or Western discursive formation can be found in this ‘transactional bricolage’ of a narrative.

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