

“The Conflagration of Community”: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*

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One of the striking features of contemporary literary theory, and indeed of cultural studies more generally, is what might be termed its socio-politicisation of the ethical. Literary texts, traditionally viewed as repositories of moral and aesthetic insight or challenge, tend now to be seen as predominantly ideological constructions, or sites of power struggles between social powers of various kinds—

C.A.J. Coady and Seumas Miller, *Literature, Power and the Recovery of Philosophical Ethics*.

Spinning out their telling through choice of words, degree of elaboration, attribution of causality and sequentiality, and the foregrounding and backgrounding of emotions, circumstances, and behaviour, narrators build novel understandings of themselves-in-the world. In this manner, selves evolve in the time frame of a single telling as well as in the course of the many tellings that eventually compose a life” – Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, “Narrating the Self”.

[I]

Amitav Ghosh’s specialty lies in his deft handling of political and philosophical issues without sacrificing the graces of art. Exhibiting a profound sense of history and space, his novels explore the human drama amidst the broad sweep of political and historical events. He has a personal stance on such controversial issues as postcoloniality, postmodernity, subjectivity, subalternity; he interweaves them in a complex pattern in his works, which themselves are generic amalgams. This generic multiplicity stems from an inherent interdisciplinarity within postmodernism which is part of its assault upon the Enlightenment. It also entails the deployment of “metafiction” wherein the text is constantly aware of its own status as a text. In Ghosh’s oeuvre, a self-reflexive narrator often introduces metafictional meditations on the value and purpose of his narrative. Ghosh looks up to the novel as a “meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc” (Ghosh, Interview, *Asia Source* 2). There are no limits to the novel as a form. For the eclectic Ghosh, it is not necessarily fictional; rather “it overarches fiction, and non-fiction, and history, the present, the

past” (Chambers 32). The novel’s generic heterogeneity, or discursive inventiveness, enables Ghosh to retain sensitivity to various kinds of discourses, voices and agents, while narrating into existence unforeseen connections between them. Ghosh’s generic mixtures are ethically aware in that they break and re-construct pre-existing generic formations, thereby changing their political implications. The self/other relationship is also narrated ethically as a reciprocal relationship, in which neither is reduced to a passive target of scrutiny; both appear as active agents in a relationship with a voice of their own. Contemporary ethical criticism examines in the main questions of how to represent otherness in a text, how to respond to the other and how to bring the concept of otherness to bear on the experience of reading and writing. Ghosh’s writings concentrate on interpersonal relationships, emphasizing the need for solidarity across ontological and epistemological divides, while retaining the ultimate alterity of the other.

One of the reasons why Ghosh is considered an important writer is that his narratives do not occupy a “neutral” zone. Rather, they offer a sensitive and multifaceted view on the contemporary problems of the worlds he writes about. Ghosh seems to be intent on moving his readers through his narratives beyond the aesthetic of indifference. Ghosh’s first commitment is to his art. The question that has engaged him a lot is whether this commitment excludes all other commitments. He has to admit that “a writer is also a citizen, not just of a country but of the world” (cited in Hawley 11). Whether a writer should be a responsible citizen or an insouciant aesthete is the issue that occupies him in the essay “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi.” His point of departure is Dzevad Karahasan’s essay “Literature and War,” which touches on the relation between modern literary aestheticism and the contemporary world’s indifference to violence. Karahasan holds that “[t]he decision to perceive literally everything as an aesthetic phenomenon—completely sidestepping questions about goodness and truth—is an artistic decision. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world” (cited in *The Imam and the Indian* 60). Ghosh abhors Karahasan’s brand of aestheticism, and plumbs for moral activism:

Writers don’t join crowds—Naipaul and so many others teach us that. But what do you do when the constitutional authority fails to act? You join and in joining bear all the responsibilities and obligations and guilt that joining represents. My experience of the violence was overwhelmingly and memorably of the resistance to it. (61)

By advocating resistance to violence and rejecting the “aesthetic of indifference,” Ghosh is squarely denouncing the postmodernist dogma of pan-aestheticization as enunciated by Patricia Waugh: “Postmodern theory can be seen and understood as the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an

aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more thoroughly aestheticising than any previous body of thought” (6). For Ghosh, it is “the affirmation of humanity” that is more important, “the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another” (*The Imam and the Indian* 61). Ghosh thus straddles the currents of both modernism and postmodernism. Meenakshi Mukherjee underscores Ghosh’s refusal to be categorized, but she does so with respect to Ghosh’s rebellion against the templates of genre (Hawley 4). Ghosh is too eclectic to embrace a particular *ism* and in the process stifle all his innate dynamism. Ghosh’s works occupy a critical juncture between postmodern and postcolonial perspectives, exploring the potentialities and limits of postcolonialism as also evading any strategic alliance with postmodernism. He is rather an intellectual amphibian, partaking of all ideas and isms that are congenial and pertinent to his artistic pursuit.

Ghosh’s keen interest in the predicament of individuals pitted against historical forces enables him to explore the depths of fundamental human experiences and emotions. In delineating his characters, Ghosh jettisons conventional postcolonial discourse which promotes racial and ethnic differences. He instead displays his characters on the level of a kind of transcendent universal humanity, or experience. His characters are socioculturally specific. He never dispenses with diversity and particularity in his writings. The stories his characters tell locate each teller in the material domain and promote particularism. But ethnic or racial differences, religious and communal separatist tendencies, although acknowledged, are of little relevance. These characters are not cocooned within their separate and local identities because the emotions and passions explored are related to humanity as such. What Ghosh endeavours to create is connections between various socio-cultural and historical discourses which smother diversity and various particularities. Ghosh thus veers away from constructionist discursive epistemology. Conversely, his celebration of the transcendent ethical universal experience connecting people is at odds with the Eurocentric mode of narrating, or constructing, the world. Accordingly Ghosh’s narration is akin to what Patrick Colm Hogan has named “particularist universalism” (xvii), which can be characterized as simultaneous universalism and cultural particularism.

[II]

Amitav Ghosh’s debut novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) won the Prix Medici Etranger, one of France’s top literary awards; it was also hailed as a Notable Book of the Year (1987) by the *New York Times*. Nevertheless, its critical reception ranges from total dismissal to near rapturous approval. Ranjita Basu, to begin with, locates the novel’s deficiencies in “immaturity of vision and an uncertain control over

form” (151). “*The Circle of Reason* is not merely circular,” counterclaims G.J.V. Prasad, “but a finely patterned novel and when seen as a whole displays the intricate ‘buti work’ of a master weaver in the making” (59). R.K. Dhawan too discerns in the novel “the folk tale charm of Arabian Nights” (19).

Like its form, the novel’s genre too has generated an intense debate. If for Shubha Tiwari the novel is “picaresque” (8), for Claire Chambers it is “ostensibly a bildungsroman” (“Historicizing Scientific Reason,” 36). What for Pradip Dutta “is an epic of restlessness” (39), for Yumna Siddiqi is a specimen of “police fiction.” No ready-made label fits the novel, thinks Stephanie Jones, for it evokes a “poignantly novel sense of a ‘minor’ cosmopolitan community, both constrained and liberated by the polylingualism of language” (441). For Tuomas Huttunen the novel “constitutes a generic mixture, containing features of the picaresque novel, magic realism, the novel of Ideas, the detective novel and Hindu epic” (126). Sujala Singh explores the relationship between subaltern subjectivity, global itineraries and knowledge production in Ghosh’s first novel. Granted its controversiality, the profundity of *The Circle of Reason* remains to be demonstrated.

Amitav Ghosh’s debut novel explores alternative ways of constructing the world based on connections that dismantle the rigid binaries and empiricism of Western modernity. It interrogates both the grounds and the production of historical knowledge by reading between the lines of the imperial archives and emerging as alternative discourses for expressing the subaltern past. Ghosh’s novel transforms the discourses of Western modernity, be they scientific or novelistic, by producing an ethically informed narrative that subverts the discursive knowledge production strategies that originally produced those discourses. Radhakrishnan, who, like Ghosh, is engaged in a project of dismantling the hegemonic position of a Western-originated discourse (the discourse of postmodernism, in his case), maintains that for genuine transcultural readings to become possible, other realities will have to be “recognized not merely as *other histories* but as *other knowledges*” (Radhakrishnan, 58, italics original). To transcend the incommensurability in worldviews, the participants would have to imagine their own “discursive-epistemic space[s] as a form of openness to one another’s persuasion” (Radhakrishnan, 61). Ghosh’s narratives consistently explore this ethical imperative to keep the channels of communication between the self and its other open, so that one might “hear that which [one] do[es] not already understand” (“Correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty, 11). Jean-Luc Nancy is suggestive in this context. Being-in-common, he maintains in *The Inoperative Community*, “does not mean a higher form of substance or subject taking charge of the limits of separate individualities” (Nancy, 29). Nor does it obtain its genesis “from out of

or as an effect of [...] a process that emerges from a ground [*fond*] or from a fund [*fonds*] of some kind [...]. It is a groundless ‘ground’, less in the sense that it opens up the gaping chasm of an abyss than that it is made up only of the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities” (29). Neither a settled arrangement from above nor one from below, the axes of utopic community are horizontal and latitudinal, seeking cohesion in what Nancy identifies as a process of “compearance.” Compearance, asserts Nancy,

does not set itself up, it does not establish itself, it does not emerge among already given subjects (objects). It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us) — a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition. What is exposed in compearance is the following, and we must learn to read it in all its possible combinations: ‘you (are/and/is) (entirely other than) I’ [...]. Or again, more simply: *you shares me* [...]. (29)

An open and hospitable community is a countermand against social exclusion. As the marker of direct affective singularity “between you *and* I” the ethics of compearance defiantly resists the instruments of power, colonial or otherwise, to orchestrate divisions and exclusions through its politics of immediate conjunction, conjuncture, coalition and collaboration. Furthermore, as “the appearance of the *between* as such”, compearance impels upon its agents a qualifying ethico-existential capacity for the radical expropriation of identity in the face of the other — a capacity for self-othering. Nancy is apposite again: “singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing; they are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced*, by the sharing that makes them *others*” (Nancy 25). This creates the shape of what we might call an “affective cosmopolitanism.”

Agamben defines sovereignty primarily in terms of exclusion or exception. Sovereignty is constitutive of the state and statist politics by deciding who is to be incorporated into it. This decision is grounded on a fundamental exclusion of what is to remain outside. It is the sovereign who decides where and whether law applies. Politics is instead grounded on rendering people vulnerable and abject, on subjection to a power so total that it can command life and death. The state wields authoritarian command and imposes vulnerability as a condition of participation in public or political life. The rise of exceptionalist policies explains the practices of dehumanization of the other that are currently being employed in postcolonial countries, both by the West and by local governments. Walker affirms that “exceptions may be enacted as a claim about inhumanity” (76), that is, all individuals not belonging or conforming to such a paradigm are considered as not being human beings, but rather as pre-human or inhuman persons, to which the legal juridical order that sustains the international, i.e. the regime of human rights, does not apply. Such “wasted lives?” as Bauman has labelled them, are then excluded by the community of humans and treated as human waste, disposable lives

that are superfluous, not necessary to the current order but at the same time part of it: they are “the waste of order-building combined into the main preoccupation and metafunction of the state, as well as providing the foundation for its claim to authority” (33).

The production of “human waste”—wasted lives, the “superfluous” populations of migrants, refugees and other outcasts—is an inevitable outcome of modernization. It is an unavoidable side-effect of economic progress and the quest for order which is characteristic of modernity. Bauman argues that the waste of globalized production is not only material but also human. Inside the “developed” world this “human waste” takes the form of “redundant” people — those who are easily disposable in an economic model which is no longer based on “jobs for life.” “To be declared redundant means to have been disposed of because of being disposable — just like the empty non-refundable plastic bottle or the once used syringe” (12). The world today is full (there is nowhere unexplored, or uninhabited which is habitable) and so there is nowhere to transport this excess, redundant population as there would have been in colonial times (5). Outside the “developed” world there are millions of people who are on the move in the liquid world – put into movement for economic or political reasons. Bauman focuses on the experience of the refugee—someone whose experience is the epitome of loss (of land, house, family, work) but who is given no “useful function in the land of arrival or assimilation.” In effect, from their present place—the dumping site—“there is no return and no road forward” (77). The state almost always portrays its use of force as an attempt to maintain “law and order.” It thus projects itself as the instrument of desirable order in conflict with a naturally unruly, unpredictable, potentially or actually violent populace.

In the current political situation Judith Butler argues that the law becomes an instrument of power to be deployed by the state. Law is no longer that which creates the state, nor that which constrains it; rather, it is one more tool for the state to use. The fact that “managerial officials decide who will be detained indefinitely” and who will be “reviewed for the possibility of a trial with questionable legitimacy,” implies that a parallel exercise of “illegitimate decision is exercised within the field of governmentality” (54). The law could have a meaningful and important role in negotiating what it is to be human, and therefore to have a liveable and grieveable life. When norms and the law are collapsed together then trials and legal interventions are an important site for securing precarious lives: “[t]he law [...] is now expressly understood as an instrument, an instrumentality of power, one that can be applied and suspended at will” (82-83).

Displacement and migration, dislocation and inter-cultural crossings are a recurrent motif in Ghosh’s oeuvre which is introduced quite intriguingly in *The Circle of Reason*. The novel is an elaborate

exercise in puncturing the Janus-faced Enlightenment's worship of Reason and its concomitant racism. Conceived to be an objective, disinterested and truth-seeking institution, Western science turned out to be a tool of colonization and of world domination. The First Section of *The Circle of Reason*, significantly titled "Satwa: Reason," is a systematic interrogation of what constitutes scientific methodology by exposing the limitations of Balaram's deviant science of phrenology. The freakish and monomaniac Balaram's efforts to eradicate disease by disinfecting his village bring him into conflict with his neighbour Bhudeb Roy. Their feud ends with the accidental killing of Balaram's family. In the inevitable carnage that follows, the police open fire which decimates Balaram's house and several innocent people. In their mode of repression, the military-bureaucratic apparatus in a post-colonial state becomes an extension of the colonial machinery's subordination of indigenous social classes. By branding Balaram's family as "extremists" who smuggle "foreign weapons" (CR, 129) from "across the border" (CR, 131), Bhudeb demonstrates reason's malleability which can accommodate any logic to serve the interests of the men in power. It allows the narrative the opportunity to explore the coercive practices of the bureaucratic apparatus in a post-colonial nation-state and its rational pretensions. In the scheme of things where reason is phantasmatic, the innocent orphan Alu is absurdly dubbed as a terrorist, thus invoking Bourdieu's warning that "the social force of representation is not necessarily proportional to [its] truth-value" (227). The fugitive Alu escapes from the clutches of the police and flees to South India where the Chalias, weavers from Kerala, help the runaway "Suspect" (CR, 154) leave the Indian shores for al-Ghazira in the Persian Gulf on the rickety boat *Mariamamma*.

While "Satwa: Reason" explores the limitations of the dogmatic ideals of the Enlightenment and their incommensurability with the demands of practical life, the third part "Tamas: Death" aims at a negotiation between science, humanism and religion in post-colonial Algeria. The country has risen from the ashes, surviving the horrors of concentration camps and organized genocide by the French. In a small Algerian town, Ghosh presents an expatriate Indian community whose members are sharply contrasted. The microbiologist Dr. Uma Verma is very eager to give a taste of Indian culture to a foreign audience and decides to stage Tagore's *Chitrangada* with the refugees from al-Ghazira in the main cast. Kulfi, a prostitute at Zindi's brothel, never has a grasp of the essence of her role. She lures, Jyoti Das, a Police Inspector impersonating Chitrangada's suitor Arjuna, with her erotic charm. Das, on his part, feels a strong carnal desire for Kulfi. He pleads for a night's liaison. Suffering from a heart condition, Kulfi cannot withstand the intensity of the moment and dies of a heart attack. The cultural show thus aborts. Like the other utopian projects in the novel, this one too ends in failure. Throwing up his job, Jyoti Das

exults in his new-found freedom, and revels in the prospects of a new life in Düsseldorf. Alu and Zindi are subaltern migrants, who resign themselves to their fate. Putting behind their unhappy past, these subalterns venture out to affront their destiny once more. Hope can only motivate a start, but whether it will lead to fulfilment or frustration is always a toss-up.

Apart from Ghosh's anti-Enlightenment project, the novel is also about subalterns on the move as well as their strategies of survival and efforts to construct and represent themselves as a community against oppressive political and bureaucratic machineries. The people of Lalpukur were hounded out of their homeland by events beyond their control. The narrator feels deeply about these victims of history "[v]omitted out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away, they had no anger left. Their only passion was memory" (CR, 59). In the context of the history of the Indian sub-continent, particularly Bengal, the "carnage" refers to the Partition of India in 1947. Here private experience is pitted against public experience. The anguished memory of the displaced glorifies the past. "Memory," believes Dipesh Chakrabarty, "is a complex phenomenon that reaches out to far beyond what normally constitutes an historian's archives" ("Remembered Villages", 318). Years later when "a war was brewing across the border" (CR, 59), the lives of the people of Lalpukur were also affected: "their relatives on the other side never let them forget it. Often they were drummed to bed by the rattle of distant gunfire" (CR, 59). What is worse, Lalpukur becomes a dumping-ground for the refugees from across the border: "[L]ong before the world had sniffed genocide in Bangladesh, Lalpukur began to swell. It grew and grew. [...] borders dissolved under the weight of millions of people in panic-stricken flight from an army of animals" (CR, 59-60). Through the idea of the borderline, nationalist discourse espouses the construction and consolidation of difference. The notion of binary oppositions is implicit in the conception of the border. Every cultural system divides the world into "its own" internal space and "their" external space. The fact that the turmoil in Bangladesh affects Lalpukur in the neighbouring country points to the ineffectuality of borders.

While political compulsion is the cause of demographic dislocation, the lure of inexhaustible prosperity and economic opportunities in the oil-rich New World of al-Ghazira in the Middle East compels the working-class South Asians to become desperate immigrants. The compelling attraction for technologically advanced commodities like watches and electronic products destroys local businesses based on indigenous traditions. What eggs Rakesh on to al-Ghazira is a "gigantic, pulsating cassette recorder" (CR, 183) beneath a small earthen figurine of the Devi Lakshmi in a sweetshop, symbolic of the hybridity of modern India, mixing modern technology and

ancient Hindu religion. Ayurvedic laxatives, symbolizing tradition, have lost out in the competition to Western consumer products like “sparkling, bubbling salts which dissolved in water or milky syrups in bottles with bright labels” (CR, 182). The narrator underlines capitalism’s long-standing lure of money, its nexus with neocolonialism, and its capacity to turn people into commodities when the migrants on board the *Mariamamma* have their first glimpse of the lights of the Middle East:

[...] through a century and a half the same lights have shone in one part of the globe or another, wherever money and its attendant arms have chosen to descend on peoples unprepared for its onslaughts, and for all of those hundred and fifty years *Mariamamma*’s avatars have left that coast for those lights carrying with them an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital. (CR, 189)

The novel’s second section “*Rajas: Passion*” shatters the dreams of third-world immigrants about the utopian possibilities in the Gulf and delineates the dehumanizing labour conditions in the region.

Migrant workers play an increasing role in Asia, where they are “remarkably mobile” and “labor in a largely disorganized and vulnerable state” (Chin, 3). The workers’ position leaves them disempowered within the workplace; it also leaves them vulnerable without. In this sense, migrant workers lead lives that are “hyper-precarious” (Lewis, 581). “Precarity describes the rise of casual, flexible, sub-contracted, temporary, contingent and part-time work in a neoliberal economy,” according to Lewis and Waite, which explains labour market processes that are conducive to the production of forced/migrant labour. “Precariousness,” they further argue, “is also understood as a condition or experience of (ontological) insecurity and as a platform to mobilize against insecurity” (Lewis and Waite, 2). Chin deduces the modes by which the lives of these migrant labourers become precarious. First, “these workers are not offered any path to permanent residency and citizenship thereby entrenching their disempowerment.” Second, “unlike local workers, migrant workers lack the basic rights of political participation and representation” (11). Hence, they are relatively powerless to challenge their labour conditions through collective means. Economically insecure and socially marginalized, the lives of these workers become precarious because they are vulnerable at the hands of the employers who provide them with contracts and wages as well as the intermediaries who recruit and sub-contract them. Workers also become less involved in determining their own labour conditions because they have “fewer resources to contest work and resist” (Wilson and Ebert, 268).

In this context, Karthamma’s painful pregnancy on the *Mariamamma* raises many questions. Her labour has started but she tries to kill the baby in the womb. Karthamma believes that her child would not have

any material possessions if she does not sign the proper forms. To make matters worse, her child might even be sent back to India. For Karthamma the “forms” are a source of legitimacy for her illegitimate child. Al-Ghazira holds for her as a migrant the possibilities of a bright future and material prosperity. She has been convinced that by going to al-Ghazira she and her unborn child will possess “houses and cars and multi-storeyed buildings” (CR, 177). To return to India, and so to her past, would be a regression. By all indications, Karthamma has been sexually exploited. She has also experienced the utter destitution typical of a citizen of a Third-World post-colonial nation by doing “eight-anna jobs in rice fields and things like that” (CR, 177). No wonder she would prefer killing her child to returning to India. The gullible Karthamma rests her dreams of modern material comforts on a piece of deception.

By providing shelter to the diverse illegal immigrants from the Indian subcontinent and North Africa, Zindi establishes a community in miniature. She relates to the inmates on the basis of both affection and money. She helps them find jobs and charges them rent. She tells stories to her neighbours and sells them tea. A victim of patriarchy, Zindi establishes a matriarchal community. Her house is for its inmates both “the home” and “the world”:

The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. (Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 120)

This matriarch contends that the relation between herself and the women is not that between an entrepreneur and his commodities but between a householder and his “family.” They are not forced diasporas but voluntary exiles: “...When I go to India I don't have to do anything. These women find me and come running: Take me, Zindi – no, me, Zindi-didi” (CR, 181). These girls have a wonderful reputation in al-Ghazira for being both “reliable” and “hard-working.” Zindi finds them jobs, and they pay her a little in return. But this is not a business, “it's my family, my aila, my own house, and I look after them,...and no one's unhappy and they all love me” (CR, 181). By calling prostitution “work” and the women as “hard-working,” Zindi seeks to legitimize both her wards' sex-work and her own entrepreneurship. Moreover, she elevates prostitution to the status of productive labour. By presenting the women as both commodities/labourers and family members, enslaved as well as free, the narrative problematizes the situation of the migrant females.

The process of witnessing or testimony is similar in structure to the process of lamentation and, indeed, is a form of lamentation itself.

While the forms and traditions of the act of witnessing or bearing testimony may not be as ritualized as are the traditional forms of lamentation in many cultures, it does acquire and establish acts and gestures through which it is articulated. The narrative devotes sections only to the stories of individuals told either by themselves or by surviving witnesses. What is emphasized in these sections is not only the need to hear every individual story, but the need for each of these individuals to testify to their own experiences to a community of like sufferers and willing listeners. It does not take long for the migrants to realize the delusive nature of the dazzling lights of al-Ghazira. Zindi herself explains that work in al-Ghazira is far scarcer than the Gulf's reputation suggests: "[t]here are hundreds, thousands of chhokren [boys] [...] begging; begging for jobs" (CR, 180). The workers' dependence on employers deepens their disempowerment, primarily when they have to negotiate terms of employment and seek redress for wrongs. The widespread discrimination they face both deepens and sustains their workplace disempowerment. Mast Ram is the victim of injustice at the hands of a labour contractor; Kulfi is the victim of anti-Indian feelings, falling prey to the colonial hierarchies and mentalities within society which rank migrants according to race or ethnicity. Samuel loses his job for a moment of absent-mindedness. Abusa the Frown is reported to the police for working illegally and is never heard from again. Several immigrants are crushed on construction sites by faulty equipment. A massive building called "The Star" collapses and traps Alu almost exactly in its centre beneath the wreckage of concrete. Pressed to explain the sequence of these terrible misfortunes, Zindi intones her "terrible litany of calamities" (CR, 201), which is an accurate summing up of the migrant experience. Zindi's family of assorted illegal immigrants gets a sense of their identity through the power of her story-telling. Her narrative creates reality and meaning:

They had lived through everything Zindi spoke of and had heard her talk of it time and time again; yet it was only in her telling that it took shape; changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing, a block of time which was not hours or minutes or days, but something corporeal, with its own malevolent wilfulness. That was Zindi's power: she could bring together empty air and give it a body just by talking of it. (CR, 212-213)

The variations which she introduces in her narrative are "like the pressure of a potter's thumb on clay – changing the thing itself and their knowledge of it" (CR, 213). Alu's entrapment beneath the pyramid of televisions, refrigerators, radios and other consumer products triggers multiple mutually exclusive interpretations about the catastrophe. Abu Fahl draws upon all his knowledge of construction to explain the crash but Hajj Fahmy would have none of it. The latter's quizzical question puzzles Abu Fahl: "If it was strong only in parts, why did the whole of it fall" (244)? He thus brings in the issue of the

organic relationship between the whole and its component parts. He claims to know “the real story; the true story” (244). The point in question needs elaboration. “Truth” is provisional and contingent. A proliferation of stories exists to narrate this “truth.” The stories lack veracity as the products of imagination. But each tale individualizes the teller by situating him against a particular social and economic background. Moreover, by celebrating the egalitarian spirit of oral tradition and storytelling, the narrative dismantles the notion of a single, determinate authoritative meaning. The possibility of plural interpretations rules out authoritative value-judgements and closures of meaning. By reviving the ancient tradition of storytelling, the narrative exhibits self-reflexivity. It projects the vision of “an exhausted centre” and “a vital margin” (Rushdie, 48). The valorization of the personal elements of oral storytelling debunks the impersonal narrative of realistic Eurocentric novels by giving each teller a distinctive voice which resists appropriation by a master narrative.

The interplay between experience and expression is a dynamic one. It is grounded in the phenomenological assumption that entities are given meaning through being experienced and the idea that narrative is a vital resource to bring experiences to conscious awareness:

At any point in time, our sense of entities, including ourselves, is an outcome of our subjective involvement in the world. Narrative mediates this involvement. Personal narratives shape how we attend to and feel about events. They are partial representations and evocations of the world as we know it. (Ochs and Capps, 21)

Experience gives rise to narratives; it acquires form and meaning in the telling. Marita Eastmond, following E.M. Bruner, distinguishes between “*life as lived*, the flow of events that touch on a person’s life; *life as experienced*, how the person perceives and ascribes meaning to what happens, drawing on previous experience and cultural repertoires; and *life as told*, how experience is framed and articulated in a particular context and to a particular audience” (250). Zindi’s narration of the stories of each immigrant can be accorded a fourth level, *life as text*. Experience is never directly represented. It is edited and interpreted at different stages of the process from life to text. A narrative is a form in which events are described as having a meaningful and coherent order. It imposes on reality a unity which it does not inherently possess. It should be accepted, nevertheless, that in its vitality and richness, experience far exceeds the expression. Hence, “stories cannot be seen as simply reflecting life as lived, but should be seen as creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present” (Eastmond, 250). Being discursive constructions of the past, these narratives are symbolic strategies of addressing their present predicament. They elucidate a community’s

understanding of itself. Thus conceptualized, stories negotiate the past and its meaning and also seek ways of going forward. Zindi's story-telling is thus reconstitutive as it organizes the experiences of the individuals and the community as well as restores continuity and identity.

The immigrants' contention that the Star disintegrated because of the whims of capital throws into wide relief the nexus between neocolonialism and globalization. Al-Ghazira is an old cosmopolitan mercantile centre, "a merchant's paradise, right in the centre of the world, conceived and nourished by the flow of centuries of trade" (CR, 221). The solidarity between the various merchants from Persia, Iraq, Zanzibar, Oman and India rests on mutual understanding and respect. The advent of the "British gunboats" (CR, 221) destroys the peaceful ambience of this prosperous city. The Englishmen brought with them a completely different language of dominance and autonomy based on racial and religious superciliousness. The first seeds of colonization are sown when the British resident tries to impose an oil-treaty on the Malik to secure exclusive digging rights for oil. Inspired by the "histories of the great Baghdadi and Cairene dynasties" (CR, 246), the Malik devises an intriguing plan for resistance which unfortunately backfires. Disengaging from strong-arm tactics, the British follow the policy of divide and rule, spread rumours about the Malik's madness and project his much-hated half-brother, the Amir, as the alternative ruler. The shrewd British press into service its superior technological powers as a smokescreen for its appropriating intentions. With the help of its flying machines, the British plant "specially grown date palms; unique palms, which could thrive on any soil" to dazzle the Ghaziris with "the near-miracle" spectacle (CR, 257). Despite partial resistance from the natives which is quickly subdued, the New City emerges overnight "like a mushroom" (CR, 263); the entire country is transformed into an Oiltown. So complete and successful is the domination of the colonial machinery that there "was no feud: no tyrants died; there was no fratricide, no regicide, no love, no hate. It was just practice for the princes of the future and their computers—an exercise in good husbandry" (CR, 262). The result is the widening gulf between the poverty of the illegal migrants and the wealth of the oil-sharks. Ghosh reflects on the devastating political fallout of the nefarious activity of the oil moguls in his essay "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel": "[...] oil and the developments it has brought in its wake have been directly responsible for the suppression of whatever democratic aspirations and tendencies there were within the region" (*The Imam and the Indian*, 87).

The Oiltown's "uniformed hirelings from every corner of the world" (CR, 260) segregate al-Ghazira spatially, transforming it into a threatening ghetto. Brought as "weapons" to "divide the Ghaziris from themselves and the world of sanity," the migrant labourers who work

at the Oiltown are reduced to mere instruments at the hands of the capitalists: “those ghosts behind the fence were not men, they were the tools – helpless, picked for their poverty” (CR, 261). To commemorate their triumph the Oilmen decide to erect an opulent shopping complex called “an-Najma, the Star” on a marshy, unused land to celebrate “the Starry future” (CR, 263). The intrusion of multinational companies has already destroyed local capitalists. Jeevanbhai Patel’s proximity with the old Malik of al-Ghazira causes his undoing. The enigmatic Nury the Damanhour, who created his own unconventional brand of capitalism and revolutionized the craft of selling eggs, loses his life rebelling against the Oilmen. This entire sequence of events about capitalist domination is filtered through folk imagination with the omniscient narrator skillfully eschewing his presence. Hajj Fahmy who narrates it concludes with a fabulistic touch: “[n]o one wanted the Star. That was why the Star fell: a house which nobody wants cannot stand” (CR, 264). If the Star stood for the triumph of capitalism and neo-colonization, its collapse signals their potential demise.

This optimistic note notwithstanding, the global flow of capital has converted al-Ghazira into a divided house. Cheap migrant labour, skilled in modern construction technology, has outnumbered the Ghaziris, which breeds xenophobia. This explains “the entrails of unfinished buildings festooned across the skyline and the flow of people with their inexplicable nationalities” (CR, 321). The illegal immigrants populate a sequestered narrow inlet called “the Ras-al-Maqtu’, the Severed Head, and a sandbar garroted by the road on the embankment” (CR, 196). Migrants create a vibrant microcosmic cosmopolitan world which outshines the “solid concrete-and-glass cliff of hotels and offices” of the Old City:

On one side of the road, jostling for space, were tiled Iranian chelo-kebab shops, Malayali dosa stalls, long, narrow Lebanese restaurants, fruit-juice stalls run by Egyptians from the Sa’id, Yemeni cafés with aprons of brass-studded tables spread out on the pavement, vendors frying ta’ameyya on push-carts—as though half the world’s haunts had been painted in miniature along the side of a single street. (CR, 344)

Although the Ras is considered to be a wretched place—in particular its dark, labyrinthine marketplace—peopled with terrifying people, the heterogeneous immigrants are tied by a “close link” (CR, 226) which fosters solidarity. This lively community spends much time there drinking coffee and smoking *narjilas*, exchanging gossip and stories of local interest. A united band, they are alert to any external threats. With the erasure of the boundaries of language, class and caste among these migrants, they replaced the notion of authentic, discrete national cultures with a shared openness to the world, espousing a utopian belief in a transracial, human collectivity. The intertwined syncretic histories of Indians and Egyptians, Indians and Chinese, Muslims and

Jews, Hindus and Muslims torn apart by political forces are a bulwark against segregationist strategies that promote the cause of religious separatism. Their ability to transcend all divisions stems from “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other” (239) and a concern with “achieving competence in cultures which are initially alien” (Hannerz, 240). This precipitates “a world culture” created “through the increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as through the development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory” (Hannerz, 237).

Despite the marked differences between the Ghaziris and the migrants, what unites them is the penetration of the curses of globalization and consumerism in their lives. The huge supermarket in Hurreyya is wrapped in air-conditioning machines and bristles in “freshly frozen Australian lamb and Danish mutton, French cauliflowers and Egyptian cabbages”, “Thai rice and Canadian wheat, English cod and Japanese sardines, prawns and shrimps and lobster from the world over” (*CR*, 208). The migrant labourers are allured by the Japanese cassette-recorders, watches, calculators and portable television sets, the latest brand of American jeans and Korean shirts (*CR*, 341). The disastrous effects of multiplexes and shopping malls on indigenous trade and local business are replete throughout the novel. This unrestrained market logic, freed from governmental constraints is a “strong discourse,” “which is so strong and so hard to fight because it has behind it all the powers of a world of power relations” (Bourdieu, 95).

Alu’s miraculous survival beneath the ruins of the Star initiates an anti-capitalist drive against dehumanizing machinery. Desperately searching for Alu, his migrant friends get lost in the collapsed glass and concrete dome. It “was like the handiwork of a madman – immense steel girders leaning crazily, whole sections of the glass dome scattered about like eggshells” (*CR*, 232). The “voice” they hear is a radio accidentally switched on during the collapse of the building. Reading the episode as an “allegory about the cultural logic of global capitalism destroying the ancient trading cultures of the Middle East,” Robert Dixon contends that the “‘voice’ concisely evokes the aesthetics of postmodernism: the loss of affect, the decentering of the bourgeois subject, the loss of interiority and the relentless commodification of culture”(17). Spiritually transfigured and carrying Balaram’s spiritual legacy as he does, Alu thinks of Louis Pasteur, “about dirt and cleanliness. I’m thinking and I’m making plans [...] I’m thinking about cleanliness and dirt and the Infinitely Small” (*CR*, 235). Buried alive in the ruins of capitalism, Alu has found the elusive breeding ground of germs—“Money. The answer is money” (*CR*, 281). Balaram thought that carbolic acid would realize Pasteur’s dream of cleaning the world. Alu goes one better than Balaram, identifies money as the prime pollutant and so makes it his exclusive target: “We will

drive money from the Ras, and without it we shall be happier, richer, more prosperous than ever before” (*CR*, 281). Evoking the Gandhian vision of an anti-materialist, collective society, the zealous Alu prepares to establish a commune, an alternative micro-economy, in which the inhabitants of the Ras are to pool their earnings and jointly buy goods and services from the Souq through an agent. Since no one makes a profit beyond what is immediately needed, the profit-making commerce in the Ras will come to an end. Inspired by a socialist vision, Alu’s micro-economy seeks to remove the curses of capitalism. A very silent man before his brush with death, Alu speaks to his spellbound audience with an extraordinary passion. And he speaks in a multitude of languages:

Not in one language but in three, four, God knows how many, a khichri of words; couscous, rice, dal and onions, all stirred together, stamped and boiled, Arabic with Hindi, Hindi swallowing Bengali, English doing a dance; tongues unraveled and woven together [...] They understood him, for his voice was only the question; the answers were their own. (*CR*, 279)

Alu’s discourse weaves a pattern which dissolves all linguistic heterogeneities and creates a communicative relationship in which the self searches for the other in the form of a question. His audience, the other, answers enigmatically through a strange silence which illustrates the communicative potential of silence, “assign[ing] speech to its exact position, designating its domain”: “By speech, silence becomes the centre and principle of expression, its vanishing point. Speech eventually has nothing more to tell us: we investigate the silence, for it is the silence that is doing the speaking” (Macherey, 96).

In Ghosh’s oeuvre, silence represents a mode of epistemology, an inscrutable experience that cannot be represented or mediated by either language or scientific empiricism. Silence ultimately has an ethical function, which basically posits silence beyond, or outside, discourse. The voluntary silence, the “will to unsay” (Duncan 28-30), functions as a subversive act, a token of resistance towards hegemonic discourses. In a literary text, the unspoken is seen as having “the potential for decoding that which is hidden by and from the dominant discourse” (Huttunen xv). Conceived of as a textual site that has the potential to create alternative meanings, this performatively functioning silence needs a reading strategy of its own (Huttunen xv). Silence is here conceived to be a feminine counterforce to Western male-centered science and rationalism. Western scientific discourse has no access to it; it cannot, in fact, even be aware of its existence. What is questioned is the transparency of language as a means of communication and the equation of language with meaning. This anti-intellectualist stance graduates Ghosh to the recesses of mysticism. Alu thus belongs to the elusive band of initiates in Ghosh’s oeuvre—Shombhu Debnath in *The Circle of Reason*, Mangala in *The Calcutta*

Chromosome, Fokir in *The Hungry Tide*, Deeti in *River of Smoke*—who with their extra-sensory perceptions erode Enlightenment’s empirical rationalism.

Alu lives up to his real name Nachiketa. In Hindu mythology Nachiketa incurs his father’s rage by his persistent questions about Brahman. In exasperation, Uddalaka curses him to go to the nether world – Yamaloka, the world of Yama, the god of death. Nachiketa pleads with the righteous Yama for divine knowledge. Moved at his devotion and ardour, Yama grants his prayer for the knowledge of Brahman. The entrapped Alu, lying at death’s door and meditating on purity, is a modern avatar of the mythological Nachiketa. The informed reader would appreciate the significance of Alu’s name as Nachiketa.

Alu’s emancipatory drive is dismantled from within and ends in disaster. His earnest efforts to create a money-free commune and develop a postcolonial utopia degenerate into mutual suspicion and greed. With all the money going to Alu’s socialist fund, Zindi’s authority over her household declines, which prompts her to take possession over Forid Mian’s small tailoring shop. The machinating Jeevanbhai stipulates that the police officials Jyoti Das and Jai Lal be allowed into the Ras as part of the deal for the shop. By presenting Jyoti Das and Jai Lal as “ordinary people” and “friends” from India, the tenacious Jeevanbhai persuades Zindi to identify Alu to them. Thus the two Indian police officers who started hunting for Alu in Part One catch up with their quarry in Part Two. Zindi is more of a dupe than a traitor and her beloved family is well on its way to disintegration. When Alu and his associates wage war on germs — both money and the “infinitely Small” (microbes) — with buckets of carbolic acid, Zindi’s own household turns against her. The “bewildered” (CR, 315) Alu’s clarion call for purity and cleanliness has been completely misinterpreted by the Ras volunteers. He has initiated a process over which he loses all control: “[h]e could no longer understand what he’d started” (316). In an ironic reversal, scared by the bizarre happenings in front of him, Das himself runs away from the fugitive: “it was as though the world had suddenly started moving backwards” (316). The immigrants’ strong desire for material possessions explodes the utopian project. When they embark on a shopping trip, the new regime of al-Ghazira interprets it to be a demonstration by immigrant workers. The composite, diasporic community of the Ras is decimated by the forces of capital and police. From the perspective of the police, the community of migrant labourers are protesters against the new rulers of al-Ghazira. The neocolonial regime resists the attempts of the subaltern people to become part of civil society. Reminiscent of Balaram’s fate, Alu’s socialist efforts are crushed by state power. In the resulting ambush, many of Alu’s friends are killed, as were the members of Balaram’s household.

Community is neither a productive project of becoming nor is it a

social contract produced by citizens. It is a sharing of singularities who are together unbecoming and unbinding in their interactions. This unworking is the refusal of unity. It is resistance to totalizing communion. Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that fascism annihilates community by destroying difference but that there is always a resistance to this destruction. “[T]he fascist masses,” Nancy writes, “tend to annihilate community in the delirium of an incarnated communion. ... [C]ommunity never ceases to resist this will. Community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence” (35). In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* Ghosh laments the equation of the novel in the Western tradition with what John Updike terms the “individual moral adventure” at the expense of the collective. The celebration of the collective, the “men in the aggregate” (106) has been a recurrent trope in Ghosh’s oeuvre initiated in *The Circle of Reason* itself. The community presented in *The Circle of Reason* is one that challenges, provokes, threatens, but also enlivens; it is a community of disagreement, dissonance, and resistance. The perspective of precarity provides the potential to link actions to tackle forced labour with the broader struggle for (migrant) workers’ rights. The recognition and inclusion of migrants as transnational actors and activists must be central to this work. The fact that Amitav Ghosh was able to explore these issues in his debut novel three decades ago speaks about his farsightedness as well as the relevance of *The Circle of Reason* in contemporary academic engagement.

NOTES

The Circle of Reason abbreviated to *CR* in parenthetical references.

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