

Changing Narration and Orientation of Characters in Amitav Ghosh's The circle of Reason

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Abstract

The Circle of reason by Amitav Ghosh is a debut novel that display reasons and inferences of the author about the transition of a boy from one place to another. The narration in the first place centers Alu, an orphan boy in an omniscient point of view whereas in part two the narration slowly shifts from omniscient to point of view of the characters in which the central character is a spectator himself. The reason are many in the novel but the prime reason of existence of Jyoti Das is to arrest Alu as he is suspected for association with terrorists. Towards the end innocence of Alu is evident and also Jyoti Das became one to be accused for the death of Kulfi. The reason gets changed in the novel from place to place. It is perceived that a character must be good or bad but in this scenario they are grey. The one that is perceived to be good has flaws and one that is bad too have some good traits. A circle starts and ends from a point, this plot starts with questions and ends with not the answers but reasons.

KEYWORDS: Hybridity, Narrator and narration, Verisimilitude, Imaginary Border.

Introduction

With the very title, this novel gives an idea about reasons and how it has come to the point from which it begun. Gosh in his characterization classifies traits of each character without any hierarchies in which through the end traits are distorted. Minor character have a major role than major characters in the novel. Every other character in part two stays in the background whereas Kulfi, Professor Samuel, Zindi and others foreground the narration. On the other hand the narration shifts from Zindi's point of view to Jyoti Das in vice versa. The star in the second part is an imagery of devastating money and fragmentation in the system of carelessness. Alu inside the Star can be associated with how one innocent can be in the clutches of the flawed high power yet be saved by fortunate perseverance of will with the help of determination (two Sewing machines). 'The Life of Pasteur' is one exemplification for the intertextual reference in this novel. This reference is presented throughout the novel in circular formation from Balamram Bose explaining about the details of the book to Alu to Mrs. Verma gifting the book to Alu that is gifted by Balamram Bose to her father. These sequence of actions paved way for circle of reasons.

"The border it had to be; safety lay on the other side,
in the vast welcoming emptiness of the Sahara" (Loc. 5985- Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh)

Amitav Ghosh as a Diasporic writer experiments with the identities of the characters in all his novels like Thamma's identity in "The Shadow Lines": Thamma has a dual identity of being a Bengali and Indian simultaneously. Border to Thamma is a farfetched detail what that matters to her is home that she had perceived in her mind. The circle of reason being the debut novel of Ghosh, he makes his protagonist as a wanderer and exemplifies his diasporic thinking of identity with characters like Alu, Zindi and Mrs. Verma. These three have three different past: Alu is a refugee, Zindi is socially excommunicated and Mrs. Verma is a hybridized person having Indian past and Algerian livelihood. The complexity of characters and narrative techniques used in this novel makes it more than a pointer, it becomes the reference that matters.

Voice of the narrator Vs Voice of the characters

Diasporic literature fundamentally represents the voice of the native land and experience of the host land where the apparatus fluctuates between identities of the characters. With reference to the existential philosophy and as a tool for interpreting this novel, Alu the protagonist suffers from existential crisis because of his nomadic life. The voice of the narrator in the novel is a monologue as it is interpreted in most part of the novel which is about the past of the characters where the flashback technique is employed by the author. The narration and narrator are differed but the author is clear about not using the drama type of conversation in the novel. There are no overtones but appropriate use of flashback and stream of consciousness technique

Alu alias Nachikita Bose throughout the novel shows a fascination for a better livelihood. His aspiration to become a weaver and his determination to 'live' is an exemplification of absurdism. However Alu's presence is the focal point; the minor characters get prominence in the novel where we can mostly see Alu through the eyes of his friends, family and Jyoti Das. The Omniscient narrator in the novel is an observer of events and all through the novel we can see the communication between the characters. The narration did not give space for characters to converse much; narration shifts from narrator to character's point of view and from character's to flashback in which the character and narrator together narrate. "Did Pasteur have and inkling of the terrifying joy when he went to examine Joseph Meister the morning after he had inoculated him with his untested vaccine? Did Einstein, in the last moments before his formula appeared before him on paper? And, still, with him, it was different, for him it was his own life, the past, the present, the future". (Loc. 2329 – Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh)

Characterization and characteristics

The character of a person can be assumed with the traits of that individual, in this portrayal an author has to be so particular about the characterization of a character. Amitav Ghosh as a dissertation writer gives prime importance to his characters and then to other elements. His meticulous attribution to the diasporic thinking is evident with several of inference like this in the novel "al-Ghazira wasn't a real place at all, but a question: are foreign countries, merely not home, or are they all that home is not?" (Loc. 4397 – Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh). Characters have diasporic identity and home to Alu is where he resists to live, on the contrary, his heart is with weaving. Ghosh attributes weaving imagery with livelihood and as a skill. In a Haphazard manner weaving and association of sewing machine is mentioned in the novel as a lifesaver and importance of skill for a person to survive

far away from his homeland. Alu's character and weaving skills go hand in hand that throughout the novel Alu gets associated with weaving.

“We only promised to present him with the sewing machines. He'll have to think of some way of bringing them back himself”(Loc. 5628 – Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh)

Characters evolve over a period of time, they get molded in accordance with their surroundings. Jyoti Das and Alu's characterization proves that their innocence at the beginning of the novel is gone towards the end. Both get their experiences from their respective journeys and at last Alu ceases to travel farther ahead as a nomadic chasing his ideal purpose like an absurd hero.

Hermeneutics and sequence of action

Hermeneutics is a branch of knowledge that deals with interpretations. It is a tool for understanding meaningful entities in a text. In *The Circle of Reason*, the sequence of actions are in the point of view and also changes. The narrator remains constant but there are change in narrative. Perhaps the narrative changes from certain character's point of view then in the sequence of action to other characters point of view. In the part two, the narrator sets focus on Alu but through the eyes of other characters; mainly Zindi's. Towards the end of part two Alu is also seen through the eyes of Jyoti Das and other minor characters. As a picaresque novel, corrupt society and hero's traumatic condition with his experience in the society are meticulously narrated in this novel. The characters, location and how borders diminish can be seen in Lalpukur which is inhabited by Pakistan refugees in the part one due to the partition of Bangladesh in 1971. The journey of Alu the central character from Lalpukur in Calcutta to Al- Ghazira in Egypt is seen in a sequence of actions in which Alu is caught between the clutches of bourgeois society and civil defenders (Police). He makes no efforts to prove his innocence rather he runs away from leaving behind his family being burnt into ashes, proves the helplessness of the marginalized “Alu, stumbling along beside him, inert and uncomprehending, could only see the flames of the known world licking the skies.”(Loc. 2467- Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh). The story begins with Alu being an orphan and ends with him being the same yet he manages to shine as a hero of having confidence to carry forward his life different regions in the world.

Plot and Subplot

Plot is the skeleton of the story which interlinks the sequence in chronological order. The narration can be either in linear or non-linear pattern. In the linear pattern the story is narrated in chronological order but in non-linear the order is distorted – placed irregularly for which narrative techniques are used: the stream of consciousness, Flashback, Foreshadowing, etc.,. Though plot is the skeleton of the story; sub-plot is not an alternative but a story within a story which presents another story of characters within the story or about the relevant events as an individual story. *Circle of Reason* has a plot in which Alu is a central character but within the story, the minor characters have more importance than Alu. The subplot within this novel seldom refers *Life of Pasteur* which is an intertextual reference. Among the subplots, two vital subplots in the novel are Balaram Bose's past and Nuri's story. Balaram Bose story intervenes the narration while he has been working as a teacher in Lalpukur. It is seen through flashback of Balaram's experience in college and his fanatic interest on Phrenology, C.V. Raman and life of Pasteur “Trouble with people

like Balaram was that theories came first and the truth came afterwards” (Loc. 241 – Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh) Bose with his admiration with phrenology takes avatar as a foreteller: he in one instance says Dantu would become a sadhu because of his head. Association of Balaram with science is evident throughout the novel, he remember dates in association with the inventions and their presence in India. 11 January 1950 at 4.30 in the afternoon Madame Irene Curie arrival to Calcutta, he remembers this date because of curie. Balram’s education in Presidency College and his experience in the college hostel is seen through the flashback. Ghosh uses Balaram’s flashback to foreshadow the book ‘Life of Pasteur’ that he presented to Mrs. Verma’s father which she has in remembrance of her father and later gifts that to Mr. Bose alias Alu and towards the end, the book is cremated with Kulfi’s body. The novel ends with an inference of ‘The life of Pasteur’ being hinted all through the novel but only to be burnt at the end.

“In 1930 when Balaram was ready to go to college, the newspaper was already talking of Raman's candidature for the Nobel.

Long before his teacher spoke to him about it, Balaram knew that he would go to Calcutta and to Presidency College” (Loc. 700 – Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh)

The second sub-plot is about Nury a dork from Damanhori who used to sell eggs in Al – Ghazira. Nury came to fame with his association of women around Ghazira with whom he made his egg wending business flourish. Slowly from Nuri, the story moves to narration about Malik of Al – Ghazira, who returned after his educated in India and though due to the sudden demise of his father becomes the Malik of Al-Ghazira. One of the conflict in Al-Ghazira is with the colonizers who wanted oil to be exported to their homeland so compelled Malik to later sign a treaty. This conflict starts to raise the tension between Malik and Goat’s Arse: British imperial officer and then the tension passes on with Thin Lips and Malik. Towards the end Oil fort is handed over to Amir: Malik's half-brother who is also an imperial agent. With this sub-plot Ghosh tries to trace the history of al-Ghazira and present it to the readers. He made this fictional analogy to the history by assimilating Nury and Jeevanbhai Patel within the story. The story of Nury – the Damanhori an egg seller who became an entrepreneur is narrated by Hajj Fahmi to Abu Fahal and to the rest of the crowd before rescuing Alu from the star.

“Hajj Fahmi inclined his head, smiling.

It’s just a story.

Once many many years ago, so long ago that the time is of no significance, an old-looking man, a very odd –looking man, appeared suddenly one day in al – Ghazira” (Loc. 4017 – Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh)

Significance of name

Ghosh satirically makes association of names with the appearance and interests of the characters. For example: the protagonist of the novel Nachikita Bose is referred as **Alu**, a name given by his uncle, thorough out the novel. The characters are given names according to their appearance and for some with their interests like Jyoti D is referred as **Birdman** when he is in Algeria. The imperial officers who come in the subplot are given names like **Thin Lips** and **Goats Arse** in which Gosh exemplifies the hatred of the people towards the colonial and imperialistic forces that

governed al-Ghazira. Also Malik is called as **Mad Malik** because of his inability to face British forces and also that he cannot stop from his half-brother coming to power.

“These men weren’t lightly to be shot at. For them life was a war. Nothing was going to stop them getting what they wanted; certainly not the Mad Malik of al-Ghazira”
(Loc. 4162- Kindle edition, Amitav Ghosh)

Conclusion

Circle of reason is a complicated novel because it paves way for too many interpretations. It has many internal references tracing back to colonial past and post-colonial present of the time in which the novel is written. The setting in the novel is of three regions, where in author experiments with different characters and characterization. Each reference in the novel compliments oneanother like characters compliment the location and borders diminish through identity. Through Alu, Ghosh holds to the point ‘home is where the heart is’. On the contrary with Mrs. Verma he portrays the diasporic tendency of the identity of association with the native land and alienation in the host land.

Work Cited

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