# THE DIALECTICS OF MYTH AND HISTORY: EXPLORING AND DECODING THE CIRCLE OF REASON BY AMITAV GHOSH
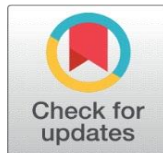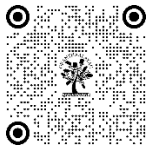
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## ABSTRACT

The Circle of Reason by Amitav Ghosh is a celebration of the fictional arras of myth, history, and rationality. It inevitably offers a glowing and an intricate exploration of human life across assorted cultures and topographies. The novel dextrously blends the mythical narratives with historical reasoning and sturdily challenges the conventional restrictions between fact and fiction. Ghosh's portrayal of the protagonist, Alu, becomes a vehicle to examine the intersections of tradition and modernity, myth and logic, as well as the cultural conflicts that arise rapidly in a globalizing world. The novel, through its non-linear narrative, draws upon allegorical elements from Indian mythology while simultaneously engaging with historical events and scientific ideologies, such as the Enlightenment and colonial enterprise. It thus encompasses the finest tenets of New-Historicism in its journey of human exploration.

**Keywords:** New- Historicism, Globalization, Post-Modernism, Dialectics, Identity, Post-Colonialism, Enlightenment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The arrival of Amitav Ghosh in the arena of Indian English fiction has provided the art of assimilating myth and history a new direction. This article tries to explore and decode the novel *The Circle of Reason* from within the framework of postcolonial literature, emphasizing its thematic concerns with displacement, identity, and the negotiation between indigenous knowledge systems and Western rationality. By interlacing legendary myth and historical reasoning into the narrative, Ghosh underscores the resilience of storytelling as a means of resistance and survival. The novel celebrates the cyclical nature of human experience, where myths provide continuity and history offers context, making *The Circle of Reason* a profound commentary on the shared stories that define humanity.

**Encircling Legendary Myth and Historical Reasoning: Decoding *The Circle of Reason*.**

The genesis and development of Indian English fiction seems to follow certain definite patterns and consists of well-defined stages. Although the earliest novels were not much of artistic worth, they still struggled to carve out their own identity. The gradual progression from the imitative stage to realistic and then to psychological and later to experimental is not difficult to trace. After the World War I, Indian English fiction became more realistic and less idealized. The

novelists made deliberate efforts to depict the history, myth and distress of the downtrodden classes portraying India as she really was. As Peter Barry comments:

The postmodern 'new sensibility' projected the cultural elitism of modernism. Although it often 'quoted' popular culture, modernism was marked by a deep suspicion of all things popular. Its entry into the museum and the academy as official culture was undoubtedly made easier by its homologous relationship with the elitism of class society. The response of postmodern 'new sensibility' to modernism's canonization was a re-evaluation of popular culture. (147)

The novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) by Amitav Ghosh is a unique combination of myth and history. Myth offers itself to subversion to highlight the contemporary socio-cultural history of India. 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 produced representations of real into 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 reference is history itself. In this regard Terry- Eagleton writes:

The literary work is the product of certain produced representation of real into an imaginary object... "The textual real" is related to the historical real, 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. (67)

The ideological environment thus, portrayed in the novel is in agreement, in ns whole or pans, with the historical environment and is in consonance with the sociological laws of human development. The subversion of science and religion towards the end, ends up in postmodern ambivalence. As Bala Kothandaraman says: The title of the novel 'Circle' has structural ramifications, not the least of which is subversion of its own ultimate concern — Reason." (156) The myth deployed for the purpose is the ancient Indian Upanishadic myth of Nachiketa, son of sage Uddalaka known for his perseverance. He makes persistent efforts to oblige the dictum of his father, who offers him to Lord Yama. Nachiketa impresses upon the Lord Yama and receives enlightenment on the true nature of Brahman. He learns the real nature of the two realms and the primordial truth 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 is cursed to undergo the mortification of nether world- 'Yamaloka'.

Lord Yama, lord of righteousness, pleased with the sincere pleadings of Nachiketa concedes to the wish of imparting divine knowledge to him. Nachiketa learns 'Brahmajaana' from Lord Yama. Nachiketa wins the heart of Yama with his commitment to the chosen cause and also 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 soul. He learns that the invisible form of Brahman is in the visible form of fire. The real cause of worshipping fire is to purify the surroundings. Nachiketa Bose is the mythical pre-figuration of mythical Nachiketa. The modern Nachiketa knows truth to be present in scientific reasoning. He grows up under the able 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. Carbolic acid is symbolic of cleansing unhealthy and undesirable practices in society.

The novel, as stated, is mainly concerned with the concept of reason, thematically. The tussle ensues between two sets of people implying the difference of good and evil. Balram his friend Dantu and Gopal Dey who represent the forces of reason. The 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 the life's laboratory of the experiential world. In the second generation their children take up respective positions, that is to say, Alu and 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 escape from the debris of a collapsed multi- storied building and his return home completes a full circle.

The story- line apart the character pre- figuration is simultaneously deployed with plot pre-figuration in an unusual manner, juxtaposing myth and history, fiction and reality. Defining the technique of pre-figuration, John J. White says:

A myth introduced by a modern novelist into his work can pre-figure and hence anticipate the plot in a number of ways. The myth will offer the novelist a short hand system of symbolic comment on modern event. '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 the allegorical significance adding a 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 at reversal of the role of mythical or legendary story to comment upon the contemporary situation and thereby render a value judgment on the existing historical situations of contemporariness, with the apt aid of irony. This leads to a paradoxical position between the character pre-figuration and 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 two dimensions retaining the original source of the Nachiketa myth, The text devises specific modality to transform the entire story into a new being, reminiscent of the techniques of new novel. Amitav Ghosh successfully breaks down the barriers between traditional tale and modern version, making the myth and history more flexible to serve the fictional purpose. The story steadily moves away from the traditional form and treads entirely into a new trajectory. It is not the mere juxtaposition of myth and fiction on the one hand and myth and history on the other, but the novelist's fusion of the two strands into the fabric of the text that binds 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.

Amitav Ghosh introduces this technique in an adroit manner 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 novel is in possession of postmodernist self-reflexivity. This is exemplified in the argument of Balram Bose and his friend Gopal, when they are at melodramatic movie. Balram in the novel 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 room in a language whose history has destroyed its knowledge of its own body. (53)

The novelist explains the historic legitimacy of carbolic acid. The mercury-based disinfectant discovered by Robert Koch is not as good as carbolic acid. Balram, the school teacher, is well versed in the matter of cleaning operation. He leads people by example. He in an exemplary fashion eliminates every germ with the disinfectant in the refugee camp. There is a sea change in his attitude to life. He is totally obsessed with carbolic acid and its efficacy in cleaning the surroundings. The complexities of colonialism and postcolonialism abound in the text. The focus is on simultaneous re-colonization or neo-colonization of the globe by multinational economic forces. This is predicted by Amitav Ghosh much before India opened its doors to the market economy.

Balram concentrates on carbolic acid, room and sewing machine, which are symbolic of self- reliance. Mahatma Gandhi preached and practised the principle of self- reliance as part of his economic policy and signified it with his committed popularization and the propagation of chakra. Nehru envisioned a state of self-sufficiency through planning. The leaders of the freedom movement pleaded for indigenous industries. As Linda Hutcheon says: "The twentieth century has seen the end of official colonial rule in much of the non- European world and, as many have argued, the simultaneous recolonization or neo-colonization of the globe by multinational economic forces." (9)

According to her wit and intuition, such a general statement, however, in a way plays down or risks playing down the significant differences between and among the historical, political and cultural effects of empire in such settler colonies like New Zealand, Australia, France, Canada and even in certain parts of the U. S. A. It has its own impact felt on Indian sub-continent and other former colonies like Caribbean Islands, Indonesia, Korea, Latin America and a host of African nations. The novel The Circle of Reason makes its impact through skilfully devised and engineered structural, verbal and stylistic patterns. As Dutta Pradip puts it: "But what I would consider striking is how the writer accomplished this through the medium of Empire's language while simultaneously decentring Empire's continued cultural hegemony"

(71). However, its most important feature is its postcolonial grounding of the social materiality of discourse. Amitav Ghosh adeptly constructs the text on the lines of epic restless internationalism and the sweeping winds of globalization.

**Conclusion**

Amitav Ghosh in the novel with his astute craftsmanship interweaves myth and history. He creates a narrative that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries to explore the complexities of human existence. He adeptly blends the allegorical elements of Indian mythology with the historical frameworks of colonial and postcolonial modernity. He earnestly tries to challenge the conventional notions of rationality and progress. The novel's cyclical structure reflects the interconnectedness of myth and history. It aptly demonstrates their crucial roles for understanding identity, culture, and resilience in the face of displacement and uncertainty. The journey of Alu and the diverse cast of characters underscore the enduring relevance of myths as repositories of collective memory and the crucial role of history in contextualizing human experiences. Thus, *The Circle of Reason* becomes not just a story of individual transformation but also a wider observation on the shared narratives that bind humanity. Eventually, the novel celebrates the coexistence of imagination and reason and critiques the linear, Eurocentric perspectives on knowledge and history. This blending of myth and historical reasoning asserts the richness of pluralistic storytelling and reminds the cyclical and enduring nature of human existence.

# CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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