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**The Humanistic Vision Of Amitav Ghosh as seen in *The Circle of Reason*.**

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Designed from Latin ‘humanus’ meaning relating to man, humanism is an intellectual movement which characterized the Renaissance civilization. It considered the world a legitimate object of interest and tended to place reason above revelation. It further emphasized the value of education and held that the goal of education was a well balanced individual with all his capabilities fully developed. The language and literature of ancient Greece and Rome, occupied a central position in the thinking of the humanists, not because of any antiquarian interest, but because the literary products of these civilizations exemplified the ideals of humanism, best. In its vaster sense, humanism stood for exalting man’s relationship to God and his free will, and his superiority over nature. Philosophically, humanism made man the measure of all things, a point of view expressed marvellously by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*,

“What a piece of work is man!  
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty.”

Petrarch, Boccaccio, Thomas More and Montaigne were some of the outstanding humanists of the Renaissance period. A century later the humanist tradition was carried forward by writers like Alexander Pope who remarked in his *An Essay on Man* (Epistle 2 [1733])

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan  
The proper study of mankind is man.”

Since time immemorial all over the world, writers and thinkers have spoken about the dignity of man and the fact that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

A.S. Dasan points out in his essay, ‘The Early Indian English Novel and the Era of Humanism’, “the concern of the elite of India for basic human rights” (*The Rain and Roots, the Indian English Novel Then and Now* 34) was one of main social factors associated with the entry of the novel from the west as a literary form in India. The works of the great Indian novelists such as the Big Three or the trinity of Indian English Fiction, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, and the long line of illustrious writers who followed reflect the Humanist Spirit which is so integral a part of Indian culture. “The Indian tradition of accommodative openness - openness that involves a sense of tolerance, receptiveness, understanding and empathy” (Dasan 34) has been reflected in the best of the Indian English novel. The East - West conflict, nationalist consciousness, Gandhian ideology, casteism, poverty and concern for the masses found expressions in the early novelists’ writings.

Dasan goes on to say that with the emergence of Anand as a novelist on the Indian horizon, the Indian English novel took a new turn in the development of social consciousness and critical social realism. Anand was of the view that all creative writings was a purposeful activity and that no creative writer could be satisfied with writing for self satisfaction alone. To him a novel mattered only as long as it served as an instrument of critical realism and as long as it illumined the possibilities of transcending existence and practising compassionate humanism. He wished to communicate the aesthetics of love and compassion as the supreme mover of life. He believed creativity and activism could go together in transforming the world. This was one of the foundational values on which he built his philosophy of integral humanism. He awakened in his reader a sense of social conscience – to see through the

pettiness of exploitation, to have a heart of compunction and to embrace a life of compassion. He believed that human dignity was the ultimate measure of human experience within the world of words.

Women writers like Kamala Markandaya also took up the cause of the poor and down trodden. Like Anand she too believed that the poverty was a social sin. She too speaks of the triumph of the human spirit in the form of philosophical or spiritual attitudes and the Indian way of facing life with a sense of stoic resignation. Khushwant Singh too speaks in his novels of the need for human solidarity against revenge and hatred.

The early Indian English novel was primarily a human document. The foundation laid by the famous three, Anand, Narayan and Rao in shaping the modern Indian literary sensibilities served as the base for the next generation of writers to sustain and expand the realist and humanistic traditions of the Indian English novel.

In much of the new brand of Indian English fiction man still takes centre stage, but we see a change of focus. We see a celebration of hybridity, migration and diaspora. Their writings often concentrate on reconstruction of history but with reference to personal, social and national identity and cross cultural and transcultural identity of India.

The arrival of Salman Rushdie has been seen as the coming of age of diasporic Indian writing. According to A.S. Dasan:

the current Indian English novel has started embracing multi culturalism and pluralism in the midst of cross fertilization of ideas and new forms of cultural exchanges in the context of humanity's drift towards transnational, cultural and social identity arising out of globalization. Consequently Indian writing in English has become a prominent part of the global map of literature.

The question of uprootedness, transplantation and experience of looking at home lands from a distance have been narrated or described in various ways by the diasporic Indian writers. As Dasan points out, variant and vibrant styles of literary excellence, creative voice, modes of satire and magic realism, and narratives concentrating on current issues such as politics, geography, migration, dislocation, identity and cultural distances and incompatibilities have contributed to the variety of themes and techniques in Indian writing in English.

If the major themes of Ghosh's first two novels *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines* is nationalism, political freedom and international relations, In his third novel *In An Antique Land* he takes up a wide canvas as he brings out parallels between Hindu, Muslim and Jewish cultures. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* he pleads for the emancipation of women and in *The Glass Palace* he deals with the rise and fall of imperial powers in the twentieth century.

In most of his novels right upto his latest one *Sea of Poppies* he offers "vivid glimpses of intertwined histories with a subversive or subaltern dimension packed with anecdotes, symbolic meaning and extraordinary range of characters. The effortless passage of his characters through Asia, Europe and America is a metaphor for connecting people emotionally." (Dasan 83). Like Anand and the long line of great Indian writers before him, he tries to recognize and voice the silenced, subaltern voice because that represents the people at the grassroots and they are believed to be more true than official versions. Ghosh questions the veracity of historical version and states that truths revealed by his characters are more true than the truths of individuals narrated in history books. He tries to understand and empathise with the people who lived then. Their quest for personal identity is a predominant theme. His readings of the history of fascism, colonialism and communalism serve as centres to juxtapose defeats and

frustrations of people with reasonable grounds of survival and hope. His is an optimistic world view and he constantly reaffirms his faith in mankind. The way he builds up his female characters provide a glimpse of Indian women's ability to manage crises moments. Amitav Ghosh is still one of the few postcolonial Indian English novelists who can keep up the Indian insider view of life. Living abroad doesn't distance him from the Indian reality past or present and he still considers India as home.

Thus we see that Ghosh carries forth the humanist tradition started off by the ancient Greek and Roman authors such as Protagoras and Sophocles. Protagoras (b.c. 485 BC) had stated in Plato Thaetetus "Man is the measure of all things." Ghost too talks of a human centred universe. He believes in breaking down artificial man made boundaries between nations and people and declaring the oneness of humanity. For beneath the external and superimposed differences of race, sex, caste, class, man remains essentially the same. His fears, joys, insecurities, strengths, are the same. Ghost rues the fact that from ancient times people have been viewing each other with such suspicion and hatred. He preaches an all embracing love for mankind, a unity that will transcend artificial barriers. But to arrive at such a mature view one must first understand oneself. For that one must distance oneself from one's immediate surroundings. That's why he advocates travel as a form of self discovery. His characters travel to far off lands and in the process discover themselves.

A work of fiction is invariably a quest for an identity and meaning, most of all for personal significance in a living world. Ghosh has been persistently trying to imaginatively reconstruct the past through all his novels with the central concern of discovering the invisible threads that link humanity and understanding and giving voice to the individuals predicament.

Ghosh's integrative vision is revealed in Section One of *The Circle Of Reason*—when he makes Balam remark, "Science doesn't belong to countries. Reason doesn't belong to one nation. They belong to history, to the world." (COR 57) Similarly Alu takes to weaving, for the loom according to Ghosh recognizes no countries and no continents. Section One is a delightful one where we follow the fortunes of Balam and Alu through Bengal, right up to the ship Mariamma which is taking a group of people to al ghazira which according to Jyoti Das, the adventurous cop was "on one of the major migration routes." (COR 178). In this section we are introduced to a host of delightful characters ranging from the idiosyncratic phrenologist Balam, to his antagonist Bhudeb Roy, from Shombhu Debnath the weaver, to his resourceful daughter Maya. On board the Mariamma we are introduced to the dour arrogant blunt mechanically skilled Hajji Musa Koya, the disillusioned travel salesman Rakesh, Professor Samuel, the heavily pregnant Karthamma and the 'madam' Zindi al Tiffaha. The engine splutters out in mid sea, Karthamma gives birth to her baby, but the ship finally makes it to al Ghazira. Ghosh's love for the sea and travel and his concern for people from all walks of life is revealed here.

The first section which ends in a violent sweep paves the way for the ensuing section, 'Rajas: Passion,' where we come across a cross section of Indians, all with no passports or work permits, living under one roof. Zindi rules over the household where they are lodged. This is a house where we see the people hatching conspiracies, quarrelling, gossiping, in much the same way as any group of people would irrespective of which country they hailed from. Life in the Ras mad with chaotic activity, passion, desire and ambition was making the people insane. It is in such a disordered state that Alu emerges out of the wreckage of the Star, strengthened in his resolve to wage war on germs and dust which to him seems to be the ordering principle of reason.

In this section Ghosh brings alive the colorful would of an African town. A strong kinship develops between all the characters and they help out each other. Race and nationality are no longer relevant as

these people from various corners of the globe live together. We have Frowning Abusa, Mast Ram, the potato head Abu Fahl, Kulfi the young maid, the businessman Jeevanbhai, "This extraordinary assortment of people" (COR 290) try to cope as best as they can. "To some of them foreign places are all alike in that they are not home." (COR 286) The section ends unhappily with only a few of the characters Kulfi, Alu, Zindi managing to escape to safety, to the Algerian Sahara.

The third section is called 'Tamas' or Death. Tamas connotes darkness and inertia. Tamas also indicates a tendency to decay and die. Zindi Alu and Kulfi are in the small town of El Qued in the middle of the Sahara desert. They have escaped the attack by the police of al Ghazira on the people of Ras. They are being chased by Jyoti Das the bird man who has been entrusted the task of tracking down the supposed terrorist Alu. There is death in the air but for Ghosh the optimist, Death is not the end but the beginning as it gives way to Birth. Death and Birth is part of the eternal cycle of life. The third section though entitled 'Tamas' is more about the birth and new beginning than the end, it is more about the light than about the darkness. It is in the completion of death that there is possibility of birth and new life. This section is a beginning, a birth of the light of consciousness, 'Satwa'.

As in *The Shadow Lines* the essence of the novel emerges towards the end.

Here as we reach the end, the crux of the novel starts crystallizing. The reason of Balaram and Abu is placed in contrast with that of Mrs. Verma, which is more integrative and unifying since it is flexible and responsive to the world of reality and the requirements of circumstances. The thematic structure of the novel is in fact a metaphorical extension of the world view of the novelist. There is no direct reference to nations and their restrictive and artificial borders. Nevertheless the integrated vision of the novel is an implicit allusion to the worldview of Ghosh that envisages a non fragmented status of the world.

*The Bhagawad Gita* states, "when the understanding enables one to see an immutable oneness in all beings, and an undivided whole in all the manifold shapes, know that to be the true light." (Adhyaya XVIII - Slokas 18-20). It is this highest philosophy and sentiment that Ghosh propounds in his novel *The Circle of Reason* and *Sea of Poppies*. Like all humanists he bases himself on faith in the goodness of human nature.

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