

The Circle of Reason: Balaram's Obsession

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Abstract

The Circle of Reason, written in 1986, is Amitav's first novel which enabled him to the pinnacle of Indian-English writing and included him in the group of luminous writing fraternity. This work vindicated him as a master craftsman. This very first novel of Amitav Ghosh broke the traditional shackles and he followed his own style with his innovative genius and exploring capabilities.

The circle of Reason develops gradually, in three sections; from 'Sattva: Reason' and 'Rajas: Passion' to 'Tamas: Death'. The circle's other meaning is here 'restlessness' to find Reason which doesn't end. The novel is full of several obsessed characters who are striving to find their ideals in this anarchic world; everybody seems to be restless to complete the circle.

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Introduction

From the very beginning of the novel everybody is obsessed, and tries to find his own ideals. Balaram is obsessed with phrenology, carbolic acid and the book, 'Life of Pasteur. He also gifts its one copy to Dantu. Gopal too has a copy of it, Balaram seems to be crazy about phrenology and after the death of his brother, he is extremely happy because his extraordinary head is a very suitable material for him to go on with his research work on phrenology. Nachiketa's brain was very unusual and extraordinary having several knots and bumps. It is like a rock covered with fungus, and that was the reason that Bolaida had given him the nickname 'Alu'. When first time he saw him, he at once remarked:

"A huge freshly dug, lumpy potato". (The Circle of Reason-3)

As soon as Balaram reached home, he appeared again in front of him with the 'Claws'. Balaram himself made this instrument, for measuring skulls. He didn't care about the child's mental state as he had lost his parents but was only obsessed with his own passion i.e. Phrenology. He had nothing to do with anybody's feeling or emotions. Alu was afraid of Balaram's instrument, but for Balaram:

"It was all very confuring and very exciting a wealth of new stimulating material".(9)

Balaram was busy in studying Alu's head. He also wrote a paper on the indistinctness of the organs of the brain and sent it to the Bombay Natural History Society and to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta. He also declared that the lumps of the back and the sides of the head showed that they would drive the poor boy to some crime. He also foretold about his self esteem, vanity, cautiousness, firmness, language, eventuality, perceptive and reflective faculties with the help of studying Alu's protuberances. For Balaram, Alu's head was a matter of keen interest:

"It was like sitting down to a wedding feast after years of stewed rice".(9)

Balaram told about Dantu after seeing a veneration organ on his head that he would be turned out into a saint. But his theory didn't come true as Dantu was more interested in politics than religion. He himself found that he could be a better teacher. When his friend Gopal asked him, what made him think that he could teach, he at once showed Gopal the upper parts of his temples and the sides of his head:

"Look: Hope, Wonder, Ideality and Firmness. What could make a better teacher". (19)

Balaram also judged Bhudeb Roy's nature and behaviour by the distinct swellings on his head. He judged Bhudeb's idealism and benevolence with the help of Phrenology but his friend Gopal and wife Toru Debi did not believe him because

Balaram began to say that the sign of idealism on Bhudeb's head began to disappear. Moreover, there appeared some protuberances of vanity, self-esteem and acquisitiveness. As soon as he saw Bhudeb's portraits hanging up all over the school, he came to know that he was charging fifty rupees from the parents of each child only for himself. Balaram was so confident of his pedantry that he did not hesitate a bit to tell Bhudeb, about his new born child, that he would be a homicidal:

"It was the first time he had been consulted like a doctor or surgeon, In a way it was more than a triumph for his science-it was a personal victory".(23)

He also did not forget to warn Bhudeb to nurture the child properly otherwise he might be perhaps his first victim. Balaram perked up that he had the knowledge of Phrenology. He himself said:

"I may as well have phrenology. After all, it's scientific; and I'm a man of future". (22)

He believed that his predictions could never be wrong. But ironically Bhudeb's child died of double pneumonia very soon after that, but still he remained adamant to his theory even in such a bitter and sorrowful moment. He was busy in studying Bhudeb's head. Balaram's obsession for everything was out of limit, He was not only obsessed with phrenology but also with criminology, carbolic acid and study of several languages.

For him Alu was a promising boy. He could study phrenology and could do experiments of any kind at any time with him. He was also very pleased to know that the boy had learnt several languages such as French, English, Bengali and Hindi which Balaram himself could barely understand. Balaram became too much possessive for the boy that he could not imagine a life without him. He himself accepted his possessiveness for Alu and his firm belief in phrenology in this line:

"Perhaps" said Balaram, ruminating, "I could try massaging him on the occipital bone where the emotions and sentiments are". (27)

Balaram was a rationalist. He believed only in science and reason. He had firm belief that with the help of science and reason he could change the world. Perusing reason, he once knocked down the image of Ma Saraswati, which he thought was nothing but a means to fulfil the selfish needs of Bhudeb:

"This, he said to the electrified crowd, is not Saraswati. This is not learning, he said, knocking the clay with his knuckles. This is vanity".(31)

Bhudeb was also familiar with his extremist passion and obsession. He always remained afraid of Balaram's inhuman plays. This became more obvious when he went to Assistant Superintendent of Police, Jyoti Das, and told him about Balaram's

blind obsession. He called Balam:

"a confused extremist" (35)

Balam had passion for science since his childhood at the age of thirteen. Balam's house was filled with electric light in 1997 and it was a great enchantment for him. He became glad beyond measures:

"He read about the Chinese and Benjamin, Franklin and Edison became one of his first heroes. In school he pursued the physics teachers with questions". (40)

After being matriculated with distinctions, Balam's teachers decided to choose history as a subject for further study and suggested him to study in Presidency College, Calcutta. In order to inspire him they acquainted him with the name of Suniti Chatterji, the professor of philology and told him about a young brilliant philosopher Radhakrishnan. But Balam had nothing to do with any of these subjects:

"For him it was the city in which Ronald Ross discovered the origin of malaria and Robert Koch, after years of effort, finally isolated the bacillus which causes typhoid. It was the Calcutta in which Jagdish Bose first demonstrated the extraordinary life like patterns of stress responses in metals; where he first proved to a disbelieving world that plants are no less burdened with feeling than man".(41)

Balam's affection for Presidency College was undaunted. For him, it was the place where two students of Jagdish Bose had been taught- Sat yen Bose and Meghnad Saha, the former told about elementary particles of the universe and the latter's formulation of the likeness between a star and an atom had laid the foundation of a whole branch of astrophysics.

In Presidency College Balam befriended by Gopal and Dantu. Once Gopal lent Balam a book, a copy of Mrs. Devonshire's translation of René Vallery-Radots 'Life of Pasteur'. This book left a remarkable impression on Balam's young mind. He was very much influenced by Pasteur's life, his experiments and their results. He liked Pasteur's passion very much. Balam never believed in empty talks. He believed in practical application in any subject. He was highly impressed by Pasteur's discovery of

"infinitesimally small – the Germ".(49)

This germ was responsible for the rotting of beer in France and damaging of silk in Europe. Pasteur also strived to get rid of hydrophobia. For Balam there was no difference in saying 'He Bhogoban', or 'Hail, Cosmic Boson'. For him reason and passion were important. He himself opined:

“It wasn’t talk of Reason, it wasn’t the universal atom. It was passion; a passion which sprang from the simple and the everyday. A passion for the future, not the past”. (50)

For him passion was the most important thing. It could change man’s life as well as the whole world’s conception.

“It is the passion which makes men great”. (50)

Balaram never forgot his passion and this passion dominated his whole life. Balaram always used to talk of reason and science. He, even, when asked to choose his birthdate chose none, but the date between May and June when Jagdish Chandra Bose invented that plants also have feelings. Balaram says that Reason defies countries. It connects people all over the world. According to him:

“Science doesn’t belong to countries, Reason doesn’t belong to any nation. They belong to the history-to the world.”(54).

When the genocide in Bangladesh took place, Lalpukur began to swell with large number of people and because of the extraordinary refuge and developments Lalpukur was filled with foul odour, stagnant water, pregnant with disease, flies, mosquitoes and rats were seen everywhere. It was a challenge for Balaram and he had only one solution i.e carbolic acid. He called a meeting and appealed to the people to contribute so that they could buy it. He volunteered by making a small contribution and soon they had enough amount to buy the disinfectant. Now Balaram was a changed man, highly obsessed with disinfectant and cleanliness. He began to disinfect every exposed inch of Lalpukur. Bolai Da, said, watching him:

“This is a new Balaram-babu. It was true: Balaram, antiseptic and pungent with disinfectant, had never so happy.”(61)

However, Ulka Joshi pointed out some ironical elements in Balaram’s this passion. She says:

“Balaram, who talks of reason all the time, practically, seems to lose it himself. It is also ironic that he who swears by science, relies on nineteenth century pseudoscience, Phrenology which is close to the Indian Superstition of popular religion and astrology that he opposes.” (Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandan.2001:27)

This carbolic acid was also used by Balaram against Bhudeb Roy, which shows his negative passion of destruction. In spite of his business in disinfecting Lalpukur, Balaram couldn’t compromise with his passion for Phrenology. Bhudeb was also surprised as he couldn’t understand why such a strong believer in science and reason was sending his nephew to a weaver’s house to be an apprentice in

weaving .But there should be no surprise in that decision as Balaram had taken that decision after making a long calculation. He had firm belief in destiny and phrenology . He had even measured the parts of weaving machine and Shombu's body parts and then matched his calculation with the measurements of Alu's body parts. According to him:

"His intuition was proved right in every detail," (The Circle of Reason-55)

When Gopal tried to oppose his decision of sending Alu to Shombu Debnath, Balaram strictly claimed that nothing but weaving was Alu's destiny and he couldn't neglect that. He explained:

"Once the organ was identified everything else became blindly clear- Alu's huge hands, his squat stocky frame. Even the mysterious attraction that drew him to Shombu Debnath's home. How could he cheat his destiny?"(55)

As soon as Balaram's interest in weaving sprouted, he declared that:

"Weaving is reason, which makes the world mad and make it human,"(58).

He told Gopal about the whole history of cotton. He narrated that William Lee in England began it with his invention of stretching frame for yarn. He even tried to prove that Charles Babbage had taken the idea of inventing computer from the draw looms. He also told that in 1981 Joseph Jacquard invented his automatic selective device based on the same principle and Babbage took ideas for his calculating engines from Jacquard loom, and Holleville who patented the first punched card machines took his ideas from Babbage. In this way Balaram proved his opinion. He said very proudly:

"And so weaving too, is hope..... Weaving is hope because it has no country, no continent."(58)

In Amitav Ghosh : A Critical Study, Sarika Pradiprao Auradkar concludes :

"When Balaram decides to make the young Alu a weaver, he tells him a history of technology of weaving that evokes cultural idea that culture is process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders".(Sarika Pradiprao Auradkar.2007: 25)

She also explained how Amitav Ghosh describes through the history of cotton, that:

"the routes of international trade are over determined by economic forces," (Auradhkar,25)

When Bhudeb decided to put an end to his career as the school's head

master, he invited the villagers to hear his speech. He proceeded on by saying that it was the time to serve the people and the need of hour was straight lines, straight houses, straight roads, straight vehicle etc. But Balaram knew that it was not because of that reason but it was to put an end to carbolic acid. So the very moment he conceived the idea of opening the Pasteur School of Reason, which would have two main departments : The Department of Practical Reason and the Department of Pure Reason. It was decided that Balaram himself would be the head of the Department of Pure Reason where students would be given lectures on history of science and technology and taught elementary reading , writing and arithmetic. In the Department of Practical Reason, tailoring and weaving would be taught by Toru Debi, Maya, Alu and Shombu. It was decided that Rakhhal would be appointed as the school's Sales Manager. But all the planning of that project was shattered, because when Balaram saw that the project was doing better than his expectations, he desired to open a third department in that school the Department of The March of Reason and he explained that the task of that department was to disinfect the whole village with carbolic acid and made it germ free. In this school, Balaram had found the means of fulfilling all his decisions. Balaram also collected some volunteers in order to fulfil his want for cleanliness. He did whatever he could to pursue his obsession. Balaram's rationalism and whims led to his self destruction. For him human beings are bumps to be studied and live to be cleansed. Balaram's obsession for carbolic acid at last becomes the cause of his death. Apparently, the novel suggests that life is very short and it is full of obsessions, restlessness, uncertainties and changes and only death can bring eternal rest to it.

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