

# Psychosocial Analysis of Characters in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the psychosocial analysis of characters present in *The Circle of Reason* written by Amitav Ghosh. Whenever there's a move on political afflictions there comes a dilemma amongst the people's lives and their quest for their identity. Postcolonial writings deal with colonizing the tradition, culture, images, scenes, languages and so on. Throughout the writings of Ghosh, his characters exhibit a lot of resistance. His narration highlights the ideologies of human freedom, liberty, identity, individuality via the life-like portrayal of characters. However, other authors such as Salman Rushdie, R.K. Narayan, Vikram Seth, Arundati Roy, Amitav Ghosh struggled a lot in order to evolve their writings from social suppression and move them towards social recognition. In addition, there are many more postcolonial elements in Ghosh's narratives which touch upon the psychosocial and psychoanalytic changes experienced by his characters.

**Keywords:** Psychosocial Analysis, Society, Identity, Post Colonialism, Symbolism, Narrative Technique

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'psychosocial' means interrelating the psychological aspect and social relationship of a person. This term came into usage by Erik Erikson's theory. Unlike Freud, Erikson used his theory in order to understand a person much better about who he is and what his relationship is with the society. To give an in-depth awareness, Erikson has divided this theory into eight different stages' such as:

- Trust v Mistrust i.e. to give and get in return.
- Autonomy vs Doubt and Shame i.e. to hold on, to move on.
- Initiative vs Guilt i.e. to do and learn things, to pursue dreams, goals.
- Industry vs Inferiority i.e. to project ideas and to learn to cooperate with people.
- Identity Role vs confusion i.e. search for self, acceptance of self.

- Intimacy vs Isolation i.e. learning to love, to lose and to live on.
- Generativity vs Stagnation i.e. responsibility to be taken care of.
- Integrity vs Despair i.e. in peace with self.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* is a complete saga divided into three parts: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas deals with adventurous life of the protagonist Alu. A young master who has been wrongly targeted as a terrorist of which he is not part of, and he's been chased away from Bengal to Bombay and to Al-Ghazira by bird-watching inspector, Das. The readers are drawn towards the characters and to the tender incidents which are compellingly delivered. Ghosh is the weaver of words like how Alu became an expert in cloth and laced with a humor and foresight to produce a narrative quality of surpassing beauty.

Every character present in the novel plays roles to add up to the flavor. But Alu stays permanent throughout the novel. When Nachiketa enters village with his aunt Toru Debi, everyone around the village finds it funny seeing the size of his head. Some even said “It’s like a rock covered with fungus” (*The Circle of Reason*, p.3). But Bolai Da apprehends as: “No, it’s not like a rock at all. It’s an alu, a potato, a huge potato, freshly dug, lumpy potato (p.4).” Nobody could realize that he owns another name by birth. They found Alu more appropriate than his original name. According to Fanon (1925-1962) “identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it’s only a problematic progress of an access to an ‘image’ of totality” (2008: xxix). The problem with people is they never try to understand the importance of one’s own identity. Identity does come from their name, but here, Nachiketa is named as Alu for being born with a lumpy head.

In terms of Erikson, Alu is at the stage of Identity vs Role confusion. Here, Alu does trust his aunt and his uncle and he is criticized for born with lumpy head. And when Alu is almost at the age of understanding things, his uncle Balaram would say “You’d have to change your head if you read Spurzhein or Gall - wouldn’t be able to live with the confusion” (p.10). Balaram was known for his interests on “phrenology or physiognomy” (p.14). This shows that he is quite interested in Science and the study of a persons’ facial expression. In short, it is to be noted that he is being inspired by Vallery-Radot’s *Life of Pasteur*. And he later launches a campaign against germs and superstitious beliefs in the village. In the meantime, Alu becomes quite a learner in weaving. At first, he is wronged by his appearance but later he proves his intellect level on becoming one of the finest weavers around the village. Moreover, he takes side to participate with his uncle in the protest movement.

This novel deals with westernized binaries like science vs religion, soul vs body, and practical life vs scientific life, east vs west. Here, *Life of Pasteur* plays an important role on signifying the symbolism. In the words of Erikson, Balaram is being self-absorbed with the idea of cleansing the society with carbolic acid,

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when the refugees flee to settle down in Lalpukar. *Life of Pasteur* taught Balaram a life-savoring lesson, that is, education played an important role. Sometimes, bread isn’t the only answer or quest for life. It brings to light the purpose, character and meaning of life. The novel has been divided into three different parts where in the first part Alu is introduced by the author to the family of Balaram. He is a person who is often worried about the nature of Alu who lacks the mode of response. But soon Alu proved and almost developed his skills on weaving. Through Sombhu Debnath, Alu understands that

“words serve no purpose; nothing mechanical...that is why loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world’s armies of pen-wielders” (p.79).

For Alu, who is not much of a talking person this seemed to serve his purpose.

Balaram is an extremist who believes that “chance doesn’t have a meaning that is why it’s chance” (p.97). He seizes the moment and he live a life of a rationalist. And that is why he has been *The Circle of Reason*: “I shall stand my ground, for Reason has nothing to fear” (p.97). Every story does revolve through a disastrous change with one single person’s thought and with this story line it is Bhudeb Roy. When Roy started his conversation with the people on village on borders i.e. the line that covered their territory, he stated: “That’s what we need: straight lines. There’s time and an age for everything, and this is the age of the straight line” (107-108). Balaram started accusing Bhudeb Roy for his border talks as he is very much aware that he is after his Carbolic acid. Hence, “That was when the Pasteur School of Reason was conceived in Balram’s mind” (p.109).

Carbolic acid is meant to purify the dirt and germs produced by the refugees. Here, Balaram meant to cleanse the area of the refugee camp also the irrational activities of Bhudeb Roy. The result of Roy’s irrational attitude reveals to us his core motivation of destroying Carbolic Acid. It exemplifies Erikson’s Generativity vs Stagnation when a person feels rejected and turns into a wretched fellow of society. This incident depicts the discipline of postcolonialism

and shows how it affects the everyday life of the villagers. Philip Darby (1998) accuses the post colonisation as “free floating and open-ended in a way that enables a discounting or passing over established disciplined of thought” (Darby, 1998: 217). There were people busy making bombs and well prepped for the situation of war. In the meantime, Balaram establishes a school where he practices the ‘school of reason and school of practical’ acquired from the *Life of Pasteur*. Everything is apart from the *Life of Pasteur* in a much wider aspect on deliberating the educational importance to the villagers. Balaram makes use of that school as a mode of earning as well as a medium of education. This triggers Bhudeb Roy’s ego and in the end he burns the entire space of Balaram. He frames Alu as a terrorist. Jyoti Das takes charge to capture Alu. Then the story continues with the escape of Alu from his town to al-Ghazira.

Alu meets Zindi whilst travelling and he starts working for her. He also starts a campaign over there. This time he visualizes money as dirt and germ which has to be abolished completely. He is almost successful until he gets trapped in an accident. Every time the concept of cleansing and purifying takes over the storyline; it brings out the fact on how badly people have been influenced by the colonial life. ‘Carbolic acid’ is symbolized as the cleansing agent of the society. Amitav Ghosh takes the reader to travel along the age-old scenario and the characters portrayed in the novel. Nachiketa himself is projected as a mythical imagery meaning ‘a young boy waiting at Yama’s door’. Yama is again a mythical Hindu god who is responsible for death. Alu symbolizes Yama at times and whenever he is around in the village. One way or the other, the people around him die. Amitav Ghosh uses this symbolic notch to showcase how people get surrounded with filth and dirt.

The second part of the novel deals with passion. Al-Ghazira is a place well known for trading and earning loads of money. Zindi takes care of Alu and lets him stay at her place and work. Zindi is known for sheltering the lower-waged people under her roof. But she has her own intentions for helping these people. Alu, for quite some time takes part in earning  
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and he quietly remembers the *Life of Pasteur* and he wants to kill those germs i.e. the money-minded people. He considers them as inferior as the germs and dirt. Amitav Ghosh brings the storyline of Pasteur, where he discovered the germ. But unfortunately, he couldn’t kill the germ. He died defeated. In the end Alu finds out who the real germ is: “The answer is money” (p.502).

Alu starts making plans on controlling and killing the germs. This threatens the quiet ambience and few oil merchants when he starts to clean with carbolic acid. This makes the people to fear for their lives in al-Ghazira. Zindi is broke due to the sudden changes and states that: “we’re ruined, all our years of struggle wasted because of a few days of madness” (306). Nothing stops Alu from his cleansing activities: “They washed the shelves, the floor, the counter, even the lane outside” (p.324). Zindi realized the mess she will be facing during the on coming days because of Alu. So, she starts seeking out a bird-man about cloth business, to start or take over the shop of tailoring. In the following pages of the novel, Alu becomes a weaver. The cloth that he weaves resembles the earliest civilization that took place in India. During Indus Valley Civilization, cotton came to progress and India became the first country to produce cotton. Since then the clothing system took place in our country. According to Erikson, Zindi is quite self-absorbed plus she doesn’t want to be controlled by anyone. She wants to be a boss lady. Next Das who comes to al-Ghazira to hand-cuff Alu gets to know that:

“a mass procession led by your old friend is going to march out of the Ras tomorrow-sorry, today-in the evening. They might even be armed. They plan to march to the Star” (p.350).

Star is the place when Alu meets with an accident and the *Life of Pasteur* inspires him to clean the germs. Zindi is alarmed that Alu is going to get arrested at Star. She begs him not to take part in the protest and to stop other people joining in. Alu shakes his head: “There’s nothing I can do...I don’t want to go myself. It’s not in my hands” (p.361).

She understands that nothing can be done and after a while she remembers that she hears that Zeynab is to set sail for the 'Red Sea'. She returns home and packs all her belongings, along with Kulfi and Boss. While she is waiting for the ship to sail, she sees the blurry image of the road beneath her. The whole place is filled with high screaming voices everywhere: "It was all sand now, everywhere, like the desert in a Khasim, wrapping her in layers, sifting into her mouth and into her eyes" (p.376).

Then, however they manage to get away from that place and the story shifts to El Oued, the final part i.e. Death. It evolves with Mrs. Verma remembering her fathers' lessons: "If you're going to do anything, do it as though you meant to finish it, and finish it well besides" (p.381).

Unlike Balaram and Alu, Mrs. Verma has her own opinions. She doesn't believe in rationalism. Every page that flips through the novel has logic as the main theme. Mrs. Verma is almost a spiritual person and not much of a science person. Mrs. Verma is totally different who has reached the stage of Stagnation and appears to possess a positive attitude always willing to help and contribute to someone in need. When Mrs. Verma is on search of servants for her home, she finds Kulfi, Zindi, Alu and Boss exactly the type of family she wants, and she states: "no one was that lucky in this world" (p.387).

They cook up a cover story and hide away their identity to Mrs. Verma. This showcases the point that every immigrant does rely on hard work and plan on settling down in their life in an alien land. Especially, where a woman is concerned about her life is worse than a man. Zindi travels across every west part of the country to get rid of the man who follows them all through the day. And, when they are in the desert they feel safe: "safer after all. There aren't any birds in the desert" (p.397).

Dr Murali Chandra Mishra is known to be a rationalist. And, Mrs. Verma hates the rationalists and she mostly dislikes the ideas: "It comes from the rottenness within: those who've been dipped in pitch see nothing but blackness everywhere" (p.411).

Everyone in the home plans for a drama. After discussing the type, they end up with 'Chithrangada', a dance drama. It's all about the storyline of Mahabharata, where the daughter of Chithrangada falls in love with Arjuna. But she gets rejected because of her looks, as she is brought up like a boy. After requesting the gift of beauty from god for a year, she is married to Arjuna. As a year passes Arjuna sees the real beauty of his wife. When she says that all her beauty is gone, Arjuna realizes "that beauty is only deception, an illusion of the senses" (p.414). Beauty is just for a phase of life and humans must understand that brains are the real beauty.

So, Mrs. Verma explains the role that everyone must play and Das is also accompanied by the doctor in the play. He is the bird-man of all the times. Except Alu no one knew about it. Alu finds a familiar book the *Life of Pasteur* on the book shelf. When he sees the book, he is lost in thoughts: "He was afraid; afraid of the power of science and those books of his; afraid that if he disowned them, they would destroy him" (p.427).

When Kulfi is found dead, everybody is astounded. Only Mrs. Verma wants a proper cremation for Kulfi. Dr. Mishra doesn't like her idea and so she becomes dejected "...you and your kind have destroyed everything-science, religion, socialism-with your rules and your orthodoxies. That's the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human" (p.442).

Then Mrs. Verma takes charge of Kulfi's cremation by arranging everything for the burial. When they find out that there's no Ganga Jal i.e. the holy water, they decide to use carbolic acid. Finally, "The world has come full circle, he groaned. Carbolic acid has become holy water" (p.444).

After the burial, Alu and Zindi prep themselves up to return home. Das approaches them and says that he is heading in the opposite direction. Everyone settles down peacefully. Finally, in terms of Erikson, Mrs. Verma, Zindi, Alu and Das find their meaning of life. They learn to accept the self and "Hope is the new beginning" (p.457).

## II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Circle of Reason* concentrates mostly on the narrative technique travelling from the past to the present. It also narrows down the histories with symbolic representations of Alu's head, carbolic acid, self-identity, the clothing system, which are the author's greatest strengths. Overall Amitav Ghosh is more interested in focusing on issues of identity rather than offering a simple solution. He always has a touch of open-endedness to his conclusions. Despite it, his individual perspective of seeing and handling things runs through the novel as a binding thread in the story line.

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