"WEAVING IS REASON":
A Critical Reading of Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

In anthropology today there exists a considerable anxiety over the problem of representation. How can we understand when 'knowledge is power' without upsetting, or appropriating the self/other balance? In an effort to deal with this anthropological dilemma, writing 'about writing' has become a focal point of attention for authors like James Clifford, George Marcus, Vincent Crapanzano, Nancy Schmidt and Clifford Geertz, to name only a few. Bruce Kapferer has identified the concern over this issue as a "rapidly developing dominant anthropological genre" (1989:77). Elsewhere, the issue has been described as the "new anthropology" (see Clifford and Marcus 1986), or "the spirit of post-modernism" in a post-colonial ethos (Said 1989:222). In the context of this largely Euro-American current of discourse appears Amitav Ghosh: a little known Indian anthropologist and novelist in Delhi. The subject of this paper is an examination of Ghosh and his recent work, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), in relation to a backdrop of contemporary anthropological theory.

RÉSUMÉ

En anthropologie, il existe présentement une anxiété considérable concernant le problème de la représentation. Comment pouvons-nous comprendre quand 'la connaissance est le pouvoir' sans approprier l'équilibre du moi/autre? Plusieurs auteurs tel que James Clifford, George Marcus, Vincent Crapanzano, Nancy Schmidt et Clifford Geertz ont réfléchi sur ce dilemme anthropologique. Bruce Kapfer a identifié les problèmes communs de ces travaux en tant qu'un "genre anthropologique en développement rapide" (1989:77). Ailleurs, le problème a été décrit comme constituant "la nouvelle anthropologie" (voir Clifford et Marcus 1986), ou comme "l'esprit du post-modernisme" dans un éthos post-colonial (Said 1989:222). Dans ce contexte largement Euro-Américain, apparait Amitau Ghosh: un anthrologue et écrivain des Indes peu connu. Le sujet de cet article consiste d'une examination de Ghosh et de son travail récent, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), en relation à la théorie anthropologique contemporaine.

INTRODUCTION

Clifford Geertz maintains that

the present jumbling of varieties of discourse has grown to the
point where it is becoming difficult either to label authors
(What is Amitav Ghosh -- novelist, philosopher,
anthropologist?), or to classify works (What is *The Circle of
Reason* -- treatise, criticism, fiction, anthropology?) (Geertz
1987:194).

Gayatri Spivak asserts that disciplinary boundaries may be moved or
changed through the act of attending to what is omitted (1988). By
bringing Ghosh into the realm of anthropological discourse, where he has
indeed been excluded, and by incorporating his novel, which is by no
means conventional, I will be deliberately transgressing some boundaries
in an area where they are decidedly blurred.

Amitav Ghosh is a thirty-three year old professor of social
anthropology at the University of Delhi, India. Described as "tall and
boyish looking", Ghosh was born the son of an Indian diplomat in
Calcutta. He was raised in parts of India, as well as East Pakistan, Sri
Lanka and Iran. As a young man he worked as an editor and reporter at
the *Indian Express*, a journal viewed as a central symbol of opposition to
the Gandhi administration. This early political activity suggests that
Ghosh, from the beginning was, to some extent, radically oriented in his
own environment. Later, he received a scholarship from Oxford
University where he completed his Phd in 1982. The subject of his D.
Phil dissertation at Oxford was derived from a year's fieldwork, between
1980 and 1981, in Egypt's western Delta province of Beheria. Most of his
fieldwork was done in the small village of Nacaawy which has a
population of about 1,700. His academic work centers on systems of
kinship, labor and politics in this area. He has published at least one
article on the phenomenon of evil eye practices and relations of envy in
the village of Nacaawy (Ghosh 1983).

Ghosh has said that "the only thing I ever wanted to do was write a
novel" (see Burgess 1986:6). The idea began in high school when he first
opened *Moby Dick*. "Reading Melville's chapter on whales," he said, "I
remember thinking, this is something I want to be able to do" (Weisman
1986:6). He admits to other influences by Bengali writers like

Rabindranath Tagore. His self-stated ambition was realized in 1986 with the publication of his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*. He has sinced published a second work, entitled *The Shadow Lines* (1988), but has no plans to give up his teaching position in the department at Delhi. "I love the stimulation of teaching", he has said. "I would hate to sit in a room writing all day" (Weisman 1986:6).

The Circle of Reason was well received by both Indian and overseas audiences. It was reviewed in such high profile publications as *India Today* (March 15, 1986) and *The New York Times Book Review* (July 6, 1986). The novel has received the attention of such prominent literary figures as Anthony Burgess, Hanif Kureishi, and Anita Desai. In general, Ghosh has been credited for successfully mastering the genre known as 'magical realism' which was largely developed in India by Salman Rushdie, and in South America by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Ghosh is seen as belonging to this international school of writing which successfully deals with the post-colonial ethos of the modern world without sacrificing the ancient histories of separate lands (Desai 1986:149).

Caputo has warned against the artificial divisions of academic disciplines, "the systematic exclusions which the disciplines enforce ... which has turned the disciplines in upon themselves and isolated them from one another and from society at large" (1987:194). Although Ghosh has contributed an innovative critique of anthropological dictums, his novel fails to be recognized (as far as I know) in published anthropological discourse. Instead, it has been received and appreciated by the literary world, who recognize the skill with which it deals with anthropological subjects such as the richness of experience on the Indian sub-continent, the migration of individuals, the mixing of cultures, and the clashes of ideas and human histories. The literary world, however, has been quick to underline a separation between Ghosh's activities as an 'up and coming novelist' on the one hand, and as an anthropologist on the other. One reviewer has even observed that, while the novel has its brilliant parts, "it comes to an end without having taught us anything ... Mr. Ghosh, (not Professor Ghosh)" he writes, "reserves the didactic for his courses in sociology at Delhi" (Burgess 1986:6).

Indeed, most reviewers convey the sense that Ghosh, as an author of fiction and as a professor of anthropology, is somehow engaged in two separate (if not conflicting) activities. They are interested that Ghosh emerges from an academic background, referring to his position at the department in Delhi, or his 'day job' so to speak, but none seem to explore this link any further. The exclusionary message in Caputo's terms, is that for the literary community, *The Circle of Reason* is not anthropology, it

is **only fiction**. For the anthropological community, it is not only **not anthropology**, both Ghosh and his book simply fail to exist. As far as the response to *The Circle of Reason* is concerned, the two disciplines (literature on the one hand, and anthropology on the other) have effectively enforced the boundaries between the disciplines, turning them inwards, isolating themselves from society at large.

DISCUSSION

At one level, it appears paradoxical that Ghosh's innovative contribution has arisen from the generally conservative structures of Indian academia. But at another level it seems like a strikingly Indian characteristic. Ghosh speaks to this idea by way of one of the characters in his novel, Jyoti Das, an Indian policeman who first appears in a chapter significantly titled TAKING SIDES. Jyoti Das is a painter and a bird-lover and above all, a bad policeman. He is, however, content with his job because it at least allows him the time to pursue his drawings and his interest in ornithology. He decides to enter the police force because his passion for painting birds would be

> better protected in the police than anywhere else, for it is only when the world you have to make your way in has no real connection with you that your private world is safe (1986:125).

The character of Jyoti Das, like Ghosh himself, has little difficulty reconciling these two apparently disparate interests. In the Indian context, the notion of dual identities or, specifically, the public and the private within a single individual, is accepted, embraced, and even celebrated as two different sides of the same human coin. The cultural opposition between public and private is both the target of feminist deconstructionist activity (i.e., Spivak 1988:103), as well as the context which gives rise to what one reviewer has referred to as "the bewildering complexity of the Indian male". The Indian context has supplied Ghosh with the flexibility to pursue the emotional activity of fiction-writing in the private sphere, without interfering with the professional or intellectual activities which constitute the public domain. It is the Indian acceptance of such a duality, of being able to 'take sides', that has helped make it possible for Ghosh to achieve such literary success from within the context of conservative Indian academic and social structures.

The Circle of Reason is the story of the adventures of Alu, a young orphan, who is taken in by his Uncle Balaram in a village in East Bengal. Like Saleem Sinai, the central character in Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1982), whose nose was so large it resembled the shape of the Indian sub-continent, Ghosh's protagonist is also physically disfigured. He is called Alu, which means potato in Hindi, because of the "knots and bumps which cover his head like a huge, freshly dug, lumpy potato" (Ghosh 1986:3). This makes him a great source of pleasure to his uncle Balaram, a man who places absurd faith in the pseudo-science of phrenology, and whose behavior is motivated by his worship of Louis Pasteur. In the character of Balaram, reason and science are taken to their comical extreme: he is entirely immersed in the world of books, and out of touch with the realities of life in his Bengali village. Both the village and the "Pasteur School of Reason", which he sets up in it, are doomed by Balaram's ridiculous delusions about the uses of carbolic acid to maintain a germ-free community. By the end of the first part of the book, the village is destroyed by a series of bizarre events, the "Pasteur School of Reason" is burned to the ground, and Balaram is killed. Alu survives, and rejects his uncle's absurd notions of scientific positivism. Instead, he becomes a master weaver.

The novel is in three parts, which are titled according to the tripartite structure of the Indian cycle of the soul: SATWA (reason), RAJAS (passion), and TAMAS (death). The parts of the novel follow Alu from this village in Bengal to a mythical Gulf state town called Al-Ghazira in the Middle East. In the second section, Alu meets up with a new cast of characters including Professor Samuel (who is not really a professor), a huge brothel madam and level-headed business woman called Zindi, a prostitute called Kulfi, and her baby, 'Boss'. The last three accompany Alu into the third part of the book set in a town called El Qued, on the edge of the Algerian Sahara. In this town Alu becomes involved, through various sets of circumstances, with the half a dozen Indians (educated medical specialists) who comprise the small community there. At the end of the book, Alu's journey has come full circle and he is seen on a boat heading back to India.

The title of the book itself (*The Circle of Reason*) provides a metacommentary of shifting limits. That which is 'rational' is consistently being cancelled in favour of the cyclical. Scientific reason, symbolized by a book belonging to Balaram, "The Life of Pasteur", appears by coincidence at several points in the narrative, but fails to impose itself onto the highly disorganised world of Ghosh's characters. Ghosh opposes the view that human life is governed by 'rules'. His characters exist in a

chaotic world where 'reason' and 'rationality' in the scientific sense, offer little or no comfort in the face of everyday human experience. His character Mrs. Verma, one of the educated Indians living in El Qued, speaks directly to this idea:

> Rules, rules, she said softly. All you ever talk about is rules. That's how 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 (1986:409).

Echoing Caputo's postmetaphysical rationality, Ghosh believes that the real obstacle to understanding human affairs lies in the tendency to believe that human life can be formalized into explicit rules (Caputo 1987:213). He is concerned with a movement away from a rule-based definition of reason, and towards a view of reason as a more free and creative movement. For Caputo, it is this formulation that "brings hermeneutics out of its corner and into the fight" (ibid). Similarly for Ghosh, the 'circle of reason' emerges 'from its corner and into the fight' as one of the key symbols of modern social thought, the hermeneutic circle of understanding.

What Ghosh offers instead of 'scientific reason' is contained in the central metaphor of Alu's passion for weaving. Alu rejects all the convoluted notions of science that Balaram stands for, in favor of the simple, traditional craft of weaving. He spends months at the loom learning the skill. Patience, we are told, is of 'utmost importance'. The process is slow and difficult, yet meaningful for Alu. He learns to

> lay the cross-thread, called the weft or the woof, between parallel long threads, called the warp, at right angles ... the essence of cloth -- locking yarns together by crossing them -- has not changed since prehistory" (Ghosh 1986:74).

The book is rich with both literal and metaphoric descriptions of Alu's apprenticeship. Weaving involves no rules like Balaram's world, and yet there is structure imposed by the warp. Instead it operates by a single principle or essence which has continued to persevere throughout human history. It is slow, yet fulfilling, and most importantly, it abandons the scientific 'text' in favor of the 'texture' provided by the craft. Ghosh tells

us in very simple terms, that "Weaving _is_ reason, which makes the world mad and makes it human" (1988:58). But why weaving? Ghosh answers this question himself:

> What could it be but weaving? Man at the loom is the finest example of Mechanical man; a creature who makes his own world as no other can, with his mind. The machine is man's curse and his salvation, and no machine has created man as much as the loom. It has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognizes no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together with its bloody ironies from the beginning of human time (Ghosh 1986:55).

Thus weaving is a technique which skilfully, and not painlessly, interrelates multiple and diverse realities by presenting them together as meaningful relations. Weaving is also both literally and metaphorically one of the dominant modalities of post-modern thought. Michael Ryan has asserted that a text is comprised of the "complex weave of threads which constitute it" and, further, that "consciousness itself is a text, or a weave of many strands" (Ryan 1982:165). Hayden White conceives of the dynamic movement of any discourse as "to and fro" and "back and forth", like a shuttle in a loom (White 1978:4). Gayatri Spivak has defined a text as a "weave of knowing and not-knowing, which is what knowing is" (Spivak, 1988:78). And James Clifford has suggested that weaving together the multiplicity of alternatives that constitute the human story is the task with which all ethnographers are faced (Clifford 1988). Ghosh's novel then, through its critique of scientific positivism, through its rejection of metaphysical notions of reason, and through its preference for 'weaving' as a dominant metaphor, may be seen as part of this critical concern with issues of representation in anthropological discourse. It is, in fact, what Stephen Tyler has defined as a "postmodern ethnography", privileging dialogue over monologue, effectively communicating through evocation, and consisting of fragmented, rather than totalizing, narratives (Tyler 1986:122-140).

But how does Ghosh go beyond this classification? Is he simply another postmodern writer, or is he engaged in providing a 'counter-discourse' in deconstructionist terms? How far does Ghosh's novel push, practically speaking, from his own situated time and space? These questions can be addressed by attending, first, to the context in which he writes, and second, to the novels' unique form.

Bruce Kapferer, in his critical assessment of post-modernist anthropology, suggests that authors like Geertz, Taussig, and Clifford represent distinct developments within anthropology (Kapferer 1989). Each proposes fairly radical directions in the ethnographic project. All the writers are critical of the arrogance of positivism in anthroplogy's past, and all propose a conscious self-criticism (now institutionalized) of anthropology's colonial origins and its emergence in the heyday of Western domination. But Kapferer points to the fact that

> all are relatively muted on the political significance of the North American context of their present writing. How much is their argument and programme -- their chosen themes, their critical discourse -- structured within a world still dominated by American political and economic power? (Kapferer 1989:103).

As Edward Said has suggested, to practice anthropology in the United States today is not just to be doing scholarly work investigating the 'other'; it is to be discussing the 'other' in the context of an "enormously influential and powerful state whose global role is that of a superpower" (Said 1989:213).

Ghosh enters the arena from outside of this context. In the predominantly Euro-Western post-modern dialogue, Ghosh represents the voice of the 'other'. His address is a part of a "post-colonial effort to reclaim traditions, histories, and cultures from imperialism, and it is also a way of entering the various world discourses on an equal footing" (Said 1989:219). Indian anthropologists have frequently expressed their resentment of being dominated by Euro-American concepts and methods, which are not very suitable for the study of their culture. Professor L.P. Vidyarthi, for example, was a major proponent of establishing an 'Indianness' in the field of social science. Indians have sought to access their own prosperous and scholarly ancient civilisation to find new roots for anthropological ideas. Writing in this context, Ghosh's contribution may be seen as a post-modern critique of anthropology not only as textuality, but also as a direct agent of political dominance. Ghosh's voice, though marginally heard, effectively decenters the post-modernist debate from its politically advantaged North American setting.

Not only does Ghosh write in the context of a unique political and cultural setting, the form he has chosen is equally unique. Eight years ago, with the publication of his novel, *Midnight's Children*, Salman

Rushdie transformed the Indian literary scene with a new fresh approach known as 'magical realism'. With *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie proved that modern India is as rich a source of material as the many myths and legends from ancient India, and that it could be captured by means of a new unconventional language and literary form which seemed particularly suited to the task of communicating the Indian character, spirit, atmosphere and conditions to both Indian and overseas audiences. Rushdie's example set free "the tongues of those young Indian writers [like Ghosh] who wished to express the contemporary spirit but had not found an authentic and relevant way to do so" (Desai 1986:149). Although Ghosh has not publicly acknowledged any debt he might have to the writing style of Salman Rushdie, he is almost always associated with this tradition by literary critics and reviewers.

The style of magical realism, which Burgess has critically referred to as "extravagance in the service of truth" (1986:6), is closely linked to a belief about the way in which human experience can be represented. The genre is characterized by its rambling narratives, eccentric characters, bizarre events, lively digressions, and above all, its innovative use of language. Hanif Kureishi (author of *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammie and Rosie Get Laid*) has written that the style of *The Circle of Reason* is "multidimensional, ironic, a mixture of the bizarre and the ordinary. It seethes with strange occurrences", and, at times, frustratingly so for the reader. This, however, is the desired effect. As Rushdie has explained in an interview, "reality is not realistic", and "magical realism, through its torrent of entertaining lies comes closer to telling us how the world is than something that attempts to reproduce the surface of everyday life" (in Kureishi 1986:40). To both Ghosh and Rushdie, human experience is made up of repetition, contradiction, multiplicity, and circularity. To represent it in a text is to adopt a literary strategy which resembles this experience as closely as possible.

Gayatri Spivak asserts that the task of deconstructive writing is to keep the ruling discourse in question, to resist the tendency for compartmentalization, and to "not merely reverse, but displace the distinction between margin and center" (1988:107). Can one subvert through form or genre? Is Ghosh engaged in such a task? Can magical realist writing provide a 'counter-discourse' in deconstructionist terms, as Michael Taussig believes it can? Is there such a thing as a 'magical realist anthropology' to speak of? These questions relating to the form of Ghosh's novel may best be explored by drawing from the similar style found in the work of Taussig.

Michael Taussig has engaged the magical realist genre in his recent
book entitled *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1987). The
purpose of the book is to understand the realities of terror, torture, and
healing in South America which he came to know through the five years
he spent in Columbia. Unlike Ghosh, Taussig has consciously chosen to
'write up' his ethnography in a magical realist mode -- not in a novel, but
in an academic piece. Taussig's project comes closest to bridging the
separation between anthropology on the one hand, and magical realist
writing on the other, the space which clearly becomes an issue when
considering Ghosh as anthropologist and novelist.

There is no doubt that Taussig's work is considered "experimental".
As Bruce Kapferer summarizes,

> Taussig's intention is to dissolve that line which may separate
> art from 'science' ... Taussig directs his critical gaze at the
> conventional categories of anthropological description. His
> object is to break free from many of the restraining bonds of
> routine anthropological thought. The objectivist, distanced
> and dispassionate style of so much anthropological writing is
> discarded ... In common with the aims of post-modernist,
> deconstructionist text-makers, Taussig presents us with a
> descriptive form which is anti-hegemonic (1989:82).

To this extent, I think Taussig's project is the same as Ghosh's.

But Taussig's agenda is much more consciously political. He finds
that the subject of his understanding, that is terror, torture, and hatred,
constitutes a particular reality which cannot be accessed through
conventional modes of understanding. He writes that

> the reality at stake here (in South America) makes a mockery
> of understanding and derides rationality ... What sort of
> understanding -- what sort of speech, writing, and
> construction of meaning by any mode -- can deal with and
> subvert that? (1987:9).

The answer to his question is that it requires a special mode of
presentation, the aim of which is to "disrupt the imagery of natural order"
that "academic rituals of explanation, with their alchemical promise of
yielding **system** from **chaos**, do nothing to ruffle the placid surface of this
natural order" (ibid). Taussig has made a practical choice to engage a

literary strategy which presents a challenge to what he calls "feeble pre-Kantian" patterns of explanation. For him, the magical realist form provides a means of extending his critique of metaphysics into the realm of social practice. Through social practice, one can subvert the dominant reality, offer an effective counter-discourse, and provide a means through which a discipline like anthropology can change.

To what extent does Ghosh accomplish the same, and how does magical realism as a genre enable him to do so? In response to the latter question first, I would like to draw attention to one of the predominant modes of magical realist writings: irony. The use of irony is a defining characteristic in the works of Ghosh, Rushdie and Taussig alike. It is interesting that irony is also one of the major tropes of deconstructive criticism, as demonstrated by the cynicism of Spivak (1988), or the 'cuttingness' of Michael Ryan (1982). Hayden White argues that the structures of sophisticated discourse replicate the phases through which consciousness itself must pass from the naive to the self-critical. Thus, he offers the theory of tropes as a model for understanding discourse. Irony, he says, is the fourth and last dominant trope (1978). White writes:

> To be sure, irony sanctions the ambiguous, and possibly even the ambivalent, statement ... What is involved here is a kind of attitude towards knowledge itself which is implicitly critical of all forms of metaphorical identification, reduction, or integration of phenomena. In short, irony is the linguistic strategy underlying and sanctioning scepticism as an explanatory tactic, satire as a mode of emplotment, and either agnosticism or cynicism as a moral posture (1978:74).

Thus, according to White, irony is tropologically a self-critical mode of understanding. The use of irony as a dominant trope implies and underlies a restructuring of the relationship between the individual and his/her reality. It is my opinion that the predominance of irony in the genre of magical realism, like the predominance of irony in deconstructive criticism, enables a mode of self-critical understanding which is inherently located in the genre. Thus, magical realist writing offers a way, which is identifiable in its very form, of critiquing the dominant modes of understanding in discourse.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Circle of Reason can be read in a way that offers a direct challenge to the discipline of anthropology. There is no doubt that the novel itself is anthropological in content. Although it is fiction, Ghosh is concerned with the reality of the representation of Indian culture, the migration of individuals from the Indian sub-continent, and the clashes of cultures and histories in dislocated settings of the post-colonial modern world. The settings of Bengal and the mythical Al-Ghazira are places that Ghosh has actually known, reflected in his upbringing and his academic training. Migration and exile are as much a part of his own personal story as they are for the characters he constructs in his text. Ghosh has effectively turned 'experience' into 'text' by adopting a literary strategy which, for him, sustains some of the overwhelmingly difficult aspects of 'real life'.

In addition, there are many aspects of his work that are relevant to contemporary theoretical discourse: his critique of metaphysical philosophy, his rejection of scientific modes of reason and rationality, and his emphasis on creative expression as seen in the opposition between 'text' and 'texture'. One of the main tasks of a deconstructive strategy is to keep the ruling discourse in question, to challenge its authority, and to tug at the tensions by which it is constituted (Caputo 1987). Ghosh effectively achieves this task through his position as 'other' to the dominant Euro-Western traditions of anthropology. The case of Ghosh is a case of 'the native's point of view', or the representation of the colonized by the colonized themselves. As such, Ghosh may be seen as a proponent of a new Indian post-modern anthropology, which decenters the discourse from its North American setting, and corrects some of the imbalances of post-colonial relationships.

Ghosh has made a practical choice to adopt a mode which destroys the definitions of the conventional ways in which we think and write anthropologically. To this extent, as a fiction writer, he has grounded his politics in social practice which may in fact offer the potential for change. Further, he has managed to do so in the context of the conservative structures of Indian academia. Thus, I read him as radically oriented, both within and outside of the dominant discourse.

Finally, the genre he employs, 'magical realism', is inherently self-critical through the presence of irony as a dominant trope. Like Taussig, the magical realist provides a means through which Ghosh extends his critique of metaphysics into the realm of social practice. Through social

practice, one can subvert the dominant reality, offer an effective counter-discourse, and provide a means through which a discipline like anthropology can change. It is in these terms that a reading of Ghosh speaks directly to the post-modern anxieties of contemporary anthropological discourse.

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