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**PETROCAPITALISM AND ITS EFFECTS: AN ECO CRITICAL STUDY  
OF AMITAV GHOSH'S**

***THE CIRCLE OF REASON***

**N. Karpagavalli<sup>1</sup>**

Assistant Professor of English

Rani Anna Government College, Ph. D Research Scholar (Part time) in Alagappa Government  
Arts College, Affiliated to Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu.

**Dr. N. Kavidha<sup>2</sup>**

Associate Professor of English

Alagappa Government Arts College, Affiliated to Alagappa University, Karaikudi- 630003  
Tamil Nadu.

**Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh's. *The Circle of Reason* focuses on themes like migration, displacement, storytelling, war, sanitation, ecology and purity. A close reading of this novel reveals a number of ecological issues that is existing in the last few decades causing environmental disasters. Journey as a motif, connects the three parts of the novel. The novel symbolically deals with the three stages of human life- Satwa – which means search for wisdom, Rajas – life of passion and Tamas – darkness and destruction. Birds are true representations of the ecology of a place. The novel delves into how birds are deprived of their natural lifecycle and remain disrupted. Petrocapitalism serves as a very powerful motif to show the depletion of fuel, leading to the displaced refugees and exploited biosphere. This paper attempts to make an eco-critical reading of the novel, *The Circle of Reason*.

**Keywords:** migrant refugees, petroculturalism, ecocultural damage, cultural exchange.

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Amitav Ghosh, one of the most prominent writers of India begins his literary career with *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and till date he continues writing with great zeal. His ecocentric vision is evident in all his works that reveal a number of present day ecological issues. He visualizes the world as a composite, interconnected whole. His novels are not just about historical or geographical locations, but also a departure from ignorance to knowledge and from awareness to understanding. His works are centred on the principles of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is not only the application of ecology and ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical approach to the interrelations of nature, culture and sometimes even supernatural elements in nature. It is essential to have a shift from anthropocentric focus towards, ecocriticism to recreate a symbiotic relationship between man and nonhuman forms in the environment. Cheryll Glotfelty, in *The Ecocriticism Reader* points out, that today's ecological issues are caused by men of our age. She writes:

We have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life supporting system. We are there.

If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem (xxi)

Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) defines ecocriticism as "the environmentally oriented study of literature and less often) the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice" (138). The First Wave of Ecocriticism focuses on genres as "nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction" (138). The Second Wave Ecocriticism "takes urban and degraded landscapes as seriously as natural landscapes" (28). In due course of time Ecocriticism goes beyond nature writing to analyze the "built environments" of urban landscapes. This shift has made eco critics to engage in various interconnected issues like poverty, gender bias, Racism, imperialism, gaiaphotria, xenophobia etc, thus the eco critical structure has widened to include intertwined eco justice and social concerns along with the ecological concerns. "Metropolitan Spaces and toxified landscapes" (Buell viii) are being evaluated ecocritically along with pristine, natural landscapes.

Greg Garrard in his *Ecocriticism; The New Critical Idiom* (2012) defines Ecocriticism as the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history

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and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself (5). Thus ecocriticism has developed into an effective, innovative methodology in literary and cultural studies which has its origin from natural writing to today’s post-colonial genres such drama, fiction, documentary and cinema.

Ghosh’s novels transcend the barriers of time and space and demonstrate the historical changes consequent upon colonization. His novels have a wide range of ecocentric concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources. The blending of history and fiction, time and geography gives scope for establishing an interdisciplinary study of Ghosh’s novels. This paper attempts to study *The Circle of Reason* in an ecological perspective.

*The Circle of Reason* extracts the names of the three parts of the novel from the three gunas, *Satwa*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* from *The Bhagvad Gita*. Each part of the novel is commanded by a guna. The First part *Satwa* known as the light of consciousness, but Ghosh refers it Reason. The concept of Reason is very much acclaimed to the Western and Scientific knowledge of research. Indicating what is right and wrong. Reason is essential for all walks of man in the world, which connects people all over the world. In the novel, Balram observes, “Science does not belong to countries; Reasons does not belong to any nation. They belong to the history – to the world” (TCR 54). Balram is an epitome of reason and works to disseminate reason. He is obsessed by the book of *Life of Pasteur*. According to him weaving is also Reason, as it connects people of the world.

The second section *Rajas* begins with the protagonist Nachiketa Bose alias Alu’s arrival in Al – Ghazira. Here *Rajas* stands for passion- to work against impurity which leads to activity. This section deals with the activities of the people of Ras, who indulge in talking, listening, gossiping, telling stories and having tea at Zindi’s house. It also deals with the cleaning campaign of Alu fighting against the germ, money to cleanse the society, His idea is carried by the inmates of the ‘Apple House’-- Abu Fahl, Prof. Samuel, Hajj Fahmy and others joined hands to cleanse the society by using carbolic acid. He collects money from the houses to create a money free society in the form of account books. With full enthusiasm the people of Ras go to the building STAR to buy sewing machines and it ends in great disaster.

The third section *Tamas*: Death- remains us of darkness and indicates a tendency to die or decay. It ends with the death of Kulfi. The book *Life of Pasteur* falls open presaging death “life

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would become impossible because death would be incomplete' (CR 396). Zindi has visioned the sign of death at Mrs Verma's house. Kulfi is cremated with carbolic acid, instead of Ganga jal. Alu accompanied by Zindi and Boss returns to claim reason, which makes the circle complete. The novel has its beginning with Alu's home coming to Lalpukur, flying across boundaries, with different types of people and ends with a hope. The last statement of the novel, states 'Hope is the beginning' (CR 410).

The western ideology of reason, as a pivotal force connects all the three parts of the novel. Reason is linked with idea of the purity in western knowledge of science. The novel has enough incidents to exhibit 'reason'. Balram inspired by *Life of Pasteur* launches a campaign towards germs and superstition in the village to make them, turn towards his vision of the purity of reason and science. In the second part Alu gets transformed into a preacher, who wishes to eradicate both the germs and personal ownership of money in Souq, a multicultural trading centre in Al – Ghazira.

In the third part Mrs Verma, plays a significant role in making the funeral of Kulfi in the desert country. She is not worried about the selfish man made rules. She breaks the established form of cremation. Carbolic acid is poured into the mouth of Kulfi instead of gangajal and is burnt with the book of *Life of Pasteur*. Here Mrs Verma behaves as a human being, with utmost love and care, breaking the ancient rituals to meet the demands of the Practical present.

Journey as a motif, connects the three parts of the novel. The novel symbolically deals with the three stages of human life 1. *Satwa* – search for wisdom 2. *Rajas* – life of passion 3. *Tamas* – darkness and destruction. Prasad G.J.V in his book *Really Imagined* says characters cross border "with almost the biological necessity if not always the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds" (23), Alu branded as terrorist, flees from Lalpukur to Kerala and then to Al – Ghazira in the Middle East with other refugees travel in the ship *Marriamma*. In the ship Alu gets mingled with people and interact with each other in their new living – in – place to build transnational ecologies of love and understanding. In the novel, Ghosh portrays the different cultural landscape of different countries. He has also criticized the Colonisation of the East by, monopolizing oil in Middle East. He raises questions against the globalized Capitalism which destroys all the earth's resources, that accentuates the setting of the place in the second section of

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the novel, *Al – Ghazira*, a fictional Gulf Emirate, a land of dreams to the migrating labours from all parts of the world. This second section can be interpreted as Ghosh’s attempt at writing “Petro fiction” unfolding the eco-cultural damage done by petro – Capitalism. The narrator through magical-fantastic stories like, “from an egg – seller’s end” has intervened the narrative and spotlights the cause of ecocide-- petro capitalism (CR 254).

The Second part *Rajas* is set in *Al – Ghazira*. This fictional territory is painted like the real countries of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. The twelfth chapter of the novel reveals the history and statusquo of *Al – Ghazira* before and after the discovery of oil, ruled by its own king Malik. The British sensing the glimpse of oil, has sent its troops and force the Malik to sign the treaty and has captured all the oilfields of the city. The British oilmen humiliated the Malik by offering “Pension the old Malik off in their own country” (CR 262) and start to reject the local people without job and “brought their own men” ( CR 261) to engage English men in oil Fields.

*The Circle of Reason* highlights the precarious existence of the migrant – refugees in the light of the post politico – economic context who are excluded from the main stream culture and condemned to occupy the periphery space. The refugees in *Ras* are pictured as,

“ . . . a narrow strip of beach . . . roots of corrugated iron and halved oil – drums, with their crazily angled wooden plat forms and tracery of pumpkin vines and at last, led by a strip where the dense patch work was cut” (CR 211).

The forces of global capitalism converts the oil giving terrains into bloody floods, by creating civil wars in the region... The British taking advantage of the situation, makes way for international terrorism and petro– capitalism causing unpredictable and irreparable eco – cultural damage to the oil nation. At this juncture, Ghosh explicates” the oil exploration in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian gulf by the Americans was literarily sterile (CR 138). He also adds that the Indian labours remain mere tools in the hands of the British. “They were brought as weapons, to divide the Ghaziris from themselves and the world of Sanity; to turn them into buffoons for the world to laugh at’ (CR 261). So the Europeans for their unquenchable thirst for money exploits both nature and the weak.

The first section of the novel shares about the birth year of the character Balram in 1942 that remembers the emigration of Indians to the west. The then, Government of Canada has

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denied the entry of “eight thousand Indians” because they are not ready to endanger the physical environment, of their country by the Asiatic immigration. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 and the Bangladesh War of 1971 has made the local people for a forced dislocation as “wanderers and refugees”. The ecocidal forces of war, colonialism and by the then State powers, have given a new birth to the people becoming “Environmental refugees”. Hence Lalpukur becomes, a village of migrant–settlers, who are “vomited out of their native soil years ago in another carnage (CR 62). The plight of the refugees is stated as:

The flowing desperation and nostalgia for their lost home is put us:

. . . a longing for a land where green was greener, the rice whiter, the fish bigger than boats; where the rivers name sand like Megh Malher on the rainy day – the Mehna. . .

Rivers over g with bounty; as wide as seas, their banks invisible from one another. (CR 62)

In the nineteenth century the British has started manipulating, the Indian scientific and Philosophical tradition of India and thereby becoming the “Owners” of a universal knowledge. In the novel Ghosh has portrayed the intelligence of the “Indians do science or how the Indians relate to knowledge and what are the relationships between a Western knowledge and an Indian knowledge” (chambers 2005, 32). The British in the name of reforms and ‘development’ try their level best to restructure, remodify, every aspect of the lives of people in India. The Britishers are responsible in bringing a decline to the ancient traditional method of medicine and healing, which is in vogue for more than hundreds of years. *The Circle of Reason* interprets the attempts made by the British to project western knowledge as superior and universal. The novel also delineates the relationship between science / technology / rationalism in the colonial India. Ghosh makes the readers to aware of the monopoly of the western science, which alters and hybridize the existing norms into complex matrix of cross – cultural exchanges, translations and mutations. In the novel the book *The Life of Pasteur* is an important motif, for both the characters Balram and Alu. Pasteur is the epitome of Reason. Balram has a strong obsession for western science and says “Science does not belong to countries Reason does not belong to any nation. They belong to history – to the world (CR 54). So Balram begins the ‘School of Reason’ and acts as a reformer to his village. He joins with the local men has started cleaning the village with carbolic acid. Later his passion for cleaning, causes the enmity with Bhudeb Roy and brings him self- destruction.

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Pasteur, the pioneer of modern medicine, has formulated the germ theory, against a human disease. Balram describes Pasteur's role in producing luxurious commodities like silk and beer. The arrival of these products disturb the pre-colonial India's economy, ending to the complete destruction of the indigenous cotton industries. So it is made clear, the western interpretation of Reason manifested into huge advancement of material wealth, that deplets the natural resources of the East. Thus the imperialist has taken steps to appropriate the resources and destroy the lives of Indians in the native soil. They also spread the existing diseases like malaria at that time and take no steps to prevent them in the Colonial India.

*The Circle of Reason* is the critique of globalized capitalism which has maximised the plundering of earth's resources and deterioration of the environment. The novel has also raised the voice for the nonhumans as characters who travel along the pages of the novel. Here in the novel the role of sewing machine plays a vital role in the plot of the novel. In the novel Balram and Alu get connected to others by the carbolic acid, and sewing machine. Balrom has influenced Alu, by the book *Life of Pasteur* and develops a sense of cleanliness by using carbolic acid. Toru – debi is always engaged with her sewing machine stitching blouses, Alu has learnt weaving and start doing new patterns with Shombhu Debnath Balram's passion for reason, prompts him to clean the village. His School of Reason, turns to be a failure, as the people show more interest in learning tailoring and weaving. The people wish to equip, life skills and the practical training for survival. Balram's passion for knowledge of science and faith in reason proves to be a defeat with real life situations. Ghosh seems to juxtapose the east against the west with the practical learning of weaving and tailoring against the ideology of rationalism. Toru – debi's practical knowledge excels science. While the sewing machine stops working, Alu throws it into the pond and buys a new one to Toru – debi': Nothing's of any use now, she muttered. It's the end .... She ran her hand over the machine's shining wheel and pulled, with all her strength ..... She strop up and put the machine in his (Alu's) arms. Throw it

– Into the pond, she said it's dead .... Get me another. Alu,; my bit of gold wond't you? (TCR 147 – 148)

Alu runs into the forest to dispose the sewing machine, suddenly Balram's house is set in flames. Alu retrives to go home but is saved by Bolai – da. The fire is due to the fight between Balram and Bhudeb Roy. Alu witness the scene as:

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.... brilliant sunburst of light arched into the sky and the whole forest shimmered in the erase silver glow. He saw it reach its

Zenith and cutie down watch .... The earth shook and the air seemed to come alive and hit him with walls of force, and when he opened his eyes again exactly where the house ought to have been there were orange flames shooting into the sky (TCR 148)

Balram’s rational and scientific mind with great passion brings destruction and death. Ghosh presents the lunatic madness of man with his limited knowledge of scientific reason of the western science. The same carbolic acid gives trouble to the people in Al –

Ghazira when the ‘displaced’ people start cleaning houses and shops. The awareness rally of

Alu is cleared by the police and ends in death of many people. Alu, Zindi, Kulfi and the child Boss are saved. Alu refers money as dirt “Germ is money, “No money, no dirt” (CR 280).

The people of Ras enticed by Alus words are ready to start a Co–operative to secure their money. The crowd of people are impressed by the eloquence of Alu. People start following him, as he is the only survivor from the ruins of the STAR, building. He is survived by two sewing machines. He is the ‘chosen one’ God to them. He preaches and teaches about the evils of money. Alu survives from the chaos, destruction and death and gets ready to leave Al – Ghazira.

Ghosh tries to knit the story of every character in the story with references to sewing machine, carbolic acid, *Life of Pasteur*, money and dirt, purity and cleanliness, science and pseudo-science. He makes use of all non-human characters connected with the humans to make the story complete. Balram out of reason, starts the ‘School of Reason’ and his passion for carbolic acid brings utter destruction to him and his village. Alu out of reason learns weaving, but his passion for cleaning dirt (money) ends in death of many people. Kulfi’s death in the final part of the story, coexist all the three sections of the novel. The novel has proved the imbalance of the three gunas in man leads to great chaos and confusion. In the novel the actions of the characters are controlled by the balance and imbalance of the three gunas (satwa, rajas, and tamas) which are the attributes of Nature (Prakriti). Man being an aspect of nature is also controlled by these three gunas. Alu who begins his journey from Lalpukur has a new beginning from the desert to home, making the *Circle of Reason* complete.



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In the first section Toru debi, the aunt of Alu, has remembered him that only sewing machine could save them. Alu is saved by the sewing machine in section two of the novel. Seeing him the people of Ras, cannot believe their eyes and says, we had to stand there and stare at this man, hardly more than a boy, buried alive under a hill of rubble, with death barely an inch from his chest, and miraculously still alive (CR 241)

Alu in the ruins, gets connected with the spirit of Balram, thinking of dirt and cleanliness and decides to perform a war against money. He remembers his uncle Balram saying “It is not possible to change the world if one has no passion” (CR28). Alu regards money “dirt or impurity” and that is the cause for all problems in the world. Money is the destination for the British to colonize India and other parts of the world, and gives power to England to rule the rest of the world.

The concluding part of the Novel *Tamaz*, Death almost creates a symbiosis of all forms of life, demonstrating the inter connectedness of the elements used in Kulfi’s funeral. Ghosh performs a Hindu funeral possible in the Algerian desert is really thought provoking. Ghosh with the application of practical wisdom and love does the cremation of Kulfi. It is an eye opening episode to the readers. Soybean oil is used instead of (ghee), carbolic acid replaces the water of the Ganges. Dr Mishra states “The world has come full circle, he groaned. Carbolic acid has become holy water” (CR 411). Carbolic acid, once a materialistic scientific disinfectant (weapon) of the British – a source of dirt and contamination becomes the ‘holy water’ for a Hindu funeral. Ghosh a staunch lover of nature, has given a spiritual dimension and does not reject the non-human elements.

Man should remember that all forms of nature has its intrinsic value. So it is the moral responsibility of man to accept the non-human life forms, beyond their instrumental value. At this juncture, it is suitable to quote Barry Commoner. He says “Everything is connected to everything else. In the novel, Ghosh has re-edited the scientific invention of the Europeans into positive and religious value, but he makes sure that only the application of practical wisdom of the East makes life poised and balance. While departing from Al-Ghazira Professor Samuel hopefully says “This is not the end, only the beginning (CR 409). This is the message by the narrator to the readers.

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Place – the geographical terrains (land, water, and desert) have a big role in influencing the life of any living being for their survival in the biosphere. Birds are the true representatives of the ecology of a place. In *Circle of Reason* birds serve a very powerful imagery / motif to show the flight of the important characters and the displaced refugees as they fly from land to sea, from water to desert and again from Sahara to the Indian Ocean for a better future with a flesh and blood vision in their dreams. Normally birds move in circular motion, the narration too is circular, connecting all the three sections *Satva, Rajas and Tamaz* forming a circle in pursuit of Reason and Enlightenment. Jyoti Das, the police officer and bird watcher witnesses:

....a shimmering, velvety carpet of ducks, and cormorants and storks covering the lake. Somewhere in that mass of birds his eyes picked out a purple out a purple of herons...every year they flew across the continent to winter... (CR 39)

In the last part, the vulture imagery reinforces the arrival of Joyti Das, who as a vulture is looking for its prey flying after Alu and Kulfi in the desert. Kulfi dies while enacting the role of *Chitrangada*. During his journey to Tangier, the police officer sees "...a sky alive with Cory's Shearwaters ...Storks, eagles ...My God. The whole sky will be migrating over Tangier now" (CR 454 – 455). The birds stand as an epitome of the plight of the displaced wanderers as refugee migrants crossing borders, with hope for a better future. In the novel *The Circle of Reason*, Alu after losing his parents comes to Lalpukur to be taken care by his uncle Balram and after his death, moves to Mahe then to Al-Ghazira with a group of new friends and finally to the desert. After witnessing, all the trails of life, acquiring the true meaning of life, Alu, with, Zindi and child Boss plans to go India. He is sure that his skill in weaving will lead him for his survival.

Alu's encounter with the three gunas gives him several new experience, with new people at different parts of the world, gives new comprehension that is beyond appearances and words. As a narrator the novel notes". ..Here is another lesson: Blindness comes first to clear-sighted" (CR 247). *The Life of Pasteur* makes the vision of the protagonist come in real and it is a symbol of subtle vision, The Book has its travel from Balram to Dantu and then to Alu. In the end, he gives the book to Dr. Verma and finally it is submitted in Kulfi's pyre to "be burned alongside with her" (CR 415).

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Ghosh's cross procreation of literature accompanied by science doesn't blind him to the constraints of modern science. Ghosh at the same time by accepting the universality of modern science, questions Pseudo-science, to juxtapose the West with the East, Modern Science with Counter pseudo –science, in his works. He has also spotlighted the age old traditional and practical wisdom of counter science, which gives a peaceful life and sustains the modern science to our real practical life. Alu as a new man starts his new life with his weaving skill “the inexhaustible miracle which can join together two separate pieces of cloth” (CR 155). Jyoti Das finds inner peace and gets ready for a new beginning. Here for everyone, “hope is the beginning” (CR 423.) The reformer Balram says, reason is hope and it seems that this hope for a new life arises from the discovery of Reason – *Sattva*, the enlightened reason, and with this *The Circle of Reason* gets completed. Hence it is made clear, that Amitav Ghosh has meticulously incorporated, the western analytical reason, imbibed through the tools- like sewing machine, phrenology and carbolic acid and their inevitable role in the lives of humans, causing new sustainable transformation for the people of the world.

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Bionote- Dr.N.Kavidha

Dr.N.Kavidha, presently working as Associate Professor of English in Alagappa Government Arts College, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, got her Ph.D in Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli in Tamilnadu in 2005. She is a Gold medalist in her MA and BA degrees and has qualified in SLET (State Level Eligibility for Lectureship). She has a passion for research and teaching. Her specialization lies in ecocritical studies and literary theories.

Biographical note

Ms.N. Karpagavalli is working as Assistant Professor of English in Rani Anna Govt College Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu. At present she is pursuing Ph.D in Alagappa University Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu. Her area of interest is Indian writing in English and Green Studies. Her research area is Ecocriticism.