



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

The Circle of Reason and the Circle of the Three Gunas

Rakes Sarkar

Assistant Teacher of English,
Medgachi High School, Burdwan, WestBengal.

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most important philosophical and religious classics in the world. It systematically synthesizes both rational analysis and religious inspiration in answering the fundamental questions of existence. The major ideas woven together in the Gita has their roots in ancient Indian texts like the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Samkhya and Yoga systems. A number of chapters in the Gita are soaked in the concept of the three *gunas* of the Samkhya Philosophy. These three *gunas* are ‘*satwa*’, ‘*rajas*’ and ‘*tamas*’. All these three *gunas* are said to be always present in everyone, but in different proportion which decides and defines the predominant temperament of any being in nature(‘*prakriti*’). Amitav Ghosh’s debut novel *The Circle of Reason* consists of three parts named after these three *gunas*: “Satwa: Reason”, “Rajas: Passion”, and “Tamas: Death”. A parallel reading of Ghosh’s novel with the relevant *shlokas* of Bhagavad Gita brings out some significant similarities.

The first part of Ghosh’s novel is called “Satwa: Reason”. Ghosh quite expectedly interprets *satwa* as being equivalent to ‘reason’. Bhagavad Gita constantly warns that the path of ‘*satwa*’ is not without its thorns. A pilgrim’s progress towards ‘*satwa*’ can be thwarted and threatened by forces of illogical illusions(‘*moha*’).The comic commingling of the rational and the irrational in this novel is achieved by the shrewd distinction between science and pseudo-science. Very early in the story we find that Balaram with his ‘Claws’ is in pursuit of ‘reason’ through the science of heads called phrenology. His interest in this so-called science of heads, however, stemmed from a relevant and rational realization. After his brief encounter with the Curies who ‘lived in the highest reaches of the imagination’ (*The Circle of Reason* 17) Balaram realized that what mattered to such scientists was nothing other than their science; that people, sentiments or humanity never had any value for them: “What’s wrong with all those scientists and their sciences is that there’s no connection between the outside and the inside, between what people think and how they are. Don’t you see? This is different. In this science the inside and the outside, the mind and the body, what people do and what they are, are one. Don’t you see how important it is?”(*The Circle of Reason* 19)

Thus, Balaram is in quest of what Bhagavad Gita considers as the ultimate wisdom but unfortunately he falls the victim of subliminal misapprehension. That is why his pursuit of phrenology, that leads him to ultimately realize that a science can tell about “things as they are; not about what they might become”(*The Circle of Reason* 22) is foredoomed to failure.

Interestingly enough, Balaram is neither contented with past, nor concerned merely with the present; he is capable enough to envision a brighter future for everyone. He insists Alu, “The future is what is important. The past doesn’t matter. One can do anything with the future. One

can change the world” (*The Circle of Reason* 30). Balaram derives this lesson from the biography of Pasteur. Balaram’s own version of scientific reason coupled with practical passion leads him to realize that Alu’s organs “correspond exactly to his calculations of the proportions ideal for a weaver”(*The Circle of Reason* 59). Balaram even interprets the ‘loom’ as the ultimate symbol of history and hope, of unity and understanding. In shloka 7 of the 7th chapter of Bhagavad Gita Lord Krishna urges Arjuna to realize that the entire universe is contained in Him just as threads are woven into one whole. The realization and visualization of the one and only ‘*Brahma*’ in everything and everywhere is, as Bhagavad Gita tells us, the step toward attaining ‘*moksha*’ or complete spiritual liberation.

During war, the insanitary conditions of the habitation of the refugees prompts Balaram to undertake Carbolic campaign; and when his mission is on the verge of abrupt extinction due to the lack of ‘filthy money’(*The Circle of Reason* 89), Alu’s weaving provided him the necessary means to carry it on. In shloka 19, of the 3rd chapter of Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna directs to perform one’s duties and works without attachment or avidity, and suggests that this can best be done through selfless devotion. Selfless work for others, a sound blend of ‘*satwa*’ and ‘*rajas*’, unites Balaram and Alu as ‘*karmayogi*’.

Shombhu Debnath, the master weaver, shows *sattvic* sense in interpreting the magnificence and significance of the loom, which in his words, “is captive to language” (*The Circle of Reason* 78). When Shombhu decides to go away with Parboti-debi and the child, he advises Balaram, “You must stop this: this is madness. There’s no reason to go on like this. No reason, Stop...” (*The Circle of Reason* 153). Shombhu is rational enough to understand that Balaram’s passion for ‘reason’ has turned into ‘madness’. He is the only person in the story to see Balaram and Bhudeb Roy as “two halves of an apple...one raw, one rotten, but the same fruit”(*The Circle of Reason* 152). Shombhu lives his life, and lives it intensely as his action and thoughts show classic combination of *satwa* and *rajas*.

Both Balaram and Alu’s initial insistence on cleanliness and purity are evident expression of ‘*satwa*’ *guna*. Shloka 11 of the 14th Chapter of Bhagavad Gita says that a person is under the increasing spell of ‘*satwa guna*’ when wisdom, purity and illumination originate everywhere in him: “The strengthening of *sattwa* hastens our approach towards a purer mind, taking it closer to the ‘*purusha*’ or ‘*poorna*’ or ‘*atman*’ aspect of our being. Our idiosyncrasies and biases then begin to be reduced, for *satwa* is the substance of purity and light itself. And thus we can move closer to understanding things as they are”(Chakraborty 78). But unfortunately both of them are ultimately engulfed by the ‘*rajasik*’ *guna*. It is because of his ‘passion for the future’ (*The Circle of Reason* 53) that Balaram’s search for ‘*satwa*’ gets entangled with ‘*rajas*’ or passion. Balaram is overtaken by ‘*rajas*’ by contracting all of his energy and concentration into attacking/defending Bhudeb Roy while Alu later goes one step further than Balaram in raising war against the background of germ, ‘money’ and thereafter becomes addicted to weaving. Anshuman A Mondal has made a valuable commentary in this respect:

“True, both Alu’s and Balaram’s projects end in disaster but the point is that such projects never could succeed because although they both find a rationale for their projects—hygiene and money (and insofar as Alu sees money as equivalent to the germ, his rationale is the same as Balaram’s)—they are unable or unwilling to recognize that they are motivated as much by desire as by reason. The novel therefore argues that Reason will always be bound to its other side: desire, hope, despair, madness, obsession, and all those other elements of life that elude rational analysis”(Mondal 53-54).

Bhagavad Gita tells that (Chapter 14, shloka 12) the increase in *rajasik guna* causes obsession with or addiction to work, avarice and greed. What Anshuman A Mondal reads as reason being bound with desire in the novel can also be read as *satwa* being entwined with *rajas* in human life. Even Assistant Superintendent of Police Jyoti Das who shows a remarkably grand philosophical objectivity in his attitude to and association with the world and the life, ultimately succumbs to *rajas* when ‘terrified of the future, without a past, aware only of the prickings of his painfully virginal flesh’(*The Circle of Reason* 440) he becomes obsessed with Kulfi. Bhudeb Roy, another important character in the story, initially appears to be the epitome of *rajasik guna*. Balaram’s *sattvik* scrutiny revealed that Bhudeb Roy’s project of opening the school was not wholly spiritual; and that even his worship of Ma Saraswati was ‘not learning’, but ‘Vanity’(*The Circle of Reason* 33). Ironically enough, it is this same Bhudeb Roy, Balaram’s alter-ego, his *doppelganger*, who speaks out *sattvik* sentiment after the plane crash: “ A new time beckons. The time to teach is over. The time has come to serve the people. The time has come...for straight lines”(*The Circle of Reason* 107). But Balaram reads it as a flawed logic because this time Balaram himself has been engulfed by *rajasik* suspicion. Apart from Bhudeb Roy, there are a number of other characters in the story with predominantly *rajasik* temperament. While Mast Ram whose passion for Kulfi reduced him to the level of ‘an animal, beyond reason and sanity’(*The Circle of Reason* 225), had to ‘put an end to his love and his remorse, his treachery and his hate, in the only honorable way he knew’(*The Circle of Reason* 228), Zindi’s passionate plan of establishing an independent shop for providing work for everyone associated with her, met a *tamasik* end because it stemmed from her *rajasik* realization that practical life is nothing but using the knowledge of the past to ‘cheat the future’(*The Circle of Reason* 241).

That the central character Alu’s respect for reason degenerates into tamasic level is proved by the fact that he comes to regard a particular book (*The Life of Pasteur*) as ‘the only real brother’(*The Circle of Reason* 426) he ever had. However, very soon he gets disillusioned when an opened page of the book suddenly revealed to him and Mrs Verma that without the germ ‘life would become impossible because death would be incomplete’(*The Circle of Reason* 428). Very early in the novel the narrator revealed that Alu had a finely scriptural name, Nachiketa. In the words of G J V Prasad, “Though Alu-Nachiketa doesn’t seem to have much control over he has unleashed, and like other major characters confuses the literal and the symbolic, he does seem to have gained some knowledge during his vigil at death’s door”(62). But this is not the only knowledge that he gains. In the Upanishad we find Nachiketa wishing to learn the knowledge of

immortality from Yama. Yama is portrayed as capable of giving the knowledge of immortality because change ultimately takes place on the basis of non-change. Only when Alu is finally capable of accepting this relative existence and significance of opposites and dualities in nature that he can place The *Life of Pasteur* 'reverently on the pyre' (*The Circle of Reason* 449). This clearly shows regeneration from *rajas* to *satwa*.

The title of the novel signifies that the path of reason is a circular rather than a straight one, suggesting that there is no way out. Just as Reason by its very nature is both 'liberating and oppressive; linear and straightforward, and circular and convoluted; reasonable and unreasonable' (Mondal 8), living being is in essence an amalgamation of *satwa*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Mortal life is excruciatingly caught in the circle of the three *gunas*. There is no means to escape from it or negate it in human form. The question that haunts us then is where does the key to transcendence lie? The answer is in going beyond the shackles of the three *gunas*. As Bhagavad Gita says, the three *gunas* will be always there in nature, but one's self should never get affected by them. Again, the question arises, is it possible for one not to get attached to action and its fruits at all? Bhagavad Gita emphatically says that when an individual truly realizes the distinction between the self and the *gunas* which operate within oneself, one does not get attached to either any action or its fruits. Once one recognizes that the modes of *satwa*, *rajas*, and *tamas* operate together to influence actions, one can free oneself from the results of actions, even while acting. Though none of the characters in the story is finally able to truly attain the state of being '*trigunatit*' (beyond the three *gunas*), Jyoti Das, with his final preparation to 'step into a new world' (*The Circle of Reason* 457), and Alu, rich with newly-gained maturity suggest that the quest to transcend will always be there in the ultimate survivors: "Hope is the beginning" (*The Circle of Reason* 457).

Works Cited:

1. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Circle of Reason*. Ravi Dayal Publisher: Penguin Books. 2009
2. Mondal, Anshuman A. *Amitav Ghosh: Contemporary World Writers*. Viva Books. 2011
3. Prasad, G J V. *Re-writing the World: The Circle of Reason as the Beginning of the Quest in Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives*, Edited by Brinda Bose. Pencraft International. 2005
4. Chakraborty, SK. *Managerial Effectiveness and Quality of Worklife: Indian Insights*. New Delhi. Tata Mcgraw-Hill. 1987