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## ***Narrative Ecology, Anthropocene Consciousness, and the Critique of Modern Rationality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason****

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### **Abstract**

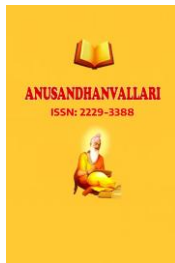
This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* (1986) as an early literary engagement with ecological concerns that anticipate many of the central themes of climate fiction and Anthropocene studies. Although the novel predates contemporary debates on climate change, it critically interrogates the ideological foundations that have since been recognized as contributing to ecological crises, particularly faith in scientific rationalism, technological mastery, and economic progress. Drawing on perspectives from ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, this study explores how Ghosh constructs a narrative world characterized by instability, excess, and constant transformation. Through a fragmented narrative structure, allegorical episodes, and recurring material forces such as carbolic acid, fire, money, and craft practices, the novel reveals the limitations of human attempts to dominate and control nature. Its tripartite movement from Satva (Reason) through Rajas (Passion) to Tamas (Death) reflects cyclical processes of growth, decline, and renewal that resonate strongly with Anthropocene thought. By departing from conventional realist narrative forms and emphasizing distributed agency among human and nonhuman forces, *The Circle of Reason* creates a distinctive literary space for representing ecological disruption. The article argues that Ghosh's early fiction already confronts the narrative limitations that climate humanities scholars would later identify as central to the cultural invisibility of environmental catastrophe.

**Keywords:** Climate Fiction; Anthropocene; Ecocriticism; Environmental Humanities; Narrative Ecology; Amitav Ghosh.

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### **1. Introduction: Revisiting *The Circle of Reason* through Anthropocene Perspectives**

The growing prominence of climate fiction has encouraged scholars to reconsider literary texts in the context of environmental challenges and planetary transformations. Within the field of environmental humanities, climate change is increasingly viewed not merely as a scientific or political issue but also as a representational challenge. Conventional literary forms, often grounded in notions of stability, progress, and human dominance,



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frequently struggle to capture the complexity of ecological disturbances characterized by uncertainty, interconnectedness, and the agency of nonhuman forces.

This critical reassessment of narrative representation has renewed scholarly interest in the works of Amitav Ghosh, particularly after the publication of *The Great Derangement*. In that influential work, Ghosh contends that realist fiction is limited in its capacity to depict climate catastrophe because it relies on probability, individual action, and coherent causality. Yet such concerns are not confined to his later writings. His debut novel, *The Circle of Reason*, already experiments with narrative strategies that challenge these assumptions and anticipate contemporary debates in climate humanities.

Rather than depicting environmental catastrophe directly, the novel investigates the intellectual and cultural frameworks that contribute to ecological crises. Nature is presented not as a passive backdrop but as a dynamic and unpredictable force that exceeds human control. Through its fragmented structure and resistance to conventional narrative closure, the novel reflects the instability and complexity associated with Anthropocene realities, making it a significant precursor to contemporary climate-oriented literary discourse.

## 2. Climate Fiction, Anthropocene Thought, and Narrative Challenges

Research in climate fiction consistently demonstrates that environmental change disrupts traditional storytelling conventions. The Anthropocene blurs long-established boundaries between nature and culture, intention and consequence, and present actions and future outcomes. Consequently, realist fiction, with its emphasis on individual agency and clear resolutions, often proves inadequate for representing processes that are collective, global, and temporally dispersed.

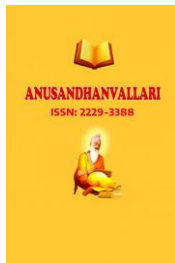
Ghosh explicitly addresses this issue in *The Great Derangement*, but *The Circle of Reason* reveals that these concerns were present in his literary imagination from the outset. The novel's episodic narrative, unexpected coincidences, and digressive storytelling challenge readers' expectations of realism and probability. Events occur not because they conform to realistic expectations but because they expose deeper structures of ideology, power, and knowledge.

Viewed through an Anthropocene framework, the novel functions as a form of narrative ecology in which human and nonhuman entities interact within interconnected systems. Elements such as fire, chemicals, money, and the human body possess active roles within the narrative. Their ability to influence events challenges anthropocentric assumptions and questions the privileged status often granted to human agency.

## 3. Rationalism and Environmental Control

A central concern of *The Circle of Reason* is its critique of Enlightenment-inspired rationality. This critique is embodied in Balaram Bose, whose unwavering faith in scientific principles and hygienic order shapes both his worldview and his behavior. Influenced by bacteriological theories and discourses of cleanliness, Balaram associates purity with advancement and views disorder as a sign of failure.

From an ecocritical perspective, his character exemplifies an authoritarian approach to environmental management. His attempts to impose order disregard social realities and ecological complexity. The novel's recurring emphasis on carbolic acid recalls colonial sanitation projects in which efforts to regulate environments often resulted in exclusion, coercion, and violence.



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As the narrative unfolds, the limitations of this worldview become increasingly apparent. Balaram's commitment to scientific mastery fails to produce harmony or progress; instead, it generates instability and destruction. Through this portrayal, Ghosh anticipates later Anthropocene critiques that identify modern rationality as a significant contributor to environmental degradation.

#### **4. Material Forces and Nonhuman Agency**

One of the novel's most compelling features is its treatment of material entities as active participants in the narrative. Carboic acid, initially celebrated as a symbol of scientific progress, gradually reveals its unpredictable and potentially destructive nature. Likewise, fire repeatedly appears as an uncontrollable force capable of dismantling both physical structures and ideological certainties.

Such representations foreground the concept of nonhuman agency, a key concern in environmental humanities. Material substances in the novel do not simply respond to human intentions; they possess their own capacities to influence events and generate unforeseen outcomes. By granting agency to these forces, Ghosh challenges anthropocentric models of causality and control.

From an Anthropocene perspective, the recurring motif of fire evokes contemporary ecological disasters whose scale exceeds human planning and containment. Its persistent presence underscores the vulnerability of systems founded on assumptions of mastery and predictability.

#### **5. Migration, Capitalism, and Ecological Mobility**

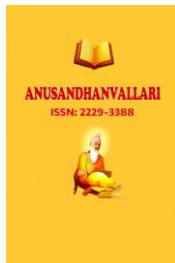
The novel's exploration of migration also resonates with contemporary environmental concerns. Characters traverse national and cultural boundaries under conditions shaped by economic insecurity and global capitalist networks. Although their movements are not directly linked to environmental collapse, they foreshadow modern forms of displacement associated with ecological instability.

Within the narrative, money functions as a transformative and often corrosive force. Alu's characterization of money as a form of "dirt" recasts economic abstraction as a source of contamination. Capitalist systems promise prosperity and order while simultaneously obscuring the ecological and social costs of accumulation.

This perspective aligns closely with Anthropocene scholarship, which frequently identifies capitalism as a driving force behind environmental degradation. Ghosh exposes the ways in which systems of extraction and accumulation exploit both human labor and natural resources.

#### **6. Narrative Structure as Ecological Critique**

The novel's rejection of linear storytelling serves as a formal response to ecological complexity. Linear narratives often reflect developmental ideologies that assume progress, control, and eventual resolution. Ecological processes, however, are characterized by cycles, feedback mechanisms, unpredictability, and collapse.



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The circular structure of *The Circle of Reason* resists teleological interpretations. The progression from Satva to Rajas and finally to Tamas suggests a recurring cycle rather than a definitive conclusion. Destruction is not portrayed as an endpoint but as part of a broader process of transformation and renewal.

By adopting this structure, the novel aligns itself with contemporary climate fiction's search for narrative forms capable of representing environmental instability without resorting to simplistic resolutions.

### **7. Weaving, Craftsmanship, and Ecological Knowledge**

Weaving emerges as an important metaphor for alternative forms of knowledge within the novel. Unlike industrial production, which prioritizes efficiency and abstraction, weaving requires patience, skill, and sensitivity to material conditions. It emphasizes relationships between humans, tools, and resources.

Shombhu Debnath's loom symbolizes a practical and sustainable mode of understanding the world. Rather than romanticizing tradition, the novel presents craft as a way of engaging responsibly with material limits. In environmental terms, weaving becomes a model of ecological awareness and restraint.

### **8. Magical Realism and Environmental Imagination**

The novel's use of magical realism extends beyond aesthetic experimentation. By incorporating extraordinary events and improbable survivals, Ghosh expands the boundaries of what can be imagined within literary representation. Alu's unusual physicality and experiences challenge conventional realist expectations and create space for alternative ways of understanding reality.

These narrative strategies anticipate Ghosh's later argument that climate change often remains difficult to imagine within traditional realist frameworks. By disrupting expectations of probability and realism, the novel enables readers to confront forms of ecological disruption that might otherwise remain invisible.

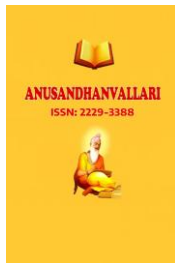
### **9. Care Ethics and Ecological Responsibility**

Characters such as Mrs. Verma offer an ethical alternative to the logic of domination and control. Her emphasis on compassion, dignity, and care contrasts sharply with Balaram's obsession with purity and mastery. The novel suggests that survival depends not on domination but on adaptability, cooperation, and empathy.

This ethical orientation resonates with ecofeminist thought and contemporary theories of climate resilience, both of which emphasize relationality, care, and mutual dependence as essential responses to environmental challenges.

### **10. Conclusion: *The Circle of Reason* as an Early Ecological Narrative**

When examined through the frameworks of climate fiction and Anthropocene studies, *The Circle of Reason* emerges as a remarkably forward-looking work. Through its critique of rationalism, capitalism, and conventional narrative structures, the novel anticipates many of the concerns that define contemporary environmental discourse.

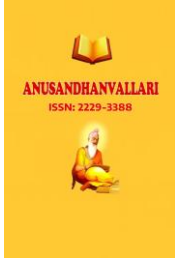


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Ghosh's text ultimately proposes an ethic of coexistence rather than control. It suggests that confronting ecological crisis requires humility, adaptability, and an acknowledgment of interconnectedness. Long before climate change became a dominant cultural concern, *The Circle of Reason* explored the imaginative and ethical challenges that now occupy a central place within environmental humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism.

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