CHAPTER II
THE CIRCLE OF REASON
Amitav Ghosh’s first novel, The Circle of Reason, has the distinction of being different in structure from the traditional novel. In fact, the novel could be taken as the starting point of a whole generation of new writers often called Ghosh generation1 who have left a lasting imprint in the novels of eighties making a new epoch in Indian fiction in English. Coming as it were, these novels, published in mid-eighties, made a drastic change in the area of fiction writing. These novels are, therefore, known for their internationalism, experimentation in structure and form, and also doing away with linguistic barriers, which are constant sources of trouble in the earlier ones.

According to Firdous Kanga, author of Trying to Grow and Heaven on Wheels, the new writers make their presence felt, with their distinctive approach, along with the rich cultural heritage and language control:

In fact, the two most promising fields for writing in English lie in India and South Africa. Both have the richness of two of the richest of cultures to draw from. Perhaps India has a slight edge over South Africa because of two things – the superb language control of Amitav Ghoshes and Vikramseths and the inescapable tinge of South Africa’s apartheid antecedents.2

In The Circle of Reason the attempts of the novelist are directed at floating the events and characters through a medley of metaphors and ideas. The characters themselves are converted into possible metaphors. The novel, which is episodic in nature, can also be called picaresque in one sense. It presents a journey from Satwa to Rasjas to Tamas, the three parts of the novel. There is a reversal of journey in the novel. Normally one is supposed to travel from Tamas (darkness) to Satwa (purity). But in this novel the protagonist travels in the reverse direction. In tune with his ‘style’ of writing, Amitav Ghosh freely mixes past, present and future in the novel.
He writes in a chain of thoughts. Ghosh describes one incident and if the incident links itself to any past happening he immediately goes to that past incident. This shifting of times in the novel has its own logic.

The novel basically tells three stories. The first part deals with the story of Balaram. He is a rationalist, and Louis Pasteur, the French microbiologist has a great influence on Balaram. He is so ideal that many times he becomes inhuman. He does not mix with people. For him people are just objects of observation. His whims lead to his self-destruction. He is also cynical by nature. Alu, the protagonist, is a nephew of Balaram’s. He is the only one to survive in the family. The second part of the novel tells the tale of a trader trying to bring together the community of Indians in the Middle East. But these efforts also prove to be unrealistic. The third part is the story of Mrs. Verma, who rejects rational thinking. She tries to create Indian model of community life in the desert. But she is deserted by others. At the end of the novel we find them in search of new horizons, hopes which are not fully formed and imaginations yet to be fulfilled. Perhaps their only plus point is that they are hopeful.

The novel begins with a description of Alu, who is present in all the three sections of the novel. Alu, whose real name is Nachiketha Bose, loses his mother and father in a car accident. He comes to stay with Balaram, his uncle and Torudebi, his aunt. They live in Lalpukur. He does not know them at all. He looks some what odd. It is a kind of unusual event in that village, for only rarely new people come to Lalpukur:

Years later – thirteen to be exact – when people talked about all that had happened sitting under the great banyan tree in the centre of the village (where Bhudeb Roy’s life-size portrait had once fallen with such a crash), it was generally reckoned that the boy’s arrival was the
real beginning. Some said they knew the moment they set eyes on that head. That was little difficult to believe. (3)

Nachiketa Bose comes to be known as Alu because of his head: “...it was an extraordinary head – huge, several times too large for an eight-year-old and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps” (3). People begin to talk about his head differently but Bolai-da says Nachiketa Bose’s head resembles a potato also known as Alu in Bengali: “He said at once: Potato.” (4). From that day onwards, he is named Alu, and his original name is almost forgotten. He looks neither ugly nor handsome, neither short nor tall, not even dark or fair. Alu displays an amazing ability to pick up various languages. Yet, paradoxically, he cannot speak properly. Balaram decides to teach him the art of weaving instead of sending him to a school for formal education. Thus Alu settles in Lalpukur, but his troubles do not. Shombhu Debnath, who teaches Alu the art of weaving, is a lowly man in Lalpukur. It is, therefore, not respectable to learn weaving from him. But Alu not only learns weaving from Shombhu, but also becomes perfect in the art of weaving. The novelist here gives a historical perspective to the skill of weaving. Ghosh exemplifies the past value of 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. (59)

It is also mentioned how in the past cloth was traded in global markets:
Human beings have woven and traded in cloth from the time they built their first houses and cities. Indian cloth was found in the graves of the Pharaohs. Indian soil is strewn with cloth from China. The whole of the ancient world hummed with the cloth trade. The Silk Route from China, running through Central Asia and Persia to the ports of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe, bound continents together for more centuries than we can count. It spawned empires and epics, cities and romances. Ibn Battuta and Marcopolo were just journeymen following paths that had been made safe and tame over centuries by unknown, unsung, traders armed with nothing more than bundles of cloth. It was the hunger for Indian chintzes and calicos, brocades and muslins that led to the foundation of the first European settlements in India. All through those centuries cloth, in its richness and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal bountiful trade. (59-60)

Ghosh chooses a circular pattern for this novel, taking clues from Indian philosophy. In contrast the Christian belief is that everyone is a born sinner and is doomed. The western belief is that, life is a journey and this journey has a definite initial and final point. There are many circles at various levels in the novel and they imply different things.

The novel is divided into three sections “Satwa,” “Rajas,” and “Tamas” and these sections are dominated by the three gunas respectively. Ghosh derives these from The Bhagavad-Gita. Satwa is described as light of consciousness by most scholars and it is called reason in this novel. However, this reason is essentially based on western thought with its components like rational thinking, scientifically choosing between right and wrong, discarding superstitions, progressive attitude, and advanced civilization. There seems to be a conscious effort to bring western and Indian
elements together. But ironically, there is a reversal of journey—all the characters move westwards and there is domination of passion and death.

Coming back to Alu, he is indisputably the protagonist, the glue that holds a nomadic novel together, but for much of the action he is the silent-centre around which an abundance of other stories are told. Though Ghosh never departs from the possible bounds, many fabulist elements are introduced. There is also the use of fantasy that suggests affinities with contemporary magic realism and a range of South Asian narrative traditions. The influence of Sanskrit classics and Bengali literature is also very much felt. This influence is felt towards the end of the novel, when a character attempts to stage a production of Tagore’s *Chitrangada*, a ballet based on an episode in *The Mahabharata*.

As mentioned earlier, Balaram is a man of reason. He wants to apply logic to each and every thing he comes across. For Balaram, theories come first followed by truth. Balaram’s interest in reason results in establishing a school called “School of Practical Reason and Pure Reason.” He also establishes a third branch called “March of Reason,” believing in the dictum that every act of life has got a purpose. Ghosh describes him thus:

He had a thin, ascetic face, with clean lines, a sharp ridge of a nose and wide, dreamy eyes. His high, broad forehead rose to a majestic dome, crowned with a thick, unruly pile of silver hair. It was an astonishing forehead: it shone; it glowed; it was like a lampshade for his bulging Higher Faculties – Language, Form, Number, the lot. It was striking face even in repose. Sometimes, when he was animated, it was lit with such a bright, pointed intensity that it imprinted itself on the minds of everyone who saw him in those moments. (12)
In fact, Balaram personifies reason. How far an action is relevant to the present-day situations – this is his only parameter for judging things and individuals. He is fascinated by the book *Life of Pasteur*. Pasteur is Balaram’s ideal logic and his God. Rational thinking is his only goal in life. But rationality has got only limited success in practical life. Scientific temper, the cause and effect theory, does not work in real situations. Balaram believes only in logic. He cannot look beyond that. He fails to accept even a very small difference from the unchangeable logical path. The story begins with his childhood. Balaram wants to study science and surpass great scientists like Jagadish Bose and Pasteur. But, he is directed to Dr. Radha Krishnan, the teacher of philosophy, by Balaram’s teachers as they think that he is good for history.

At Calcutta, Baralam’s favourite pastime is to study heads. He has a compulsive habit of commenting on others’ heads. This habit lands him in trouble many times. Gopal is Balaram’s most trusted friend. This friendship lasts lifelong but Gopal senses something wrong in Balaram’s attitude:

As he watched Baralam go, Gopal had a premonition: a premonition of the disaster he would call upon himself and all of them, if ever he was allowed to take charge of society. He decided then, with an uncharacteristic determination, that he would do everything in his power to keep that from happening. (53-54)

Baralam’s wife, unable to tolerate, puts his books on fire. Alu is able to save just one book – *Life of Pasteur*. *Life of Pasteur* is a significant symbol in this book. Balaram is obsessed with Phrenology and carbolic acid. His great mistake is that he fails to treat people as full humans. For him human beings are bumps to be studied or lives to be cleansed. Alu’s world of cotton weaving is projected as a kind of alternate ethos to Balaram’s new science. Yet even Alu loses his world to violence, commerce,
and destruction. At the end, he remains with his limbs withered, unable to weave. Ghosh uses contemporary history with its most awful confrontations to show how something is achieved at the cost of something else. Alu loses his copy of *Life of Pasteur* – given by Balaram on his death bed – but gets another one from Uma Verma. He consigns this copy to the funeral pyre lit to cremate Kulfí, the servant maid. This copy of *Life of Pasteur* can be considered a concrete symbol inherited from Balaram. This book has out lived its use. Carbolic acid, too, is disposed of in a ritualistic way. Alu learns that it is the human concern behind the action that gives it value. When Uma Verma fails to get cow dung for the ritual of the ground, she uses carbolic acid instead. When Misra objects to this, Uma Verma retorts, ‘‘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” (442).

*Life of Pasteur* plays a very intricate role in the novel. When Alu is first introduced to this book, Balaram is worried about Alu’s lack of response. When Balaram lectures about the book, Alu listens to him with ‘‘wide-eyed silence.’’ Baralam stops reading when he sees tears in Alu’s eyes. When Alu retrieves the book, it is Balaram who becomes wet-eyed. So, it can be considered that the book exists as a bond between uncle and nephew, an extension of the tradition of reason from one generation to the other. The greatest win for a rationalist is to win over someone else for his cause.

The rationality of Balaram wages war against germs, which are the root of all diseases. The analogy is: carbolic acid as a tool of scientific temper tries to finish off diseases, and rationality as the offshoot of scientific temper tries to end the ills of society. These cleansing mechanisms in different forms run as a metaphor throughout
the novel. In Al-Ghazira, Hajji Fahmy makes Adil and his cousin bathe in antiseptic. Carbolic acid is very much part and parcel of Alu’s cleaning programme. Towards the end of the novel, Mrs. Verma uses carbolic acid instead of Gangajal at the funeral of Kulfi. In fact the book *Life of Pasteur* is related to Mrs. Verma’s life also. She began developing interest in microbiology when her father introduced this book to her. Dr. Misra remarks after sniffing the air:

> When the first few mugfuls had splashed over the veranda Dr. Mishra began to sniff the air suspiciously. Then, throwing back his head, he burst into laughter. Mrs. Verma, he gasped, tell me, is that carbolic acid in those buckets? Yes of course Mrs. Varma said. He nodded weakly. The world has come full circle, he groaned. Carbolic acid has become holy water. (444)

Mrs. Verma responds:

> What does it matters? She cried. What does it matter whether it’s Ganga- Jal or carbolic acid? It’s just a question of cleaning the place, isn’t it? People thought something was clean once, now they think something else is clean. What difference does it make to the dead, Dr Mishra? (445).

Ghosh is pointing out to the blind faith of millions of Indians in Gangajal even though the water which was once so pure and germ-free, is now very badly polluted. However, when Kulfi dies, in spite of all efforts by Balaram and Alu to save her, it can be considered the defeat of reason since the course of action does not follow the path of reason always. The book *Life of Pasteur* itself states, “… without the germ ‘life would become impossible because death would be incomplete’” (428).

*The Circle of Reason* may be the response of Amitav Ghosh to the unhygienic conditions in India. What seems to have moved the author is the amount of filth and
dirt in a country where people always gave utmost importance to purity of soul and surroundings. This seems to be in contradiction to the everyday rituals people perform in their homes and their apathy towards their surroundings. People take their morning baths, purify their homes, and do all types of ablutions. They also observe fast for internal cleansing. But sadly they turn a blind eye to all the garbage and dirt in their holy places and rivers. Alu’s concern is simply how to overcome germ and disease.

Alu’s real name being Nachiketa Bose has its own meaning in the novel. Nachiketa in Indian mythology is the boy who waits at Yama’s door in obedience to the commands of his father. Waiting at Yama’s door is symbolically waiting at the door of death. Nachiketa is sage Uddalaka’s son. When Nachiketa tries to find out the real knowledge of Brahman, he incurs his father’s displeasure. Uddalaka curses Nachiketa to go to Yamaloka (nether world). Nachiketa pleads to Yama to give him divine knowledge. His single mindedness coupled with disinterested action wins the favour of Yama, who teaches him the Atmagnana (Knowledge of Self). As in mythology fire is the cleansing agent, so in the novel carbolic acid is the cleansing agent. Alu (Nachiketa Basu) also waits at death’s door when in Al-Ghazira he is buried under the debris when a building collapses. He survives on the oxygen that he gets through the gaps in the debris. For days he does only one thing – thinking. He wants to adopt that scientific approach in removing the ills of present day society. When he finally comes out, Alu declares that money is the enemy of mankind for “it travels on every man and every woman, silently preparing them for their defeat, turning one against the other” (302).

Balaram’s irrational behaviour brings his own doom. His interest in Life of Pasteur and the rationalist society is what Ghosh terms “a Pasteurized Cosmos”: “It wasn’t talk of reason, it wasn’t the universal atom. It was passion; a passion which
sprang from the simple and the every day. A passion for the future, not the past. It was that which made him the greatest man of his time, for it is that passion which makes men great” (53).

It is this passion that makes Balaram attempt to clean the surrounding area in his village Lalpukur that brings about his doom, destruction, and death. Though he starts a school he fails to educate the youth to think rationally. The youth of the village are interested in learning practical skills essential for survival. Balaram’s knowledge of science and his faith in reason have no base in real life situations. Abstract knowledge without worldly wisdom is bound to bring disaster. This is what happens with Balaram. His behaviour at Saraswathipuja, his passionate handling of cleanliness movement with carbolic acid, and his love for study of heads are ironically described. Ghosh juxtaposes the east against the west with practical learning and tailoring against the abstract ideology of rationalism.

It is Toru-debi’s practical sense and belief in the sewing machine that saves Alu twice from disaster. When the machine breaks down, Totu-debi asks Alu to throw it away and bring a new one for her:

Nothing’s any use now, she muttered. It’s the end. Just one blouse left to go and he’s died. She ran her hand over the machine’s shining wheel and pulled, with all her strength. The wheel was absolutely rigid. She smiled at them: you see; he’s haunted. There’s something in him.

Suddenly her face lit up, as though something had occurred to her. She tore her blouse away, and her heavy breasts spilled out. She lifted the black sinuously curved machine off its wooden base and settled it on her lap, clucking to herself.

Maya darted forward and caught her hands. Toru-debi looked up shamefacedly, straight at Alu. I thought it was you, she said confusedly. Aren’t you going to do something? Then all at once her
naked breasts and shoulders collapsed as though an immense weight had been lowered on to them. What’s the use? She said. It’s the end.

Alu felt his throat go dry as he looked at the terrible incandescent desolation in her eyes. Then Rakhal was shaking him, whispering: Run, there’s no time to lose. And Maya was beside him, holding his hand: yes, go. I’ll look after her; don’t worry.

In a daze, Alu found his slippers and went to the back door. But before he could slip out Toru – debi shouted again: Alu, come here. For one minute; only one.

Slowly Alu went back to her. She stood up and put the sewing machine in his arms. Throw it into the pond, she said. It’s dead. She learnt forward and searched his eyes. But you’ll get me another, Alu my bit of gold, won’t you? (158-159)

*The Circle of Reason* pivots upon a debate concerning the relationship between science, technology, and nationalism in India, and reaches back to the beginning of nineteenth century. Ghosh engages in a dialogue concerning tradition versus modernity which had preoccupied Indian nationalists from Rammohan Roy to Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru and colonial thinkers such as William Jones and Macaulay. Ghosh, by not fully accepting the conventional science / tradition division, problematizes the science-is-west-and-tradition-is-East dichotomy. He interrogates the status and worth of different branches of science in India. He seems to be greatly concerned about the way the media – under the influence of the prejudiced opinion of the west – attributes science to the west and pseudo-science to the east. He makes the important point that India did not receive the benefits of science, technology and medicine entirely from the British as in a one-day process of transfer, but as a result of cross-cultural exchanges, translations, and mutations.
Seen in this context, Balaram’s fascination with science generates much of the novel’s debate about the materialistic scientific reason of the west: is it tethered to its cultural origin or is it possessed by a universal validity? Balaram takes the latter position, arguing that “Science doesn’t belong to countries. Reason doesn’t belong to any nation. They belong to history – to the world” (57).

Balaram is a product of western education and, despite his fervent Indian nationalism, he has internalized the notion that western science transcends national boundaries in its search for truths. This is because the British administrators consistently strove to demonstrate that the discourse of reason was – in the Foucaultian sense – their exclusive property. In India, for example, “natives” were stereotyped as illogical dreamy creatures of instinct, while Britain’s technological and scientific practices were presented as proof of their superior faculty of reasoning – western science was also portrayed as being objective, culturally neutral, benevolent in intention, and allowing access to “truth.” In his pioneering study Machines as the Measure of Men, Michel Adas argues that western man from the industrial age onward considered science and technology to be the most realistic indicators of their purportedly superior reasoning abilities. With the Industrial Revolution, western technology and science was perceived as dominant signifiers of “civilization.” This belief justified the colonialist argument that non-western countries were inferior, childlike, and were in need of guidance from that alleged archetype of advanced reason, the west.4

This advancement of science and technology helped Britain establish and consolidate power in colonized countries. As Daniel Headrick shows, scientific and technological advances may be interpreted as “tools of empire.”5 At the same time western science is often interpreted as a discipline founded upon logic, empiricism, and rationalism, even if these goals are not always met. The distinction between
science and pseudo-science began to get importance only after the Industrial Revolution. This point is perhaps most vividly illustrated in colonial India where the British administrators’ desire to promote science as a visual spectacle to the illiterate masses of India caused mesmerism to gain temporary acceptance within the mainstream science even as late as the mid-nineteenth century.⁶

There are a few other major characters in the novel. Balaram’s friend Dantu is a rationalist. The name Dantu has a history. As the novelist describes it:

… his sharply domed head, of course, and his thin, hollow face those two long, peeping front teeth from which he took his name. It’s his bregma, said Balaram. I can see now that it was Veneration that had pushed his skull up so sharply. Besides, he always had the look of a saint. (15)

But Dantu’s saintly look is deceptive. He is actually a politician in the garb of a saint. Balaram’s neighbour and later on his enemy is Bhudeb Roy. Gopal, Balaram’s friend, describes him thus, “He had looked like a fairly ordinary young man then, with thinning hair and a large pleasant face. He was stout even then but far from fat, and in his starched white dhoti and Kurta he had even possessed a certain kind of grace” (23). Jyothidas, Assistant Superintendent of Police, is an impressive character in the novel. He is proud that he looks younger. He is described as:

He is a slight man, of medium height, dark, with straight black hair. He has a long, even face with a rounded chin and a short, straight nose. His only irregular features are his eyebrows, which are slightly out of alignment, one being a fraction higher than the other and slightly more sharply curved, and that tends to make him appear a little surprised even when he is not. His eyes, which he has trained over the years to record the minutest details of plumage and colouring, are sharp and meticulously observant. He is clean shaven and prides himself on it, for it distinguishes him from his colleagues, who tend
generally to be aggressively moustached. He is pleasant— if not good-looking and he looks younger than his twenty-five years. He is often mistaken for a college student. (133)

He is always after Alu, thinking that Alu is a terrorist. He is the person who accompanies Alu throughout the three parts of the novel. His other passion is watching birds. He is also known as bird man.

Journey as a motif runs throughout the novel and unites the three parts. As G.J.V. Prasad observes, “Characters cross border with almost the biological necessity, if not, always the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds.” This motif is particularly associated with Alu, who is on the run branded as a terrorist by the police and Jyothidas close on Alu’s heels always. Alu moves from Lalpukur to Kerala and then sets off to Al-Ghazira in the Middle East along with a number of characters who travel in search of material wealth and better opportunities. Travel itself is converted into a homeland.

Jyothidas pursues Alu as part of his professional obligation. He is also moved by the urge to watch birds in his travels. It is Jyothidas who causes the journey of Alu from Al-Ghazira through Alexandria, Egypt, Lisbon, Tunis to a little town of Elqued. He is accompanied by Zindi, Boss and Kufli, and whenever Zindi and Alu say anything, Jyothidas seems to overhear them for he appears wherever they go. But Jyothidas gets suspended from service for his sympathies with Alu. Jyothidas goes even to Elqued to see more birds, rare vultures and atone for previous lapses. But ironically he is viewed as a vulture by Zindi, for, she says, he seems to bring death wherever he goes, “That man carries death with him wherever he goes. He can’t help
it; it’s in his eyes. Think of what happened to Jeevanbhai; think of Karthamma and all the rest. And this time he’s come with a vulture” (424).

Alu, alone in the desert, is terrified of the future. Jyothidas is enchanted by Kulfi but even as he starts wooing her when they rehearse for the dance drama *Chitrangada*, Kulfi dies of a heart attack. Having nothing to fall back on in India he sets off to Dusseldrof in Germany to stay with his engineer uncle. When he is informed that Alu and Zindi are moving to Tangier on their way back home, he is able to visualize a sky beaming with different birds over Tangier, “sky alive with Cory’s shearwaters and honey buzzards, white storks and steppe eagles” (454). He takes the permission of suspecting Zindi to accompany them up to Tangier, “I’m migrating myself - to Dusseldorf. I’ve got nowhere else to go. Can I come with you, too?” (455). For Jyothidas his past and future are continents of defeat – defeat at home, defeat in the world.

Birds, as Jyothidas sees them, contribute to the central idea of the novel. As he observes various birds at various times, they seem to highlight a journey from water to desert and in the end again to water. Jyothidas recalls that he saw ducks and cormorants and storks when he had visited the zoo, then he is in search of Paradise Flycatcher when he goes to Mahe and there he actually sees a Malabar Kingfisher. When he is to land in Al-Ghazira he is eager to see Barbary Falcon and the Saker Falcon. When he is in Elqued he is eagerly looking for vultures. When he is to go to Dusseldorf through Tangier, to his amazement, he realizes that the whole sky will be migrating over Tangier.

Shombhu Debnath, a skilful weaver and Alu’s teacher, is a strong man with self respect: “He was tall, spectrally dark and skeletal thin. He was usually nearly naked, with only a thin gamcha wound around his waist, displaying proudly the
corded muscles he bore all over him as a legacy of his years of weaving and wandering” (74). Rakhal, Shombhu Debnath’s son and Maya’s brother, is a man of dreams and aspirations: “Rakhal was only sixteen but already among the tallest in the village, and known everywhere for this skill with the bamboo pole. He had a special one for serious fights studded with nails” (34). The character of Rakesh appears in the second section of the novel. He, along with Alu, migrates from India to Al-Ghazira for better prospects. Before that, “Rakesh was a travelling sales man for a small Ayurvedic Pharmacy in Bhopal which specialized in a patented herbal laxative. It was the only job he had been able to find—despite his bachelor’s degree in commerce— and that, too, only after a year’s efforts” (195).

The most interesting character in the novel is Jeevanbhai Patel—a businessman from Gujarat. The Durban Tailoring House belongs to him. Being a practical man, he constantly worships money. Money is both knowledge and power, he believes. Since he marries a Bohra girl, he is ostracized from his family. He moves from place to place, loses his name and fame, struggles a lot in his life, and after his wife’s death, once again he succeeds in establishing his business. He is the founder of New Life Marriage Bureau. He constantly lives under the shadow of death, and one day he hangs himself with his belt, lonely without relatives.

The characters of Nury the egg seller appears in the second section of the novel. He is typically a philosopher by nature. Ghosh describes him thus:

Nury had imagination. But, more important, Nury was the only man in Al-Ghazira who went from house to house every day, talking to people, even going into courtyards, taking in, in one glance, as much as other people take in ten. Not a leaf fell, not a sheep shat in al-Ghazira without Nury’s knowing of it. But all this he did quietly, for silence was in his nature. (267)
The Character of Dr. Mishra appears in the third section of the novel. Apart from being a doctor, he knows Sanskrit and Indian scriptures. He is a rationalist like Balaram. We can see the mark of his genius when he says, “The world has come full circle, he groaned. Carbolic acid has become holy water” (444).

The women characters of the novel also struggle with their lives. Nonderma, maid servant of Balaram and Torudebi, is an old widow who looks after Alu and does the household work at Balaram’s house. Maya, daughter of Shombhu Debnath and sister of Rakhal, is an innocent character:

Maya was eleven then, a few months younger than Alu, but a good head taller and sturdily built. She had a red sari wound around her, covering her budding breasts. It was an old shrunken piece of cloth, and it fell well short of her ankles and left her shoulders bare. She had a six-foot length of bamboo in her hands. Her firm, rounded face and her gently slanting eyes were dark with anger (34).

Kulfi didi, a widow, is a tragic character in the novel. She is a fragile woman with long slender arms and a thin, hollowed-out face. Her cheeks look as through they have collapsed, like a skin of a punctured drum. She works as a cook in a rich family. She loses the job for trivial reasons. She dies of a heart attack and is buried with all rites in the sands of Sahara.

Zindi’s character is fully developed by the novelist. We first encounter her on the boat Mariamma, which is owned by Hajji Musa. In his boat, he smuggles Alu and others to Al-Gazira. Zindi’s full name is Zindi al-Tiffaha. Formerly she was a prostitute and brothel owner. She is clad all the time in “black dress which enveloped her in a cocoon of cloth, billowing outwards with quivering breasts rested on her stomach and then ballooning over her massive hips to fall to the ground like a tent, over her feet” (185). She runs an “urban village” complex, her best girls being the
beautiful Kulfi and unprepossessing Karthamma. We find in The Circle of Reason the same weird combination of eccentric characters and unlikely events as in Wole Soyinka’s The Road. But, whereas Soyinka’s characters are all held in thrall to the professor who searches for the meaning of death, Zindi and companions move from one place to another by the restless hands of destiny. Hujji Fahmy, an elderly man in Ras, takes care of her. She treats all strangers warmly. She is an interesting talker like every character in the novel. As she is growing older, she is worried about the maintenance of the house. She says, “While everything is all right outside, things seem fine in the house – money keeps coming in and I can manage. But let something happen outside, and that’s the end – there’s nothing I can do. Why? Because I can give them food, I can give them a roof, but I can’t give them work” (236). Worried about the future of migrants, she plans to buy the Durban Tailoring House, but it does not materialize because of the death of Jeevanbhai Patel.

The only educated and rational woman who appears in the third section of the navel is Dr. Uma Verma. She is unorthodox and an emblem of the changing woman. She is a microbiologist and a sympathetic and warm-hearted lady. She worries about humanity. She says, “Nothing’s whole anymore. If we wait for everything to be right, again, we’ll wait forever while the world falls apart. The only hope is to make do with what we’ve got” (450).

The Circle of Reason is a well-constructed novel with the folktale charm of Arabian Nights. The plot stretches from a rural village in Bengal to the shores of the Mediterranean. The novel can be analyzed as an epic of restlessness. Around the bare outline of the plot, which moves over continents, are several stories skilfully arranged moving back and forth in time.
The motto of the Rationalist Society is “Reason rescues Man from Barbarity” (49). Hence Balaram does not choose any of the dates in 1914 when reason embattled for determining his birth date, but selects a date between May and June when Jagadeesh Bose discovered that vegetables have feelings. He is of the view that reason connects people all over the world; it defies countries. His School of Reason has two Faculties: Pure Reason and Practical Reason, believing that superstition and ignorance were done away with Pasteur’s development of disinfectant and inoculation and Madame Curie’s experiments with radiation to control cancer cells. Balaram tries to solve all the problems with buckets of carbolic acid. However, Balaram, who talks of reason all the time, practically seems to lose it himself when he confronts Bhudeb Roy, in the first part of the novel. It is also ironic that Balaram, who swears by science, rallies on nineteenth-century pseudoscience Phrenology, which is close to Indian superstition of popular religion and astrology that he opposes. Pradip Datta says, “His search for a new western vision of reality reflected in the Chapter titled ‘A Pasteurized Universe’ bring to mind the Vedic legend of creation of the world, in which the milk ocean of creation was churned by the gods and demons using a snake to separate poison from ‘Amrit’ (ambrosia).”

In the second section, when Alu arrives in al-Ghazira, Passion (Rajas) begins. According to Dr S. Radhakrishnan, “Rajas has an outward movement …. Rajas is impurity which leads to activity.” Balaram describes passion as springing from the simple and every day. In this section the people in Ras indulge in talking, listening to and telling stories, gossiping, having tea at Zindi’s house, fighting in front of Hajji Fahmy’s house, indulging in intrigues, falling prey to conspiracies, dancing, worrying about things. They join Alu’s mission to wage a war against money. However, after the initial pronouncement to cleanse society of the germ called “money,” Alu seeks
refuge in doing nothing but weaving. His idea is carried by Abu Fahl, Prof. Samuel, Hajji Fahmy, and others in Ras with tremendous enthusiasm as they all tie cloth on their sleeves for cleaning, set out to cleanse society and compel the shop owners to convert their shops into public property. Finally zealous and charged, they all go to The Star to fetch the sewing machines which prove to be their doom; the building collapses and many of them die.

Bhudeb Roy sets in motion Alu’s flight from Northern India. The young man is relentlessly pursued by Jyothidas in a pointless misidentification of “the bad guy” reminiscent of Victor Hugo’s Les Miserables. Alu goes to Calcutta and from there travels to Kerala and to the small former French colony of Mahe. But Jyothidas traces him there also. But luckily Alu leaves to Al-Ghazira before Jyothidas arrives. He is helped by a former prostitute Zindi-al-Tiffaha, who has got a house in a place called “The Severed Head” or Ras. All sorts of refugees go there, some of them with questionable occupations. Among them are Samuel, Kulfi, Karthamma, and a travelling sales man Rakesh. When they arrive in Al-Ghazira, they meet the rest of the characters in Zindi’s little world, including Abutahl who drinks too much; Forid Mian, an old tailor; Jeevanbhi Patel, by far the richest merchant in the area; Hajji Fahmy, a wealthy teetotaler whose family has been among the earliest settlers in the area; handsome Zaghoul the pigeon; and Mast Ram, who falls in love with Kulfi. When Kulfi does not reciprocate, Mast Ram commits suicide and in the process sets fire to the village, burning 50 shacks to the ground.

Alu is trapped under the heaps of concrete when a massive building called “The Star” collapses. He is saved by two Singer sewing machines. When he is saved after a few days, there is a kind of metamorphosis in his personality. He is a completely changed man: “He was sitting behind the loom on the platform weaving
very fast, but without so much as looking at the loom and talking all the while. And in a way that was the strongest thing of all; that he was talking. “For Alu was a very silent man” (299). He begins speaking about “cleanliness and dirt and the infinitely small” but his greater concern is war against money. He converts some to his cause, for establishing a system in which no one makes profit from their business beyond what they immediately need. Like Nachiketa of mythology, Alu returns from death’s door but the metamorphosis only brings his doom.

The Circle of Reason has multiple layers of narration. One layer is about education. Ghosh seems to be very much worried about the education that is being imparted to young boys and girls. Is education just memorizing of facts? Is it just a tool for setting livelihood? These questions baffle the reader. The real purpose of education is to sharpen human sensitivities. Young minds are led to become socially conscious. Can the ultimate goal of releasing the common man from the clutches of poverty, ignorance and disease be achieved by the current education system? Balaram, as Ghosh’s mouthpiece, says, “It would be wrong; it would be immoral. Children go to school for their first glimpse into the life of the mind. Not for jobs. If I thought that my teaching is nothing but a means of findings jobs, I’d stop teaching tomorrow” (56). So, glimpse into the life of mind is all that education should do. Education should become a joy of learning not burdensome. It would be pertinent here to mention how Pasteur’s life exemplified the fact that education should be aimed at answering the common everyday problems of people. Bread alone is not the answer. Several other forms of thinking are needed to be really useful to society. Pasteur left the study of crystallography to answer the most common problem of brewers of France. “What was it that made bean rot?” This is how he came to discover the infinitesimally small germ and the good and harm it causes to human life.
Life therefore is the best teacher. Experience and exposure to real life situations are more crucial than classroom instruction. Education is for life but better education is from life. Shombhu Debnath says, “Skill is not enough; you have all that you ever will. Technique is just the beginning. The world is your challenge now. Look around you and see if your loom can encompass it” (86).

There is also reference to politics and power emotions within India. There are a set of people, traditional and perhaps out-dated, who are worried about decolonizing what the British did in India. The novel focuses on decolonization and neo-colonization of the globe by multinational companies. The novel also tries to point out how democracy has failed in this country. Ghosh attacks both the colonizers and the colonized; the colonizers because of the harm they have done and the colonized for their hypocrisy and lack of sincerity. On one occasion Mrs. Verma shouts at Misra:

Who sabotaged Lohia? Don’t think we’ve forgotten. We’ve forgotten nothing. We know your kind inside and outside, through and through: We’ve heard your sugary speeches and we’ve seen the snakes hidden up your sleeves; we’ve seen you wallowing in filth with the Congress while High Theory drips from your mouths; we’ve heard you spouting about the Misery of the Masses while your fingers dig into their pockets. (411)

In the third part “Tamas: Death,” we find the trio in Elqued on the northeastern edge of Algerian Sahara. All the pandemonium created at the end of the section “Rajas: Passion” prepares us for the denouement. Tamas has been described by S. Radhakrihnan as “darkness and inertia.” Besides this, Tamas also indicates a tendency to decay, to die. Dr. Uma Verma helps the trio – Zindi, Alu and Kulfi – the same way she helped Jyothidas. In Dr. Uma Verma’s library, Alu finds the book Life of Pasteur given to her by her father Dantu who was a friend of Balaram’s. Zindi and
Alu meet metaphoric deaths as Zindi is no more the same powerful and dominant woman. Alu, for whom weaving has been an expression of his self, is not able to weave as his thumb has gone stiff. Kulfi, who is acting as Chitragada in Tagore’s play against Jyothidas as Arjun, collapses and dies. There is a mockery of Hindu death rituals as carbolic acid is considered as pure as Gangajal, and put in Kulfi’s mouth. Throughout the novel, Ghosh makes fun of the so-called scientific attitude, rationalism, and Hindu philosophy and rituals.

However, at the end of the third section, there are hints of restoration of life of reason. There comes a new realization, a new life as Mrs. Verma says, “If there’s one thing people learn from their past it is that every consummated death is another beginning” (447). Having experienced many crises, Alu, accompanied by Zindi and Boss, returns to reason, and suggesting the completion of the circle. But this time, it is Satwa – the light of consciousness. Reason here is a balanced, progressive and civilized attitude towards life.

Moving from place to place, continent to continent, Ghosh’s characters keep floating in the novel; they do not form any relationships worth the name. They keep telling the stories. When Alu is presumed killed buried under the debris of The Star, a building he was helping to construct, Jeevanbhai tells the police the story, but it is Zindi’s version which commands the complete attention of the audience:

They crouched on mats around Zindi, listening intently to every word. They had lived through everything Zindi spoke of and had heard her talk of it time and time again; yet it was only in her telling that it took shape; changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing, a block of time which was not hours or minutes or days, but something corporeal, with its own malevolent willfulness. (228)
In the complex artifact that the novel is, the parts which seem unconnected are connected in one way or the other. In one case Balam watches the movie *Aradhana* with Gopal on the day Balaram discusses Alu’s education. Much later a song from the same movie changes Rakesh’s life and he travels in the same boat to Al-Ghazira along with Alu. In another case, the boat rides to and away from Al-Ghazira are connected by umbrellas. At first it is Zindi who carries an umbrella. When it falls overboard, Alu recovers it and earns her gratitude. Again, a mute carries a Japanese umbrella. The old man falls overboard when he throws the umbrella at an aircraft-carrier, but Alu fails to save him as his thumb has gone stiff.

The metaphors generate circles in the novel which itself comes full circle. Beginning with Alu’s homecoming, as Alu comes to his uncle’s home after his parents loss, the novel ends as Alu is about to return home. The concluding sentence of the novel does not suggest an end, but a beginning – “Hope is the beginning” (457). Time also moves in a circular motion. Hem Narain Mathur, who seems to have disappeared after the first section, again appears in the third section. While talking to Jyothis, Gopal tells him about the burning of Balaram’s books and mentions that Alu was eleven then. This triggers off Jyothis’ memory. He remembers the time when he was eleven and his father had taken him to the zoo and had complained about the chaos. Many years later, Dubey and Lal complain about society. The narration of events is not done in a linear method but memories take the readers back and forward in time.

It is quite obvious that characters’ tales are told by the novelist himself. Ghosh tries to weave together the different stories through reference to sewing machines, carabolic acid, *Life of Pasteur*, money and dirt, purity and cleanliness, and rationalism and science. He uses all these devices to make a coherent whole of the
n o v e l .  A l u ’ s  l o v e  f o r  w e a v i n g  i s  t h e  o n l y  m e t a p h o r  t h a t  b i n d s  a n d  w e a v e s  t h e
episodes together. The knowledge that Balaram and Alu acquire is not life-giving,
life-sustaining knowledge but an abstract knowledge that is far removed from the
realities of life. Balaram’s is the knowledge of the western science and ideology and
Alu’s is the eastern philosophy of considering money as dirt. Both are mocked at. In
spite of the destruction and death they bring about, the impression that is created is
not one of serious tragedy but of comic misfortune. In The Calcutta Chromosome
too, Ghosh pitches knowledge / science of the west against the intuition / counter
science of the east.

Alu, who was orphaned with the death of his parents in a car accident, moves
from one disaster to another disaster. He moves on from the death of his uncle and
aunt in a fire to the death and destruction of his fellow friends in Al-Ghzira and finally
to Kulfi’s death from a heart attack. Alu witnesses nothing but death and disaster.
Ghosh hints at the hope, yes, hope for the bird-watcher police-officer, Jyothidas, hope
for Zindi with the child Boss and her profession. But for Alu? He returns home, but
what home has he in India? The novel remains a question mark. He drifts from place
to place and person to person without any will, desire, or effort on his part. But it is
not rounding off. To quote Irving H. Buchan, “It is not a little to say that the novel is
more a way of travelling than a point of arrival; more an invitation to wander than a
secure niche; and more akin to the way a man enters and meanders through this world
than to an assured resting place in the after life."

What is expected is a journey from purpose to passion to perception. In The
Circle of Reason there is too much passion but too little perception; there is a sort of
uncertainty of perception or meaning. All characters are caught up in a non-
productive circle: Alu’s and Maya’s love for each other, Mast Ram’s one-sided love
for Kulfi, Kulfi and Abusa’s liking for each other, Jyothidas’ infatuation for Kulfi, and implicitly hinted love between Alu and Karthamma result in failures. Balaram’s “School of Reason,” Zindi’s attempts to purchase the Durban Tailoring House, Torudebi’s attempts to make blouses for Parboti-debi, Ghaziri peoples’ zealous mission to bring sewing machines and the desire to get rid of money, and Mrs.Verma’s plan to put up Chitrangada are utter failures. The chasing of Alu by Jyothidas results in his own suspension. The characters are trapped in such a non-productive circle that their struggles lead them to nothingness. Toru-debi and Zindi are childless, Kulfi is a prostitute, Abusa is arrested, and Prof. Samuel loses his job. In spite of this, the novel does provide a way for hope: “Hope is the beginning” (457).

*The Circle of Reason* makes an unconventional reading; the form of the novel may be taken to symbolize the chaotic state of today’s society. However, the novel does have a plot, theme and characterization. The novel seems to suggest that everything is actually a matter how we look at it. Ghosh builds his extraordinary tale with the help of extraordinary characters. In all the three parts the novel finds patches of settled community life. Each part is a tale of attempts to better society. But many efforts flame into destruction and exile. Yet the novel does not slip into cynicism. The way it looks at its stories ensures that the urge to mould a better life remains undefeated.
References


10. Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli *The Bhagwadgita*.