Chapter 2

The Migrant Subaltern: The Traveller in *The Circle of Reason*

The tendency of the post modern Indian English novelist is to delude all sorts of illusory classifications and categorisations with the result that distinct borders and boundaries between the forms, as well as content of a literary work are fast disappearing.

“Amitav Ghosh is a post-modern, Indo-Anglian novelist whose major novels—*The Circle of Reason, The Shadow Lines, In An Antique Land, The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery* pivot around multiracial, multiethnic issues as the wandering cosmopolitan roves around and weaves—them with his deft, narrative flourish. In almost all these novels the characters move round a gyre of timelessness, yielding helplessly to the chasm in human relations and other post-modern perturbations.”¹

The thematic patterns undertaken for the study tackle with the themes of boundary crossings and obliteration of borders be they between two nations, two cultures, two races, two individuals or those between genres of literary writing. Amitav Ghosh refuses to be categorised and rebels against the templates of genre. This experiment is evident in John Hawley’s remarks: “Indeed Ghosh has by now become a bit notorious in his bold embrace of new genres and styles when he undertakes a new project.”² Hawley further goes on to enumerate the major themes that are incorporated in most of his fictional works;
“Ghosh’s recurring themes are: the role of the individual in the broad sweep of political events; the dubious nature of borders whether between nations and peoples or between one literary genre and another; the role of memory in one’s recovery of identity in the march of time; the role of the artist in society; the importance of narrative in shaping history.”

*The Circle of Reason* (1986), Ghosh’s first novel is written in the style of magic realism, popularised by Salman Rushdie in his *Midnight’s Children* – a mixing of historical and fantastic elements to create an interesting work of fiction. Numerous instances in the novel exemplify the fine blending of fantasy and realism in *The Circle of Reason*. The extra-ordinary head of Alu reminds us of Saleem Sinai’s prominent nose in *Midnight’s Children*. The head was “huge, several times too large for an eight year old, and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps.” A “big spectacle shaped lump which covered a large part of the back and sides” (TCOR, p. 37) was also a sight of wonder for the villagers.

“It was large enough to contain a multitude of organs and yet its boundaries were too shadowy to say which. And the worst part was that it was right on the trickiest part of the skull, for the founders of the science of phrenology were all agreed that the organs which govern the lowest and least desirable propensities, all grow on the back and sides of the head. For all Balaram knew, a witch’s brew could be bubbling in that lump, destructiveness perhaps, mixed with amativeness or secrecy and peppered with combativeness and acquisitiveness” (TCOR, p. 37).
Dr. Shyam S. Aggarwalla points out:

“The attribution of moral qualities to different parts of Alu’s head and their workability in the miraculous happenings in the novel are like the magician’s ghetto in Midnight’s children where ventriloquists could make stones tell jokes and contortionists could swallow their own legs.”\(^5\)

In terms of history, the years when Ghosh was writing this novel, was a very crucial period for India. The separatist violence in Punjab, militant attack on a Sikh temple of Amritsar, the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the riots that broke out after the assassination were the major social and political events of the period. But, before embarking on a close analysis of *The Circle of Reason* and critically examine the manner and the matter of the novel, it would be a fruitful exercise to get acquainted with the major developments in the field of Anthropology and the art of writing fiction because Ghosh has a background in Anthropology and these developments have a direct bearing on the theme under study.

Anthropologists in recent times have mainly concerned themselves with the porous nature of cultural boundaries which is parallel to the obliteration of borders in literary works. Robert Dixon aptly remarks:

“The characters in Ghosh’s novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but dwell in travel in cultural spaces that flow across borders, the ‘shadow lines’ drawn around modern nation states.”\(^6\)
Renato Rosaldo further throws light on the subject.

“In contrast to the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a mere porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and beyond its borders.”

Anthropology is not a study of separate, authentic cultures that it used to be, but it has shifted its concern to a study of borderlands between cultures. Such hybrid cultures are a result of the migrations across borders and mass flow of population from one nation to another. James Clifford emphasizes the evaporation of borders and the creation of a vast cultural space without any boundaries and with its own languages and national or religious practices. He argues:

“Once we begin to focus on these inter-cultural processes, the notion of separate, discrete cultures evaporates; we become aware that all cultures have long histories of border crossings, diasporas and migrations.”

Renato Rosaldo further elaborates on these hybrid cultural spaces or zones:

“More often than we usually care to think, our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets and eruptions of all kinds... Along with “our” supposedly transparent cultural selves, such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation.”

It is precisely these border zones, pockets and eruptions and transitional zones that Amitav Ghosh has chosen as the background
setting of almost all of his fictional works that the work proposes to analyse.

Amitav Ghosh’s first novel *The Circle of Reason* has as its setting the small village of Lalpukur, near Calcutta. The main protagonist is Alu, whose picaresque adventures in the course of his journey from Lalpukur, across the Indian Ocean to the oil town of al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf, form both the setting and the chief concern of the novel. The village Lalpukur, where the first half of the novel is set, is a perfect embodiment of diasporic, porous cultural space where people from different cultures, nations and languages dwell together and interact with one-another in perfect harmony. The village does not symbolise Indian tradition in contrast with Western tradition and culture, as a conventional post-colonial novel usually would depict in a setting. Rather the village was settled by refuges from East Pakistan after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Thus, the village apparently a symbol of traditional India, is itself the product of a diaspora. The people of Lalpukur were;

“Vomited out of their native soil years ago, and dumped hundreds of miles away... borders dissolved under the weight of millions of people in panic-stricken flight from an army of animals” (TCOR, p. 59-60).

Lalpukur, with its mixture of technologies, ‘its blend of Hinduism and Bruce Lee movies’ (TCOR, p. 75), is not a site of tradition but of hybridization.

“The village is churning like cement in a grinder and Balaram was busy chasing its shooting boundaries with buckets of carbolic
acid, his hair wafting behind him, in the germ free air” (TCOR, p. 76).

The novel can be studied as a *bildungsroman*, the story of coming of age of the main protagonist Alu, who arrives as the orphaned child of Balaram’s elder brother, to Lalpukur where Balaram lives with his wife Toru Debi and is still childless. The long opening section of the novel further describes Alu, apprenticed as a weaver with Shombhu Debnath, a master weaver, while his uncle Balaram the village school master is obsessed with western ideas, epitomized by his passion for phrenology and the writings of Louis Pasteur. In his enthusiasm to propagate his peculiar scientific notions and obsession with cleanliness he establishes the Pasteur School of Reason where he teaches the construct of Reason, and carries out drives of disinfecting the village with carbolic acid. He employs Shombhu Debnath to teach weaving while his wife teaches sewing and stitching. It is his obsession with carbolic acid and enmity with Bhudeb Roy, the owner of village school that brings about his destruction along with the rest except Alu who escapes to embark upon the rest of his journey to other parts of the globe.

*The Circle of Reason* like Ghosh’s other novels deconstructs any simple opposition between tradition and modernity or discrete oriental and occidental cultures. The history of weaving and the international cloth trade keep on recurring in this and each of his subsequent novels. It becomes a synecdoche of that ‘intricate network of differences’ in which all cultures are enmeshed with their neighbours. When Balaram decides to make the young Alu a weaver, he convinces him by citing the history of the technology of
weaving and how weaving too evokes the cultural instability and porous boundaries, a result of borrowings across borders. According to Balaram:

“... the loom 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” (TCOR, p. 55).

Balaram develops and reinforces the idea that culture is a process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders. Weaving forms the background of this idea and he cites the example of world cloth trade, which traverses every possible route notwithstanding the cultural differences.

“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 parts of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe, bound continents together for more centuries – than we can count... All through the centuries, cloth in its richness and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe in equal bountiful trade” (TCOR, p. 55-56).

Thus, the history of weaving has no single national roots, but it traverses complex international routes. It can be read as an example of a traditional craft as opposed to western science and technology. It is another illustration that questions the idea of discrete divisions between cultures and nations.
Weaving is not the only binding factor in the novel. Rather there are various other patterns that keep on repeating in the course of the novel, imposing a kind of order on a chaotic world. GJV Prasad comments on Weaving and the accompanying patterns:

"The Circle of Reason is not merely circular but a finely patterned novel and when seen as a whole displays the intricate buti work of a master weaver in the making. The journey from Satwa through Rajas to Tamas, the three parts of the novel is not a straight forward narrative but one full of resonances harkening back and forth like an unfolding Raga circling and repeating notes and sequences of notes, each contextually different. And like a singer, Amitav Ghosh points to and expects appreciation of the subtle variations, the nuances, the resonances, the patterns in the rendition, and hence the whole narrative structure."\(^{10}\)

Carbolic acid, birds, germs, the Life of Pasteur and sewing machines are the other repetitive patterns that keep recurring and bind the narrative together. Besides these, there are other attempts at forming a pattern like singing, weaving, politics, theories of straight roads, and queues among others.

Sewing machines enter the novel very early when Toru Debi is worried about the newly arrived Alu: “…Toru Debi knew nothing of children. Children inhabited another world, a world without sewing machines. They neither hemmed, nor chain stitched nor cross-stitched, nor quilted. What did they do?” Later she plans “the clothes she would make him on the sewing machine” (TCOR, p. 5-6). She tries to pacify Bhudeb Roy and Parboti Debi by offering to make six blouses for her. When Parboti Debi elopes with Shombhu
Debnath and comes to her house to seek refuge, she thinks it’s for the blouses, and cries out: “Can’t you see how serious it is? She’s coming, and it’ll be the end of everything if the blouses aren’t ready. Only the sewing machine can save us now” (TCOR, p. 136).

Just moments before the entire household is burnt into ashes, Toru Debi calls Alu and gives him the heavy sewing machine, to be thrown away into the pond and requests him to buy another one for her. It is this sewing machine which saves Alu at this point and later also when Alu is trapped in a building collapse. It is in the company of these sewing machines that Alu meditates on money and other evils pestering mankind. It is the sewing machines, which the Ras people are going to retrieve when the al-Ghazira police attacks them. In the end Jyoti Das shouts to Alu, “…don’t worry about the sewing machine; they make them better at home now” (TCOR, p. 423).

*Life of Pasteur* also contributes markedly to render circularity to the text. Balaram lectures Alu about the book very early in the novel with a purpose to instil emotion and passion in him. Reciprocating Balaram’s concern, Alu displays care and affection by retrieving the book from fire when Toru Debi had set all his books on fire. Carbolic acid, a gift of Pasteur against the world of germs is repeatedly used in the novel, first by Balaram and Alu both, and later by Alu in al-Ghazira. Even at the end, *Life of Pasteur* is discovered by Alu on Mrs. Verma’s (Dantu’s daughter) bookshelf and Mrs. Verma uses carbolic acid instead of Ganga-jaal to put in the dead Kulfī’s mouth.
In fact it is the *Life of Pasteur* which is responsible for Mrs. Verma’s being there in Algeria she tells Alu the reason why she became a microbiologist: “My father told me that microbiology was Pasteur’s heritage and that I was to keep it alive” (TCOR, p. 395). In the end both Mrs. Verma and Alu seem to oppose the idea of fight against the germs and give a funeral to the *Life of Pasteur* thus completing the cycle. “Without the germ, life would be impossible because death would be incomplete” (TCOR, p. 396). This patterning and circularity brings forth histories and narratives and adds value to individual’s lives. It forms a very important element of Amitav Ghosh’s work. GJV Prasad comments:

“He is a careful craftsman precisely because craft is all in this life of ours. His journey across borders of various kinds in his life and works show us Ghosh’s abiding interest in the ways in which changes can be and are being wrought in our understanding of the world.”

The settings of Amitav Ghosh’s novels amply illustrate his constant attempts at creating a space where all kinds of borders are immaterial. This tendency makes Ghosh the most cosmopolitan of contemporary writers. It is this quality that forms the backbone of all his works, fiction or non-fiction. Prasad goes on to say:

“Amitav Gosh is arguably the most cosmopolitan of contemporary Indian English writers as also the most significant. His significance has its roots in his cosmopolitanism, for he is a writer who travels and remaps the world drawing connections across the boundaries of modern nation states. It is in this creative engagement with historical and political realities and truths, it is in this clearheaded erasure and redrawing of cultural
and political lines that divide and unite, that Amitav Ghosh finds his mission as a writer. With an anthropologist’s sense of detail, and a historian’s grasp of facts and chronology, and with a creative writer’s curiosity about causation and effects and great narrative skill and imagination, Ghosh weaves together a pluralistic and self reflexive view of the world – one that challenges the smugness of accepted narratives and points of views and the certainties of post-colonial borders as well as generic boundaries.”

After completing his share of adventures in the culturally eclectic Lalpukur, Alu joins the tide of diasporic Indians drawn to the rich oil economies of the Middle East. Part two of The Circle of Reason is set in al-Ghazira in the Persian Gulf. Alu there resumes his craft of weaving, but is accidentally buried alive when a new concrete building collapses. The collapsed building, The Star, a symbol of modernizing influx of the west on al-Ghazira, is contrasted with the traditional market place, the Souq: “… the old bazar’s honeycomb of passageways … obscure (ed) every trace of the world outside… Nor did any but the most alert in the Souq feel the soil of al-Gazira tremble when ‘The Star’ fell” (TCOR, p. 194). But even the Souq does not represent a discrete culture rooted in one nation. Rather it’s a small part of the network of trade routes, confirming Balaram’s argument that weaving produces not one world but many. Alu begins weaving again at the loom of his Egyptian neighbour Hajj Fahmy, who abandoned his traditional craft of weaving for the more profitable construction business. As an effort towards the revival of weaving, Alu now has to cross the borders of language and learn Arabic, as he had earlier learned
English. A close scrutiny of the characters living in the *Souq* further reveals Ghosh’s negation of borders in terms of culture, nation, language and even profession. Like the village of Lalpukur, the *Souq* of al-Ghazira does not represent a stable authentic culture, but a network of trade centuries old that unfurls like a cloth through a vast, borderless region.

“Since the beginning of time, al-Ghazira has been home to anyone who chooses to call it such” (TCOR, p. 261). But when the British discovered the oil deposits, they broke with the past by using military force to persuade the elderly Malik to sign a treaty. “al-Ghazira was just a speck of sand floating on a sea of oil. So the British... sent a resident to al-Ghazira, to make the Malik sign a treaty which would let them dig for oil... The resident arrived in a battleship...” (TCOR, p. 248-249). This illustrates that the intercultural interaction and exchange that creates these borderless areas does not take place on an equal level. Renato Rosaldo argues;

“All of us inhabit an interdependent late-twentieth century world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries, but we do not do so on equal terms. These boundaries are saturated with inequality, power and domination.”

The landlady of the house where most of Alu’s fellow diasporic migrants live is an Egyptian brothel owner named Zindi. She plans to buy Durban tailoring house from another diasporic Indian, Jeevanbhai Patel. Patel is a *Gujarati* Hindu from Durban in South Africa who has come to al-Ghazira after a marriage, of which his parents disapproved. His movements invoke the flow of the Indian ocean trade: “The Indian merchants along the coast pulled
(the couple) northwards like a bucket from a well. First they went to Mozambique, the Dar-es-Salaam then Zanzibar, Djibouti, Perim and Aden” (TCOR, p. 261). Zindi’s house is full of migrant labourers whom she hopes to divert from the construction industry to the now declining cloth trade: “al-Ghazira was a merchant’s paradise, right in the centre of the world conceived and nourished by the flow of centuries of trade. Persians, Zanzibari Arabs, Omanis and Indians fattened upon it and grew rich” (TCOR, p. 261).

Amitav Ghosh despises any facile and simple categorization of his works to a predictable set of themes and a recognised style of writing. In an interview with John Hawley, he suggests: “Every writer is an individual and every writer has a right to define their own role.”14 And speaking with Michelle Caswell he suggests that:

“... the novel is a metaphor that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historians, journalists, anthropologists etc.”15

He is defining fictional works in this manner so that the term includes fields as distinct as anthropology, fiction, historical research, social commentary, in other words - the freedom to invent new forms.

“In Ghosh’s worldview all such borders that hem us in and attempt to define us should be challenged - be they political, cultural, linguistic, racial, communal, spatial or even temporal. All these borders are constructs and meant for crossing. Perception is all- imagination and articulation can enable you to
cross all such shadow lines, to ‘colonise’ other spaces, to find your place in your story. Travel is a spiritual quest, a quest for narrative design, for personal significance in a meaningful world. This quest that is narrated in *The Circle of Reason* is present in all subsequent works by Ghosh.”

*The Circle of Reason* is a clear illustration of Amitav Ghosh’s experimentation with various genres and forms of literary writing.

“It is at once a travelogue, a detective story, a story of exile, a women’s rights tract, Marxist protest, a plea for humanistic comraderie etc.”

The narrative techniques employed in the novel sometimes contain the characteristics of magic realism for instance Toru Debi, looks upon her singer sewing machine as her child, but it is generally realistic and straightforward. He juggles with a lot of characters, time zones and locales in the telling of his tale. John Hawley comments on his style of writing:

“Ghosh’s roots are in journalism and academic writing – investigation and analysis, a revelation of subterranean connections and patterns – but first and foremost, and overriding all the many ideas that inform his work are the stories, the Dickensian proliferation of characters whose lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times.”

Meenakshi Mukherjee in her review of *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* for India Star comments upon Ghosh’s rebellion against the boundaries of genre:

“The wistful evocation of memory to reflect on divisions of land and people in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) had nothing in common with the
disjointed magical realism of his apprentice novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986)."\(^{19}\)

In an interview with Sheela Reddy in 2002 Ghosh suggests that his future writing may go in still newer directions, at least in themes if not their forms.

"The whole system of nation states is coming under increasing strain. The rich countries are essentially more and more a single unit: borders don’t really apply. At the bottom of the scale, in countries like Pakistan and Burma, again borders have melted away and there’s a general collapse of the state. I think we are at a point where the ideal of the nation as a way of organising society is no longer holding."\(^{20}\)

Justifying his obliteration and negation of borders both in terms of themes and the generic experimentation, Ghosh confesses to John Hawley:

"What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness the ways in which they are ‘naturalised’ by modern political myth-making. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be given or taken for granted. This is why I distrust also the lines that people draw between fiction and non-fiction. I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought that is why they must be disregarded."\(^{21}\)

Ghosh expresses an acute sympathy with the subaltern class in most of his works. In fact his main protagonists come from the suffering class. The motley migrant group that travels from Mahe to al-Ghazira on the boat ‘Mariamma’ with their eclectic backgrounds, is a perfect illustration of the futility of divisions based on caste,
race or religion. The protagonist Alu who is evading an incompetent Indian police chase and an absurd charge over a petty strife between his uncle Balaram and the corrupt Bhudeb Roy; Zindi, a ‘madam’ who runs a house of prostitutes in al-Ghazira after being banished by her husband on account of barrenness; Karthamma and Kulfi who have been picked up by Zindi to be prostitutes there; Rakesh, an ex-travelling salesman of Ayurvedic laxatives which he could never sell; Professor Samuel who propounds theories about queues; and others, are all aboard the multicultural boat on their way to al-Ghazira.

“In both *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*, through the experiences of poor and middle class female migrants, Ghosh makes visible the bodily and psychic violence done to those who are minor to the hegemonic languages of the nation and of globalization - by their class, gender, race or ethnicity ... he reveals how the much celebrated global flow of human bodies and its associated tropes of empowerment can also be differently, and violently abjecting processes – processes that disempower by stripping away the realization of equal citizenship for those marked other by their race, ethnicity, gender and class belonging.”

*The Circle of Reason* incorporates the characteristics of various literary genres. Sometimes it appears to be a *bildungsroman* describing the journey of Alu, a Bengali orphan from the obscure village of Lalpukur to Calcutta, Kerala the Middle East and Algeria. It has the elements of the picaresque novel, the novel of ideas, the thriller or detective novel (with ASP Jyoti Das), trailing the alleged extremist, Alu through several continents) and the
Hindu epic (when the community of Doctors stages a play *Chitrangada* and they look for water from the Ganges for Kulfi who’s no more.

Certain historical events like the Indian nationalist struggle of the 1930s, the Bangladesh war of 1971, and the international tide of migration to the Middle East of the 1970s onwards are foregrounded in *The Circle of Reason* making it suitable to be called a historical novel. The novel is however more concerned with period of British colonization of India. Ghosh’s concern is not with the Raj quo, but with the complex cultural changes as a result of the Raj, of various elements pre-colonial, colonial post-colonial and the creation of a certain kind of knowledge.

*The Circle of Reason* can also be read as a scientific tract since it introduces into its narrative deviant and obscure sciences like ‘Phrenology’ and ‘Criminology’, Balaram’s obsession with phrenology reveals the technique in detail to the readers who become aware of the way it works. Criminology is revealed through phrenology and further illustrated through the way Jyoti Das trails Alu and the manner in which most of them are trapped and some escape. Ghosh also introduces into the novel the myths, legends and anecdotes to indicate that these allow alternative ways of looking at the universe.

Feminism in *The Circle of Reason* finds manifestation in the form of the migrant female. Through the experiences of the migrant female Ghosh critiques both globalization and post-colonial nationalism. The chapter entitled *Becalmed* reveals and articulates Ghosh’s vision of globalization as well as the predicament of the
migrating women. A motley group of migrants from various parts of India are going to an imaginary island al-Ghazira on a boat named Mariamma. The group includes Alu who’s trying to escape the charge of an absurdly exaggerated village conflict; Zindi, who is the mastermind of this illegal exodus and who, after being banished from her matrimonial home because of her barrenness, runs a house of prostitution. Karthamma in her last stage of pregnancy and Kulfi who have been picked by Zindi, Rakesh, an ex-travelling salesman of Ayurvedic laxatives which he could never sell; and Professor Samuel, forever obsessed with his theory of queues.

The situation is a perfect illustration of the oppressed woman lured into migrating to a world apparently full of opportunities, but in reality exploitative in disguise. Professor Samuel says about Zindi, “She’s a madam ... If she wasn’t, why would she be herding these poor women across the sea? Why would she be keeping them shut away like prisoners in the cabin? I tell you, she’s going to sell them into slavery in al-Ghazira. Something like that or worse!” (TCOR, p. 173) On the contrary Zindi perceives herself as the saviour of these women:

“And, as for the women, why, when I get to India I don’t have to do anything. These women find me and come running. Take me, Zindi – no, me, Zindi-didi – don’t take her, she’s got lice. They go on like that. But I don’t take them all. I take only the good girls – clean, polite, and hardworking. That’s why I have to go to India myself to look... the whole of al-Ghazira knows that Zindi’s girls are reliable and hardworking... And so I get a little extra too,
not much. It’s not a business; it’s my family, my aila, my own house, and I look after them, all the boys and girls, and no one’s unhappy and they all love me” (TCOR, p. 181).

Thus, in a way, the barren Zindi surrounds herself with a surrogate family, something which the patriarchal set up had denied her. The different perspectives of both Zindi and Samuel express the objectification and commodification of women. For instance “I take only the good girls,” “she’s going to sell them”, or labourers like “Zindi’s girls are hardworking and reliable.” Here it would be important to allude to Karthamma’s tortuous pregnancy. She refuses to deliver her baby, despite being in full labour, because she wants to fill in certain forms before delivering the baby. “She won’t let the labour start. She’s sitting on the floor and kicking and fighting. She’s stuffed her hands into her womb, right in, up to her wrists” (TCOR, p. 177).

This peculiar behaviour of the female migrant i.e. Karthamma can be seen as a longing for home and security, or a manifestation of her desire and wishes or still perhaps an effort to confer legitimacy, to her illegitimate baby. This desire for home and security is inherent in every travelling protagonist and is exemplified in the separate existence they carve out together in the foreign land. The betrayed Zindi also makes a last effort to reconcile with her paternal home but is denied and disrespected. The powerful Zindi herself is a victim of this patriarchal set up which is still cruel to the interests of women.

Indian philosophy inspires the circular pattern of this novel. Ghosh takes inspiration from *The Bhagvadgita*, to name the three
sections of the novel. The three parts are named after the three gunas – Satwa, Rajas and Tamas with every guna given an English substitute. In fact this circular patterning of the novel can be seen as one of its major concerns. It can be seen as an attempt at imposing order on a chaotic world, an effort at making it worth living. Satwa: Reason is the first section of the book: Satwa implies the light of consciousness which Ghosh prefers to call reason. The contents of each section justify the nomenclature. The western concept of reason is equated with the very Indian concept of Satwa while a student Balaram with his friends establishes the Rationalist society with the motto ‘Reason rescues man from barbarity’. Reason, according to Balaram brings people together and defies countries Balaram says, “...science doesn’t belong to countries, Reason doesn’t belong to any nation. They belong to the history – to the world” (TCOR, p. 54). Balaram perceives Life of Pasteur as an epitome of reason. Weaving is also reason because it has brought the world closer. He quotes ‘Reason’ as the principal factor to oppose his friend Gopal in one of the meetings of the rationalist society – “If we can’t make them change their lives, if we can’t make them see Reason, what can we even have to say to the masses of Hindoostan?” (TCOR, p. 50) When he opens his own school in Lalpukur he divides it into two sections: one is the faculty of Pure Reason and the other that of Practical Reason. The whole village is witness to Balaram’s obsession with carbolic acid as he tries to solve all problems with buckets of carbolic acid. But in the end, he comes out as a confounded personality, obsessed with pseudoscience ‘Phrenology’, which is closer to superstition than science.
The second section of the novel is entitled *Rajas: Passion*. It begins with Alu’s arrival in al-Ghazira. This section is truly ruled by passion. The *Ras* people indulge in talking, listening and telling stories, gossiping having tea at Zindi’s house, fighting in front of Hajj Fahmy’s house, indulging in intrigues, falling prey to conspiracies, dancing, worrying about things. Following in the steps of Balaram’s obsession with cleanliness, Alu alongwith *Ras* people wages war against money, disinfects the place with carbolic acid, creates a society free of money, converts the shops into public property and all members wear dusters on their sleeves. Weaving and the sewing machines appear again completing the circle. There is a huge uproar towards the end of this part when the sewing machines are brought.

The confusion prepares us for the grim third part named *Tamas*: Death, meaning inertia or death. This section takes Zindi, Alu and Kulfi to El-Oued a small town in the mid-Sahara desert while fleeing from Jyoti Das. Alu, who looks upon weaving as a manifestation of self, is unable to weave because of a stiff thumb. Kulfi dies in this section when Jyoti Das enacting the part of Arjun, in a play *Chitrangada* organised by local Indian medical community, wooes her. The book *Life of Pasteur* makes an appearance again as Mrs Verma realises that Alu is Balaram’s, her father Dantu’s friend’s nephew. The book opens ominously on the page saying “life would become impossible because death would be incomplete” (TCOR, p. 396). Zindi also voices this pervasion of death: “I can smell death in this house: its there in writing - one of us isn’t going to leave this house alive” (TCOR, p. 393).
But the end sees rays of light appearing as Mrs Verma says, “If there’s one thing people learn from the past, it is that every consummated death is another beginning” (TCOR, p. 404). Alu’s stiff-thumbs start moving. Having experienced many crises, Alu accompanied by Zindi and Boss returns to Satwa. But the reason achieved now is not the obsession it was with Balaram in the beginning. Here it is a more balanced version of reason, interspersed with both passion and a bit of inertia.

In addition to the metaphors like the sewing machine, carbolic acid, Life of Pasteur, we also have Jyoti Das’s obsession with birds which contributes to the central idea of the novel. Jyoti Das recalls ‘ducks and cormorants and storks’ (TCOR, p. 37) that he had seen when he went to the zoo to celebrate his birthday, when he goes to Mahe, he sees ‘Malabar Kingfisher’ (TCOR, p. 159), when he’s about to land in al-Ghazira, he’s eager to see ‘Barbary falcon and the Saker falcon’ (TCOR, p. 269) and then in El Oued he’s looking for vultures. After the vultures Jyoti Das actually sees “a sky alive with Cory’s shearwaters and honey buzzards, white storks and steppe eagles, Montagu’s harriers and sparrow hawks” (TCOR, p. 421). When he is to go to Düsseldorf through Tangier he realizes “the whole sky will be migrating over Tangier now” (TCOR, p. 314).

These metaphors add circularity to the novel. The concluding sentence of the novel suggests a new beginning “hope is the beginning”. The narration of events is not done in a linear method but moves backward and forward in time. Hem Narain Mathur who disappears in the first section appears again in the third section.
While talking to Jyoti Das, Gopal tells him about how when Alu was eleven, Toru Debi burnt Balaram’s books which takes Jyoti Das back to the time when he was eleven years old.

All the characters in the novel are caught up in a futile circle. Alu’s and Maya’s non-productive love for each other, Mast Ram’s one sided love for Kulfī, Kulfī’s and Abusa’s love for each other; Jyoti Das’s infatuation for Kulfī and Alu and Karthamma’s love, all affairs are failures. Balaram’s school of reason, Zindi’s attempts to purchase Durban tailoring house, Toru Debi’s attempts at making blouses for Parboti Debi, Ghaziri people’s zealous mission to bring sewing machines and the desire to get rid of money, Jeevanbhai’s cunning attempts to establish Malik’s supremacy and consequently his own; and Mrs Verma’s plan to put up Chitrangada are, utter failures. Jyoti Das chases Alu but himself is suspended. All the characters are trapped in unproductive circle and reap nothingness. But still hope never dies as the novelist himself says, “hope is the beginning.”

Besides these metaphorical and rhetorical circles – there are some physical circles as well: When Balaram was ragged in the hostel of Presidency College, he was surrounded by the senior boys, the leader was standing in front of Balaram and “the others were standing in a circle around him” (TCOR, p. 44). When Balaram prepares for war against Bhudeb Roy, he stands amidst the ‘circle of oil drums’ (TCOR, p. 137). Zindi is surrounded by the “circle of frowning intent faces,” (TCOR, p. 213) when she tells the story of Abusa and Mast Ram. Similarly Abu Fahl walks ‘into the circle’ (TCOR, p. 314) to tell the story of Adil the Blue’s
misbehaviour. In the end, Zindi sees – the vulture circling patiently above” (TCOR, p. 367).

In contrast to these circles is Bhudeb Roy’s obsession with straight lines and Prof. Samuel’s theories of queues, which in a way balance the circularity of the novel.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


* All the subsequent references are from the same edition hereafter referred to with page numbers in parentheses within the chapter itself.

11. GJV Prasad, “Re-Writing the World: The Circle of Reason as the Beginning of the Quest” p. 66.

12. GJV Prasad, “Re-Writing the World: The Circle of Reason as the Beginning of the Quest” p. 56.


15. John C Hawley, p. 166.


17. GJV Prasad, “Re-Writing the World: The Circle of Reason as the Beginning of the Quest” p. 58.


20. John C Hawley, p. 5.
