CHAPTER - 3

THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY
Since times immemorial the search for identity has been an integral part of the Indian consciousness. Under the impact of the inherent spiritual leanings of Indian culture, this search has traditionally taken the shape of a spiritual quest. Innumerable stories in the oral narrative tradition survive to substantiate this claim.

In the first phase of its development, the Indian English Novel was closely associated with the national movement. Consequently the concern with an individual search for identity was submerged under a broader concern with the national identity. The national identity having been established through independence, there was now scope for foregrounding the search for identity at the individual level. The post-independence decades thus see the increasing prominence of this theme. The search for identity is regarded widely as being the major concern of the twentieth century European novel. It is an outgrowth of the existential philosophy which preoccupied the European intellectuals of the age. Existential philosophy is obsessed with the malaise of life, a sense of spiritual vacancy, and attempts to fathom some meaning from the barrenness. Such concerns do not appear to be of great significance given the Indian socio-economic contexts where survival itself is problematic. Consequently, the search for identity in the Indian English Novel, although sharing its nomenclature with the European novel, takes on a different form.
The first clear treatment of this theme is found in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. The search for identity in this novel takes on the age-old form of a spiritual quest which takes the protagonist to the ultimate step of merging his self into an omni divine consciousness. The treatment retains the popular trappings of this ancient theme—the river symbolising the flow of life, the inevitable journey of the grihastha, and ultimately enlightenment through the guru. Although R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide* differs significantly from Raja Rao’s metaphysical treatment, it too takes recourse to a spiritual solution. After these initial explorations, the search for identity takes on a different shape in a group of novels dealing with the problem of cultural alienation. The focus moves from the spiritual and metaphysical to more contemporary reality. Even after independence, the legacy of the colonial past continued to impinge on the Indian consciousness, giving rise to an inevitable clash of cultures. The search for identity thus takes on the particular form of an East-West encounter, leading to a range of solutions, which includes marriage and renunciation as discussed in Chapter-1. Arun Joshi’s novels continue the idea of a spiritual quest under a different guise. Disgust with the superficialities of upperclass urban existence propels the protagonist into a search for roots.

The change of consciousness and perceptions which gave the novel of the 80s a significantly different form than its predecessors has been discussed in Chapter-1. These changes have played a decisive role in
shaping the thematic concern of the novel of the 80s as shown in the chapter, History, Politics and the Individual. The search for identity mirrors the compelling realities of a cosmopolitan consciousness.

This chapter attempts to explore the significantly new form in which this theme is presented in the novels studied.

The search for identity in the novel of the 80s finds its most complex expression in Midnight's Children. The complexity is an inevitable outcome of the sheer expanse of the novel with its multitudinous experiences. The protagonist's search for identity moves parallel to a similar effort of the newly born nation. As has been pointed in chapter-1, the protagonist is consciously presented as being "Handcuffed to history, my (his) destinies indissoluble chained to those of my (his) country" (MC-3).

The search for identity on the part of the protagonist is marked into three distinct phases. The first phase is one in which the protagonist undergoes a crisis of identity due to several factors. This leads to the second phase of negation and total loss of identity. The final phase is one of reconstruction as the protagonist attempts to establish an identity on his own terms.
Much has been made of the connection between Rushdie’s expatriate status and his interest in the quest for an integrated identity. According to R.S. Pathak "The treatment of dispossessed character’s plight is born to a great extent, of Rushdie’s personal experiences...Rushdie’s novels faithfully delineate the predicament of the people with a partial identity."¹ But Saleem Sinai is no dislocated Expatriate. His predicament grows out of the realities of contemporary Indian existence. This fact is established through the manner in which Rushdie himself emphasises the connection between his protagonist and the nation. The expatriate’s crisis is primarily due to a cultural and geographical dislocation. On the other hand, saleem’s sense of disorientation is due to the compelling realities of contemporary life. Critics have noticed a certain kinship between Midnight’s Children and Gunter Grass’s The Tin Drum. Deval Darkar comments: "Both books present an omniscient adult consciousness trying to come to terms with the collapse of history."²

The moment of his birth itself is the first significant indication of the crisis of identity which will plague him through much of his life. The choice of that moment-to coincide with the birth of an independent India is a deliberate narrative device, blatant in its artifice. As M.K. Naik aptly comments:

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His birth on the stroke of midnight on the day which marks the great divide between colonial and independent India is itself symptomatic of his identity crisis... being a midnight’s child he is born with a basically divided character.\(^3\)

Other factors, too, have contributed to the protagonist’s sense of fractured identity. At birth in Dr. Narlikar’s nursing home, Mary Pereria, who identifying with her boyfriend Joseph’s D’costa’s socialist ideals exchanges babies born into two homes belonging to the opposite ends of the social and economic spectrum. Thus Saleem Sinai the son of poor parents finds a home in the affluent Sinai family. This switching of babies, a device obviously borrowed from popular Hindi movies is a blatant device to reiterate the protagonist’s confusion of identity: equally blatant is the saddling of the child with a multiplicity of parent figures. As Saleem Sinai wryly comments, "Giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents"(MC-243). Mother figures abound—his real mother Vanitha, his putative mother Amina, the nurse Mary Pereria, his aunt Pia; even more plentiful are the father figures, the English man William Methwold, Wee-Wille-Winke, the street singer, Dr. Schaapstaker, the German snake doctor who saves his life when still a child, his uncle Zulfikar, Hanif Aziz, his maternal uncle, the snake charmer, Picture Singh and of course Ahmed Sinai. Such a nebulous inheritance will inevitably cause a confused and fragmentary identity.
From birth Saleem Sinai is caught between dual expectations. Ahmed Sinai's unborn child brings with him the burden of a prophesy. Since this child is switched at birth, the protagonist enters the scene as Ahmed Sinai's son and carries the weight of this prophesy. Hailed as the Mubarak, the child grows up with illusions of his own divinity, which is not shared by his family members. He alone takes the predictions seriously and believes that "voices will guide him"(MC-195). The hyper-imaginative boy fantasises that voices are calling out to him, and immediately identifies himself grandiosely with the Prophets Moses and Mohammed. Knowing that the voices had urged Prophet Mohammed to write the Quran, Saleem envisages an equally impressive future for himself. He saw "The shawl of genius fluttering down like an embroidered butterfly, the mantle of greatness settling upon my shoulders"(MC-192). Saleem's pompous illusions are shattered, when he is charged with blasphemy by his family and even soundly beaten by his father resulting in permanent deafness in the left ear. Saleem moans the passing away of "being certain of myself for the first time in my life" and plunging into "constant doubts about what I was for" (MC-195). The crisis of identity has truly begun.

Even as Saleem Sinai is attempting to grapple with the role of Messiah thrust on him by a prenatal prediction, he is simultaneously burdened with a second expectation very different in nature. Nehru's words, "You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is eternally
young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own. (MC-143) Inspire him.

Saleem's attempts to reconcile the dual expectations mirror the crisis of identity of a nation, striving to balance traditional religious attitude with the new secular ideals. Being rejected in his attempt to project himself in the traditional Messiah role, Saleem modifies it in keeping with the secular ethos, that the new nation is trying to establish. The voices heard in the washing chest which had inspired him, and in his unsuccessful attempts to project himself as a Messiah are now transformed onto the clamouring voices of a secular independent India. The accident in the washing chest that had nudged his mind's door open to certain disembodied sensations is transformed into distinct voices after another bicycle accident. Having thus made the abandoned clock tower his headquarters for his daily interaction with the midnight's children, he becomes a radio transmitter into which the children of midnight start tuning in.

The precocious nine-year-old Saleem Sinai begins his attempt to form a midnight children's conference with a considerable hope. Fired with a sense of purpose, Saleem wishes to use the supra powers of the midnight children in the service of this impoverished nation. He wants it to be "a loose federation of equals with all the points of view given full expression" (MC-263). As in the earlier instance, his hopes are shattered.
Discord soon sets into the midnight children's conference with the entry of Shiva, the real Saleem Sinai and now the leader of a gang of street urchins. Shiva makes his intentions clear when he says, "gangs ought to have gang bosses" (MC-263); his immediate desire is to take charge of the midnight children's conference and to be its leader. Shiva with his unashamed philosophy, "You got to get what you can" (MC-264) is the symbol of the cynical and materialistic approach to life which can undo the vision of a secular India. Dieter Riemenschneider observes "Shiya is condemned to a life of poverty and crime; he rejects Saleem's search for the purpose and meaning of their lives because poverty leaves no room for idealistic philosophing." Thus looking at Shiva's aggressive stance and predicament, his pronouncements may not be too shocking. But disturbed by Shiva's dismissal of purposefulness as the privilege of the rich, Saleem begins to doubt his own role in the conference. Deprived of support from either his parents or the midnight children pre-occupied with worldly and selfish interests, Saleem's faith in his own convictions begin to waver. He is caught in a flurry of conflicting emotions; the Prime Minister's words which he had treasured so far, now appears tinged with a different and more cynical significance. The attitude of the midnight's children had a frustrating effect on Saleem. They in fact reflected the nation prejudices and differences. In other words, they revealed in miniature the dissentions prevalent in this country and so in a tragic paradox, they are like the mirror that the Prime Minister had so hopefully referred to. Though nine year
olds were talking of identity, purpose and the role of the individual, none of the deliberations bore fruit as the midnight’s children were too preoccupied with selfish and worldly desires. Thus Saleem Sinai feels increasingly frustrated and alienated increasingly a prey to uncertainty regarding his identity.

The protagonist’s appearance is presented with a sardonic, almost metaphysical wit, characteristic of Rushdie. In an apparently violent yoking together of heterogeneous elements Saleem Sinai’s face is represented as bearing a remarkable resemblance to the map of India. When asked in an interview how the idea had struck him, Rushdie reply was:

It was a comic notion which struck when I was looking at the map. I saw it as a nose hanging into the sea with a drip off the end of it, which is Ceylon. It was another way of making flesh the idea of Saleem’s link with the country.5

This aspect is illustrated graphically by a cynical school teacher’s ridicule of Saleem Sinai’s appearance; "In the face of thees ugly ape you don’t see the whole map of India? the Deccan peninsula hanging down" (MC-277). Referring to the stains on Saleem’s face he continues "These stains are Pakistan! Thees birthmarks on the right ear is the East wing; and
thees horrible stained left cheek, the west" (MC-277). His fragmented personality is manifest in his grotesque physical appearance, "the unseemly birth marks spreading to his western hairline, his rampant cucumber of a nose" (MC-124) "temples like stunted horns, his unblinking eyes and irretrievably bowed legs" (MC-149). In the process of growth, his appearance becomes increasingly even more grotesque, as he is subjected to a series of personal mutilations. The first mutilation he is when his father’s angry blow leaves him permanently deaf in his left ear. And a more painful blow occurs when his school teacher Mr. Zagallo creates a monkish tonsure during a virulent attack on the hapless young school boy’s appearance. At his school socials, in the course of an altercation with his envious schoolmates, he loses the top third of his middle finger. The most significant of these mutilations in this stage of his search for identity occurs much later, when he is brained by the silver spittoon, during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war:

Something twisting turning somersaulting down, silver as the moonlight, a wondrously worked silver spittoon inlaid with lapis lazuli plummeting towards me a feeling at the back of my head all Saleëems go pouring out of me wiped clean as a wooden writing chest, brained by my mother’s silver spittoon (MC-409-410).
This results in a debilitating loss of memory even to the extent of forgetting his own name. As R.S. Pathak points out that the loss of name is "an analogue suggesting Saleem's identity crisis." With this loss of memory and name, Saleem's identity crisis moves on to the next phase of total negation.

Since the novelist has been at obvious pains to link his protagonist with the nation, it is logical to conjecture that the physical mutilations have a larger significance. They suggest the dismemberment of the nation. The partition with its tragic hacking of the nation, the increasing fragile and tenuous hold on Kashmir with the constant threat of a complete break away, the conflict with Bangladesh all are indicators of a nation disintegrating. Mutilations need not be confined to merely the geographical it can be extended to include a collapse of cordial inter-national relations. Thus Saleem's personal crisis runs parallel to the crisis of the nation, as it attempts to find a stable footing.

The sense of dislocation which haunts Saleem throughout his life finds another externalisation in his narrative. His constant and disjointed physical movements from one location to the other emphasise his fragmentary identity. As he grows into adulthood, the increasing pressures on his integrated identity, is reflected in the constant to and fro movements. Beginning with a sudden shift to his Uncle Mustafa Aziz's house in.
childhood, the movement gains momentum when Saleem is constantly shuffled between India and Pakistan. This frenetic shift of location is a predominant feature of the novel of the 80s, and is in striking contrast to the static nature of the earlier Indian-English novels. While the narratives of R.K.Narayan’s novels rarely ever stretch beyond the confined limits of Malgudi, the novel of the 80s is marked by trans-national and even trans-continental movements. The search for identity in an increasingly complex contemporary world demands an unshackling of the narrative from a single geographical location.

At the age of ten, Saleem’s family is split as his mother shifts with her two children to Pakistan, leaving behind her husband who stubbornly refuses to try a new life away from India. This division in the family, the divided loyalties which split them, encapsulates the predicament of many Indian Muslims. Any narrative purporting to deal with the historical and social realities of life on the sub-continent cannot fail to focus on this compelling aspect of this reality. For four years, Saleem is a reluctant resident of Pakistan, unable to identify with the socio-politico ethos of the newly emerged nation. The whimsicalities of a military dictatorship, the flimsy and fragile nature of the entire political system are graphically communicated in the episode of the “Pepperpots”: 
General Zulfikar described troop movements; I moved pepperpots symbolically while he spoke ...I shifted salt-cellars and bowls of chutney; This mustard jar is company A occupying head post office, There are two pepperpots surrounding a serving spoon, which means company B had seized the airport. With the fate of the nation in my hands, I shifted condiments and cutlery, capturing empty biriani-dishes with water glass, stationing salt-cellars...in the movements performed by pepper pots etcetera, one table-ornament remained uncaptured: a cream-jug in solid silver, which, in our table-top coup, represented the Head of state, President Iskander Mirza; for three weeks, Mirza remained President (MC-348-49).

A state of uncertainty pervades these four years of Saleem's life, consequently leaving him unsure of his moorings. Through out his childhood, he had been sustained by his self-created identity as a member of the midnight children's conference. This identity had been snatched away, when on entering Pakistan, the transmitter linking him to his fellow midnight's children had been significantly jammed. Saleem’s relief at returning to India proves short-lived, as he soon realises much to his consternation that the snapped ties with the midnight’s children cannot be
reinstated. The loss of this particular identity forged by Saleem turns out to be permanent, when he undergoes a sinus operation; which leaves the transmitter permanently disabled. This loss is, however, compensated by a sudden and equally miraculous gift - a sense of smell, "I had been drained - although no voices spoke in my head, and never would again - there was one compensation; namely that, for the first time in my life I was discovering the astonishing delights of possessing a sense of smell."

(MC-366) a power with which he was "capable of smelling sadness and joy, of sniffing out intelligence and stupidity with my (his) eyes closed."

(MC-370). Although apparently miraculous this new gift is a precursor to a later stage of degrading dehumanisation, when Saleem is reduced to the status of a sniffer dog.

The second stage of Saleem's search for identity unfolds when the family seems to have resolved its problem of divided loyalties, when it decides to shift fully to Pakistan, with an enticing vision of a new life in the "Land of the Pure". However, the sense of dislocation continues to haunt the protagonist as the crisis of identity moves inexorably to a state of total negation. The crisis takes place on two fronts - the personal in his suddenly changed relation to his sister, and the social in his failure to reconcile the ideal vision of Pakistan with its murky reality. The relationship with Jamila, his sister creates in him a dual sense of confusion. Jamila, who is now Jamila Singer, the darling of the masses, dislodges him from centre stage,
a position which he thought was his birthright. The unexpected rapid decline in his fortunes leaves him even more confounded. Saleem’s predicament is worsened with the horrible realisation that he is in love with his own sister. Taibibi, a five hundred and twelve year old prostitute, an expert at imitating smells brings to the fore the horrifying truth of Saleem’s incestuous love for his sister- "I learned the unspeakable secret of my love for Jamila Singer from the mouth and scent glands of that most exceptional of whores" (MC-382). His fatal attraction for Jamila Singer, perhaps was due to what he saw in her the hopes of his own life the fulfillment of his most private dreams. On the socio-political front, the confusion further aggravates when Saleem feels that he was adrift, disoriented amidst an infinite number of falseness, unrealities and lies, in a land “Where truth is what it is instructed to be” (MC-389).

The sense of purposelessness is conveyed when he wanders aimlessly on the streets of Karachi picking up women of the streets. While Jamila Sang of holiness and love-of-country "I picked up the women of the street...And eventually I nosed out the whore of whores whose gifts were a mirror of my own" (MC-381).

Corrupt politicians and the antics of their unscrupulous sons, discord within the family, his incestuous longing for Jamila Singer, and deterioration in his own behaviour are part of his troubled experience during his stay in
Pakistan. One horror followed another, leaving him with the feeling that “the years were of diseased reality” (MC-403).

To reiterate his point of being inextricably handcuffed to history, he sees in the Pakistani aggression on Kashmir an expression of his own unfulfilled longings of the beautiful state. The callousness of both governments towards human life, the deliberate disinformation practiced by both nations as well as his disturbing love for his sister leaves him in a state of acute depression culminating in a death wish. “I went in search of friendly, obliterating, sleep-giving, paradise-bringing bombs...I rode the night-streets of the city, looking for death” (MC-407). While death is elusive to him, the war paradoxically claims the other members of the family. He watches with horror his family home with all the members in it explode in a bomb attack. This explosion releases a “family heirloom inlaid with lapis lazuli” (MC-409) which had lain hidden in a green tin trunk. The flying spittoon hits Saleem with such velocity that it obliterates his memory and along with it, all the identities he had acquired in the eighteen years of his life:

Saleems go pouring out of me, from the baby who appeared in Jumbo-sized front-page baby snaps to the eighteen-year-old with his filthy dirty love pouring out goes shame and guilt and wanting to please and needing
to-be-loved and determined-to find- a-historical-role and growing-too-fast, I am free of Snotnose and Stainface and Baldy and Sniffer and Mapface and washing-chests and Evie Burns and language marchers, liberated from Kolynos kid and the breasts of Piamumani and Alpha-and-Omega, absolved from the multiple murders of Homi Catrack and Hanif and Aadam Aziz and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, I have shaken of five-hundred- year old whores and confessions of love at dead of night, free now, beyond caring, brained by my mother’s silver spittoon (MC-409-410).

Totally devoid of memory, Saleem leads a virtual vegetable existence for six long years in a hospital. Michael Murphy’s comment on the importance of a name, "The name surrounds us like a cloak. A name can shape a life" is a reflection of Saleem’s helplessness. The crisis of identity as reached a state of total negation. A tragic transformation takes place in a person who had pretensions of being a hero. A recognition of Saleem’s miraculous sense of smell brings him yet another identity-the inhuman degrading one of a sniffer dog. The internal dissensions between the two wings of Pakistan flare up into a full-fledged war in the sub-continent over the creation of Bangladesh. Saleem is now drafted into the CUTIA
unit of the army to sniff out insurgents in East Pakistan. The fact that he merges himself into this identity without a protest is a clear indication of the depth of Saleem's degradation in the course of his quest for identity. The three young soldiers drafted along with him give him one more identity, that of "buddha", which means old man, "because there hung around him an air of great antiquity. The buddha was old before his time" (MC-418). The narrator, also commenting on it says:

The identity of the buddha carries with it a certain ambivalence. The urdu word "buddha", meaning old man, is pronounced with the D's hard and plosive. But there is also Buddha, with soft tongued D's, meaning he-who-acheived-enlightenment-under-the-bodhi tree (MC-418).

While in his physical appearance he is buddha an old man, in his attitude too he seems to have all the trappings of the Buddha, the enlightened one. The Buddha like detachment is merely an illusion. While the Buddha's detachment was the by-product of an elevated consciousness, Saleem's was due to a more resigned submission. "Emptied of history, the buddha learned the arts of submission, and did only what was required of him" (MC-419). The narrative mode suddenly shifts to the third person as if to under score the idea of the total negation of Saleem's identity. Thus during
the Bangladesh war serving as an agent of the Pakistani government in his role of the sniffer dog, Saleem becomes an unconscious collaborator of the atrocities on human life and dignity perpetrated by the army. Saleem, who had always hungered for centrality, resigns to living in a vacuum, unquestioningly pursuing his duties as a sniffer dog. However the narrator protagonist is almost gloating to Padma “Yes Padma, when Mujib was arrested, it was I who sniffed him out, its easy when you’ve got the smell” (MC-425).

In a passage reminiscent of the encapsulated history of Pakistan presented through Rani Harappa’s shawl knitting in Shame, the gruesome reality of civil war is expressed through the horrified eyes of the three young soldiers:

Soldiers entering women’s hostels without knocking; women, dragged into the streets, were also entered, and again nobody troubled to knock...roadside ditches filling up with people who were not merely asleep-bare chests were seen, and hollow pimples of bullet holes. Ayooba Shaheed Farooq watched in silence...our soldiers- for-Allah, our worth- ten-babus jawans held Pakistan together by turning flame-throwers machine-guns hand-grenades on the city slums...take turns in
vomiting as their nostrils are assailed by the stench of burning slums (MC-426-27).

Finally incapable of continuing in the submissive performance of his duty, Saleem took to his heels and fled. It appeared as if an "overdose of reality gave birth to a miasmic longing for flight into the safety of dreams" (MC-431).

The degrading identity of a sniffer dog marks in one way the nadir of Saleem's quest for identity. Paradoxically it also paves the way to reconstruction of his life.

Saleem's drift into the Sundarbans along with the three soldiers symbolises the total loss of identity. He is lost in a jungle so thick that history never found its way in. In the Sundarbans the four men succumb to the logic of the jungle, then acquire the skills of survival, gradually evolve into a new adulthood and peace and rest at a Hindu temple. From this easeful time Saleem wakes up as Mario Couto says, "like a latter day Odysseus tearing himself from the arms of Calypso who both soothes his pain and robs him of the challenge of achievement." They realised that the temple was fooling them into using up their dreams by giving them their hearts desire. Saleem now views the temple with new eyes and tears himself from the forest of illusions. In the Sundarbans it is once again
snake poison that helps him to regain his memory. Out of the Sundarbans, Saleem is in a daze when he sees the human waste created by war. In a series of bizarre incidents he loses his companions. A lonely and forlorn Saleem wanders the streets of Dhaka still unable to recall his name. He becomes aware of his name through Parvati, another midnight’s child, who has come along with a band of magicians to celebrate the Indian victory over Pakistan and to participate in the creation of a new nation Bangladesh. Through her, he not only recovers his name but is also smuggled to India in her magic basket. As he pops out of the basket in India he wants to bury the identity of his past and wants to embark on a new life, and to choose his own undestined future.

From this moment onwards Saleem embarks on a process of reconstruction. His search for identity now on his own terms unfolds. After a short stay in the magicians’ ghetto, Saleem in his quest for identity shifts to his uncle Mustafa’s house. He has visions of embarking on a nation saving mission through his bureaucrat uncle. Ironically what he does realise a little late is that his uncle himself does not have an identity either in his own home or in his official life. Disillusioned once again, he goes back to the magicians’ ghetto. Saleem now hopes to embark on one last mission of direct communication with the masses with the help of Picture Singh, a snake charmer and his last father figure. The emergency imposed by the widow drives the last nail into Saleem’s ambitious vision. Saleem is taken
to the widow’s hostel where he is forced to reveal the identities of the other midnight’s children. Citing them as a threat to her over vauling ambition, she has all the midnight’s children vasectomised. Now drained of all hope, Saleem in the widow’s hostel ruminates on the nature of politics. He comes to the conclusion that "politics at the best of times is a dirty business" (MC-518), hence to be avoided. He feels that he shouldn’t have dreamt of purpose at all since "privacy the small individual lives of men was preferable to all the inflated macrocosmic activity." (MC-518). Saleem, at the end of it all, is highly critical of the modern state when he says that the midnight’s children were just the "grotesque aberrational monsters of Independence and as a result the modern nation state could have neither time nor compassion" (MC-517).

Saleem’s retrieval from the anonymity of being the buddha in the Sundarbans and the hopes of a purposeful and meaningful life is sadly negated by the emergency. The new leaders who took over from Indira Gandhi did not represent a new dawn. To Saleem it seemed obscene that the atrocities committed by the emergency on human dignity was soon forgotten due to the burdens of daily life. Saleem is confident that his son Aadam Sanai, emergency’s child, is more determined and does not easily give to dreams.
Saleem's search for identity is sometimes grimly factual and sometimes lapsing into dreams. Though his attempts at creating history are thwarted, he is not disappointed. The novel surely does not end on a pessimistic note, as it is generally believed. Replying to the question on the pessimistic end in an interview Rushdie says:

I don't think that the end of the book suggests a negative view. Saleem's personal destiny does lead to despair, but Saleem does not represent the whole of India, but only one historical process, a certain kind of hope that is lost and which exhausts itself with the death of Saleem. But in the way the book is written I am suggesting also reserves beyond this the multitudinous possibilities that India generates. I think I have shown that although the possibility that Saleem represents is finished, a new and tougher generation is just ahead.9

Commenting on the ending of the novel Ron Blabber says, "For Saleem the promise and hope associated with the 'mythic' midnight's children will always fall victim to the history of the times. But the despair is not total; buried within the process is hope that the cycle will be broken."10 The hope that the tougher generation of Aadam Sinai might succeed in their quest is not too far-fetched and a consoling thought.
In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, the hero is at the outset confident about his centrality in the scheme of things. However, by the time the story ends, he is pushed to the periphery, becomes marginalised. All his attempts at finding purpose and identity steadily push him from his illusory centrality to the periphery. On the other hand, in *Shame* Omar Khayyam Shakil is presented as a peripheral hero at the beginning. Hence his search for identity basically involves an attempt to get into the main stream of life. His search may not be as spectacular as that of Saleem Sinai but is nothing in terms of intensity.

Comparing the two novels Timothy Hyman comments, "Shame stands to Midnight's Children very much as Pakistan to India, a smaller book for a meaner world." The narrative on the personal level begins with the mysterious birth of Omar Khayyam Shakil. He is raised under bizarre circumstances by the three sisters in that equally bizarre mansion, "Nishapur" which symbolises an area of darkness, intrigue and anonymity.

While the public plot focuses primarily on the political rivalries, the private lives of the women are equally important and, as the author intervenes to inform us, "Refract" or perhaps even "Subsume the male plot" (SH-173). M.D.Fletcher succinctly sums up the interaction of the plots:
The various plots are integrated in circular fashion into one story from Omar through Isky and Raza to the wives and daughters to Sufiya and back to Omar with Sufia also cutting across the diameter of the circle to complete the violent destruction of the male sphere in the end.\textsuperscript{12}

The plot has all the seeming trappings of a tragedy, but is not really so, for as Rushdie explains "The work combines a plot comprised of the stuff of tragedy but with a cast of gangsters, clowns, hoodlums, necessitating that it be written like a farce, a kind of macabre black farce."\textsuperscript{13}

Saleem Sinai in \textit{Midnight's Children} is bedevilled by a dual perception of reality as it exists in India and Pakistan. His experience of the multi-dimensional reality of India clashes with the uni-dimensional ordered reality of Pakistan. Omar Khayyam Shakil on the other hand is not exposed to such confusing duality of perception, for his experience is only limited to the latter. From his birth his destiny is anonymous, divorced from the national history, while Saleem Sinai is inextricably linked to history of the nation.

Omar Khayyam Shakil starts life with a distinct disadvantage. He is conceived and raised under bizarre by the three Shakil sisters. Secluded
from the world by an eccentric father strictly abiding by the rules of purdah, the three sisters break out with a vengeance after their father’s death. This results in the birth of a child who is, as Griffin A. Chausse says, "the standard bearer and personification of their misguided legacy." The conception of Omar Khayyam Shakil with the identity of both father and mother left deliberately undefined, is their gesture of revolt against their earlier cloistered and unhealthy existence. Michael Hollington aptly observes, "His ontological insecurity is in some measure the product of the secrecy and mystery that surround the circumstances of his paternity and maternity." Omar Khayyam Shakil passes twelve long years, the most crucial years of development, trapped inside that reclusive mansion, described by Afzal Khan Fawzia as "a sort of concentrated decrepitude made up of decomposing remnants discarded ideas and forgotten dreams." For twelve long years Omar Khayyam views the outer world through his telescope, spying out of the upper storey window, since those on the ground floor were permanently shuttered. The fleeting glimpses of the vibrant outside world serves as a contrast to the stagnant gloomy world of Nishapur. The only other link with the outside world is provided by the dumb-waiter. His seemingly idle explorations of Nishapur is ironically not completely useless, as it yields him a book case "stuffed with the volumes of the theory and practice of hypnosis"(SH-33), which leads him to a "lifelong involvement with that arcane science which has so awesome a power for good or ill" (SH-34). The knowledge garnered from these books, practiced
successfully on the maid Hasmat bibi and on his classmate Farah Zoraster, provides the base for later experiences, both good and evil. It gives him the means of debauchery in the company of Isky Harappa and later, provides him with a chance to redeem himself through his treatment of Sufiya Zinobia.

Rushdie concretises the impact of this unnatural upbringing on a child of superior perceptions in his over whimsical manner. Shakil’s distorted vision of the world, which persists throughout the novel, has its origins in the moments after his birth, when the baby is held upside down. An extension of this infantile inversion in Shakil’s increasing sense of imbalance, “He was afflicted from his earlier days, by a sense of inversion, of a world turned upside down. And by something worse- the fear that he was living at the edge of the world” (SH-21). The vertigo with which he is afflicted is a symbolic manifestation of a sense of disorientation which eternally troubles him. The narrator intervenes to reiterate the significance of this recurring problem of his peripheral hero:

Hell above, paradise below, I have lingered on this account of Omar Khayyam’s original, unstable wilderness to underline the propositions that he grew up between twin eternities, whose conventional order was, in his experience precisely inverted (SH-23).
It is not merely the physical confines of Nishapur that is claustrophobic to the growing child, even more suffocating is the unhealthy relationship existing among his mothers as well as between them and himself. The three women are portrayed, as close minded, dictatorial and repressive. He watches them for a dozen years and hated them "for their closeness, their three-in-oneness which redoubled that sense of exclusion, of being in the midst of objects, out of things" (SH-35). Omar Khayyam gradually realises that his apparent freedom in the house is merely "pseudo-liberty of a zoo animal, and his mothers were his loving caring keepers" (SH-35). The fragmented nature of the relationship implants in him the conviction of being a peripheral personality, a watcher from the wings of his own life. The attitudes of the mothers, the symbolic shutting of the doors of Nishapur, the archaeological antiquity of Nishapur with its crumbling walls and out dated Neolithic pottery all coalesce to create a world entombed in the past. The ignorance about his father's identity troubles him endlessly and to confound it all is an equally disturbing uncertainty about who among the three sisters is his real mother. All these contribute to a sense of imbalance, confusion of identity, a disturbing feeling of peripheral leading to increasing restlessness and a strong desire to break free from these shackles.

On his twelfth birthday, Omar Khayyam makes his first gesture of independence when he demands to be sent to school. Contrary to his
expectations, the changes are merely superficial and lack substance. The old problems continue to haunt him. He realises that narrowness of outlook is not limited to his mothers in Nishapur but extends to people like Maulana Dawood and the postman who are equally narrow minded in a wide world. He makes a determined effort to trace his father and failing, takes recourse to father figures like Eduardo Rodrigues, his schoolmaster. The idea that he has broken free from the past is merely an illusion and this is clearly indicated by his delight in voyeurism. His voyeurism reveals to him the hitherto, unknown rich and cryptic texture of human life. What he fails to realise that this too can give only substitute gratification, that he is savouring life through other human beings and thus continues to be on the peripheries of life. It is the schoolmaster-father figure who recognizes the true peripheral nature of the boy, his inclination to confine himself to the sidelines of life. Rodrigues attempts to push his protege from the peripheries to the centre, “To succeed in life” he told the boy, “One must be of the essence yes, make yourself essential, that’s the ticket...be a doctor...what’s a doctor after all? A legitimised voyeur, a stranger yet also paradoxically, central, especially at the crisis”(SH-49). And at a later stage he does exactly that, when he secures a medical scholarship in Karachi, carrying the legacy of his mothers’ strange advice when he had first stepped outside the crumbling portals of Nishapur. Wishing to armour him against the expected hostility of the outside world directed against his shameful origins, they had instructed him to sacrifice not just shame "but also embarrassment,
discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world" (SH-39). The author significantly intervenes to emphasise the lasting impact of this advice on Omar Khayyam Shakil, "Can it be doubted that Omar Khayyam having been barred from feeling Shame at an early age, continued to be affected by that remarkable ban throughout his later years, years yes, after his escape from his mother's zone of influence" (SH-39). His odyssey has just begun.

Burdened with this kind of unhealthy advice, it is inevitable that his search for identity takes a wrong direction, manifesting itself in a negative form. When he re-enters the narrative at the age of thirty-five, he has earned a high reputation as a doctor and an equally low reputation as human being. In Sushila Singh's words "a degenerate without shame."17 Through Rani Humayun and Biliquis Hyder we catch fleeting glimpses of a man who is not only a debauch himself but leads others on to similar excesses. As Biliquis maliciously informs Rani, "Who hasn't seen your Isky and that doctor run around belly dancer shows, international hotel swimming pools...that Shakil fixes everything like a pimp or what... the two of them go to the red light area with movie cameras" (SH-93). The utter disgust of the entire city at his uncouth behaviour is given expression by Rani when she says, "Fellow doesn't know the meaning of the word (Shame); as if some essential part of his education has been overlooked or perhaps he has deliberately chosen to expunge the word from his vocabulary lest it's
explosive" (SH-81). Omar Khayyam Shakil’s moral degeneration finds a powerful physical manifestation in his increasingly disproportionate physical contours. The enormity of his inner shamelessness is directly proportional to the enormity of his physical bulk. The narrative deliberately links the two when Rani remarks on the occasion of his appearance at her wedding to Isky Harappa, "Quiet a shameless fellow to carry all that tummy and fat about and all" (SH-80).

In this stage of the quest for identity Omar Khayyam begins to assert influence, but because of the distortions of his personality, the influence is wholly negative. The full impact of this negative influence is seen through two interrelated incidents. On the first occasion at a party, he is witness to both Isky and Raza’s attempts to win the favours of the beautiful Pinky Aurangezeb, culminating in the suave Isky walking away triumphantly with his prize; "Watching from the side lines was the flabby Himalayan figure of our peripheral hero, the doctor Omar Khayyam Shakil" (SH-106). On a second occasion, at a party in Mohenjo, a drunken Omar Khayyam rouses the ire of Biliquis and her husband Raza against Isky Harappa, indicating that they had been dishonoured by the later. This provokes Raza into frenzied anger and an insane wish to challenge Isky to duel unto death. Although this volatile situation is diffused, the fire of discord has been irreparably fanned by Omar Khayyam’s thoughtless interference. This fire of discord has vital bearing on the unfolding national drama, as it brings the principal protagonists on the path of confrontation.
Paradoxically, it is Isky Harappa’s unceremonious rejection of Omar Khayyam that reiterates the peripheral nature of his identity. His association with Isky Harappa has given him some sort of acceptability in society; "Some of Isky’s saratorical ways have rubbed off on him...he carries a present from his friend Iskander; a silver-headed sword stick from the Ansu valley, twelve inches of polished steel concealed in intricately carved walnut" (SH-127). However, the fear of falling off the edge of the world troubles him every now and then. At such times when he is assailed by the old vertigo, "he leans heavily on his sword concealing cane to prevent himself from falling" (SH-126). His dependence on the silver headed cane symbolises his relationship with Isky, through which he has gained temporarily at least a sense of identity. When Isky develops a new interest in politics, herealises the necessity of changing his way of life. Pinky Aurangazeb and Omar Khayyam are summarily obliterated from his life. Isky even instructs his gatekeeper, “When that degenerate comes to call, just throw the badmash on his fat bottom and watch him bounce” (SH-125). Realising that he no longer has the symbolic stick to lean on, the sad truth of his peripheral identity is brought home to him with a renewed and severe attack of vertigo; “So severe at Isky’s rejection that he fell sick at the back of the taxi”(SH-126). It requires of Omar Khayyam Shakil to find an identity now on his own terms.
The third and final stage of his quest begins with an apparent similarity to the preceding one but soon transforms its nature. "Ditched by one great figure of the period, Omar Khayyam seeks to hitch himself to another star"(SH-144). But it is this relationship which offers the chance to redeem himself and finally procures an identity for the peripheral hero. The most monumental encounter of his life occurs when he is called into treat the psychosomatic disorder of Sufiya Zinobia, the mentally retarded daughter of Raza Hyder. She is by far the most intriguing character of the novel, rich with symbolic overtones. Sufiya’s psychosomatic disorders accompanied by occasional outbursts of terrible violence, is symbolic of the ills that plague the nation and the inevitable outburst which will follow. As Michael Hollington comments on the role of Sufiya, "Sufiya can be said to stand for the necessary violent reaction, of the women against patriarchy and of the people against dictatorship."

She is projected as the embodiment of Shame and is disparagingly referred to as such by her mother. The parents’ sense of Shame at their inability to fulfill the expectations of their society by bearing a male child is tragically imposed on the hapless child. She is the product of misconstrued notions of Shame; which flourish in a society which is inhumanly rigid in its norms.

Most critics have limited their understanding of Omar Khayyam Shakil by seeing him only in terms of shamelessness till the very end. On the contrary there is a well-defined movement away from shamelessness.
after his association with Sufiya Zenobia. When Sufiya enters Omar Khayyam’s life, twelve years of unloved humiliation has already taken its toll. Omar Khayyam’s instantaneous love for her is totally uncharacteristic of a man who has not thought beyond himself. Both are born outside the misconceived norms of society and they share an affinity as marginalised people. Hence it is logical in the scheme of things that these two people—one representing Shame, the other Shamelessness—should be united. D.B. Jewison remarks, "The narrator seems to be suggesting that in such a consummation the polarities would mingle and free humanity from its curse."¹⁹ In short Omar Khayyam Shakil “had fallen for his destiny” (SH-141). These two discordant people, a twelve year old retarded beauty and fifty year old man with a dubious past, are united in the physical and social marital ties. Omar Khayyam’s first acquaintance with Sufiya’s capacity for horrifying violence is during the marriage of her younger sister Naveed Hyder to Talvar-Ulhaq. A painful distinction has been maintained from birth between the two sisters, the distinction concretised by one being called "Shame" and the other "Goodnews" by their mother. Her repressed, perhaps even unconscious anger at the injustice of this discrimination bursts out in full fury when she sees her sister enjoying what had been denied to her. In an act of barbaric violence she almost wrenches Talvar-Ul Haq’s head off during the marriage. Omar Khayyam had witnessed this alarming transformation and had used his hypnotic skill more than he had ever done before to bring Sufiya out of her self-induced trance. The long hinted at
nikah between Sufiya and Omar Khayyam takes place. The marriage not only provides him with the scope of becoming the confidant of another man, moulding the fate of the nation, it also provides him an opportunity to redefine himself as a human being through his tender care of Sufiya. His physical transformation keeps pace with the more important internal changes. His physical girth had remarkably diminished to almost normal dimensions. He develops a hitherto unknown respect for himself and views himself new eyes, “I may be no movie star, he told his mirror, but I have ceased to be a cartoon” (SH-211). The transformation prompts the Parsee ayah to comment, “You’re not such a wreck as you say” (SH-212). It is a long way from Rani Harappa’s earlier comment about him. The man who had in his earlier days abandoned Farah Zoraster to face an unwanted pregnancy alone, now shows an increasing sense of responsibility in his concern for Shahbanu, a mere ayah.

This human concern finds its full expression in his loving care of his retarded wife. The image of Sufiya begins to merge with that of a nation increasingly repressed with the religious fanaticism of Raza Hyder. Her increasing bouts of violence symbolically reflects the mood of a long-suffering nation. Raza too seems to have made this identification and thinks that in silencing Sufiya he would be able to regain control over the nation. What had started in Pinky Aurangezeb’s back yard had now spread to the whole nation. This had elevated Sufiya to the status of a terrifying
myth. Pushed against the wall, Raza confides in Omar the necessity of eliminating Sufiya through a “fatal injection”. At that moment Omar shows great courage and compassion in refusing to heed Hyder and insists on treatment through hypnosis and his expertise. This is the turning point in Omar Khayyam life. And as the narrator comments “Courage is a rarer thing than evil after all” (SH-235). M.D. Fletcher observes, "It is at this stage that Omar’s general nature seems to change, when he refuses to kill Sufiya with a painless injection despite the danger posed by her increasing violent symptoms." As an unavoidable part of the treatment, Sufiya is chained in a secret cellar and kept constantly drugged, transformed from a beast to a sleeping beauty. In spite of Omar’s constant and tender watch, one night she makes good her escape. Significantly this happens on the day Isky Harappa is unjustly hanged, an act of ultimate shame of a repressive leader. Sufiya’s escape symbolically represents a nation breaking free from its repressive shackles.

After many trials and tribulations, the trio of Omar Shakil, Raza Hyder and Biliquis arrive in the town of Q, Ironically sheltered by the “Burqua”. Thus Omar Khayyam’s quest for identity comes full circle with the return to Nishapur. Nemesis awaits these two men in the crumbling mansion. Haunted by the premonition of death fed on rumours of Sufiya’s ominous approach towards Q, Omar Khayyam bursts out in rancour:
I am a peripheral man. Other persons have been the principal actors in my story. Hyder and Harappa my leading men... I watched from the wings, not knowing how to act. I confess to social climbing, to only-doing-my-job, to being corner man in other peoples wrestling matches. (SH-283).

Ironically it is this assertion and realisation of his peripheral nature which confirms how far he has moved from the peripheries. Paradoxically it is an indication that he has been able to rise beyond these infirmities and forge a more positive identity for himself. Unlike Raza Hyder Omar Khayyam is neither terrified neither of Sufiya’s spectral presence nor of the prospect of death. Raza Hyder who is terrified of the imminent confrontation with Sufiya, is virtually a dead man, even before his gruesome death in the dumb-waiter engineered by the three vindictive mothers of Omar Khayyam. On the contrary, Omar Khayyam faces Sufiya and death with equanimity, confident of the Knowledge that in his own unheroic way, his quest for identity has been fulfilled. The novel ends with a violent explosion, reducing Nishapur to smithereens. Paul Sharrad comments, "Like Sufiya Zinobia’s Somnambulist outrages, the novel is an outburst exposing the shame of others before it becomes demonic through prolonged repression. It is also born of the writer’s 'blushing' for the shame of the world and of himself as a displaced person."21 The gesture of farewell
from its unprepossessing hero is a confirmation of his changed status. Positive human values have not only been the redemption of Omar Khayyam the individual; it indicates the path of redemption of a repressed nation.

**THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY : THE CIRCLE OF REASON**

Amitav Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* is a beehive of activity. Characters flit in and out like actors on a Shakespearean stage or as in Chaucer's Canterbury tales, each with his own story, told in a flavour and style which is his own.

The novel lends itself to interpretation at two levels. On the surface according to S. Sengupta, "The Circle of Reason might give the impression that it is a picaresque novel set in the contemporary milieu. It does have an unheroic hero and records various adventures befalling him and his interaction with a host of other characters as he moves from one country to another." The movement from one country to another is not merely a narrative device to widen the scope of the novel. It is used to underline a very important aspect of human life. It can be best understood in the words of James Clifford when he says, "Ghosh's work... underlines the novelist's interest in travelling as a metaphor for the human condition." This briskly paced narrative, at a deeper level, explores the struggle between the power
of cold heartless reason and the nurturing power of human qualities which follow no rules yet bring a healing touch to all mankind.

The protagonist Alu's search for identity unfolds against this background. A passionate commitment to a goal tempered by human touch forms the focus of Alu's quest for identity. With this idea in perspective, Alu's quest passes through three distinct stages. His Odyssey starts in Lalpukur, a small border village in Bengal. The second stage unfolds itself in al-Ghazira, a fictitious country in the Middle East, the new oil rich town with its fascinating mix of fortune hunters from various countries. At both these stages Alu's attempts to seek an identity ends disastrously. And as the narrative reaches its denouement in El oued, the Algerian Sahara, the third stage of Alu's quest takes a decisive and positive turn which puts him on the right path to self-discovery and hope.

Orphaned at the age of eight, Nachiketa comes to live with his Uncle Balaram Bose in Lalpukur. And there he is renamed Alu by Bolai-da due to the shape of his head "curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps" (CR-9). Incidentally this grotesque appearance links Alu with the protagonists of Rushdie's novels- a clear indication that the protagonists of the novel of the 80s have moved away from the prototype of the romantic hero. In Lalpukur, Alu is wedged between an uncle obsessed with phrenology and an aunt equally with the sewing machine. Apparently
discordant in their natures—one an intellectual rationalist, the other superstitious and tradition bound, they are paradoxically similar in the manner in which their respective obsessions reduces them both to irrationality. In this stage of the quest for identity Alu is merely an observer, but his sensitive and receptive mind unconsciously absorbs signals transmitted by his exposure to people like his aunt and uncle.

Alu’s Uncle, Balram Bose prides himself on his rationality. He passionately believes that phrenology is a rational science based on the belief that, “the inside and the outside, the head and the body, what people do and what they are, are one” (CR-14). Armed with this belief, he moves around with his contraption called the claws, making predictions based on shapes of peoples’ heads. The superficiality of Balaram’s knowledge of a dubious science is seen in his constantly changing assessments of Alu’s nature and future. Balaram initially felt that:

A witches brew could be bubbling in that lump of a head-destructiveness perhaps, mixed with Amativeness or secrecy and peppered with combativeness or Acquisitiveness. And if one could find no way of identifying and combating those organs it would be just a matter of time before they drove the boy to some hideous crime (CR-9).
And later changed his opinion when he felt that, "it avoided destructiveness and secretiveness and Acquisitiveness" (CR10). The obsession takes a dangerous turn when Balaram Bose is requested to predict the future of Bhudeb Roy's infant son. His pronouncements only help to widen the rift between them, and put them on the direct path of confrontation. With an utter disregard to the sentiments of a parent, Balaram Bose had pronounced that the infant child had typical homicidal tendencies. The trouble with Bhudeb Roy led his wife Toru-debi to insist on his abandoning his study of Phrenology, which is temporarily revived with Alu's coming to Lalpukur. A more dangerous obsession is with the idea of cleanliness, the instrument of which is carbolic acid. It originates when war refugees stream into the border village of Lalpukur. Oblivious to the human tragedy behind the refugee influx, blinded by an overwhelming preoccupation with cleanliness, Balaram Bose plunges onto the task of cleaning the refugee shanties with carbolic acid.

Alu, by nature is a quiet child. it takes him some time to adjust to his new surroundings. Like another isolated child Omar Khayyam Shakil, Alu too is a voracious reader, devouring the books in Balaram's library with passionate interest. Unfortunately Bhudeb Roy's sons hound him out from school. Disturbed by his orphaned nephew's impassivity and lack of emotion, Balaram Bose had attempted to reach out to the boy. Urging him to "forget the past and look to the future" and reassured him that "one
could do anything with the future, one could change the world" (CR-28). He advocates the idea, "that to change the world one needs to have passion" (CR-28) and quotes the instance of Louis Pasteur's courageous convictions that changed the course of history. This strikes a chord in the consciousness of the sensitive boy, and for the first time he displays emotion. His frequent visits to Shombu Debnath, the enigmatic weaver's, but leads his uncle to suspect that he is interested in weaving. Balaram's phrenological studies of Alu's physical appearance confirm his surmise. "His intuition was proved in every detail; Alu's body, his hands, his legs, his arms, not to speak of the organ, corresponded exactly to his calculated of the proportions ideal for a weaver." (CR-55). To his great joy Alu is apprenticed to Shombu Debnath. Moving from weaving coarse cloth to the finest Jamdani, the young Alu seems well on the way to creating a pattern in his life. This tragically disrupted when he is caught in the vortex of the turbulent passions of Bhudeb Roy, his uncle and aunt.

After discarding phrenology, Balaram Bose had taken equally passionately to the idea of cleanliness. As war breaks out and refugees stream into Lalpukur, Balaram takes up passionately the task of cleaning up the refugee shanties with carbolic acid. As Bolai-da wryly comments, "This is a new Balaram babu. It was true; Balaram, antiseptic and pungent with disinfectant, had never been so happy" (CR-61). His excessive irrational obsession with cleanliness had made him oblivious to the human
tragedy surrounding him. A similar weakness earlier proved dangerous during his forays into phrenology. This new passionate devotion leads him to a blunder whose consequences are tragic. Paranoid about germs, he begins to see Bhudeb Roy too as the most dangerous germ of them all. He incites Shombu Debnath to pour carbolic acid on Bhudeb Roy's head when he is addressing a political meeting. The simmering animosity between the two men now erupts into open conflict and results in outright violence, compounded by Bhudeb Roy's suspicion that Balaram Bose had abetted in Shombu Debnath's elopement with his wife.

Alu is a witness and participant in Balaram Bose's growing fanaticism. He is also witness to Balaram's school of Reason, its initial euphoria and its gradual descent into obscurity. Balaram Bose's School of Reason according to Robert Dixon, "alternatively bores and terrorises people with his scientific notions, and eventually destroys the village by sterilizing the village carbolic acid." When his uncle runs out of money to replenish his stock of carbolic acid, Alu supports him financially. Inspired by his uncle's insistence that passion is the only way to changing the world, Alu sees it in action in his uncle's obsession. He is also a mute witness to how destructive passion can be in reality. A passion for politics and the love of money are Bhudeb Roy's obsessions. He regards Balaram Bose as the greatest obstacle in his path to fame and wealth. Circumstances play into Bhudeb Roy's hands, when Shombu Debnath's son Rakhal stores crude...
home made bombs for sale to the extremists in Balaram's house. This provides Bhudeb Roy with the long awaited opportunity of hitting back at both his opponents. Accusing them of being extremists, he summons the police to conduct a raid on Balaram's house. In a bizarre accident, a flare sent up by the police as a warning falls on the house stocked with carbolic acid and bombs reducing the house to smithereens. Surrounded by danger, Toru-debi feels that she has been abandoned by her singular passion the sewing machine, when it suddenly stops working, she stood up and put the sewing machine in Alu's arms, "Throw it into the pond", she said, "It's dead" (CR-47). This providentially saves Alu's life. Now branded an extremist, Alu is forced to leave Lalpukur. The first stage of his quest for identity has seen him as an observer of passions of various kinds. In the next stage, the realisation becomes more conscious as he becomes the principal actor of his own story.

Hunted down as an extremist, with the policeman Jyothi Das hot on his heels, Alu moves from place to place in search of safety. In Calcutta his uncle's friend Gopal provides him shelter. A chance encounter with Rajan, a mill worker, provides Alu with the means of evading an unjustified arrest:

He passed down a chain of Rajan's Chalia kinsmen, scattered over every factory along the South-Eastern
railway, paying out parts of his eight thousand rupees where Rajan had told him to, down, steadily south wards stooping to catch his breath in the great mills of Madurai and Coimbatire, till whispers came that the police had orders and a sketch, Rajan had been taken in -then it was time to leave the railways behind, time to slip into the forests of the Nilgiris-then over the water sheds into Kerala-he spent the nights secreted away in the Chalia quarters of scattered villages-but then again suddenly rumours of informers of reports to the police, so faster still westwards,down through the mountains,faster and faster (CR-157).

Cast adrift without a house or an identity, the pattern of his life disrupted by forces beyond his control, Alu finds himself in a boat as dilapidated as his own condition. The boat “Mariamma” is on it’s way to al-Ghazira, carrying a load of fortune hunters. As Fakrul Alam rightly comments "Illegal immigrants they hazard their lives by voyaging on frail vessels."25 The turbulent sea voyage sees the beginning of a meaningful association with Zindi. Zindi a middle aged woman running an establishment for illegal migrants in al-Ghazira, perhaps senses the boy’s plight and takes him under her protective care. An embodiment of practicality, she is also capable of sporadic displays of compassion. "I will
give you a chance because you are helpful kind of turd- I’ll give you a place and I’ll find you work aren’t easy to get” (CR-181). Zindi’s patronising benevolence helps Alu to re-establish a certain rhythm in his life, but one which is still dictated by others. Six months of this uneventful and monotonous life, is broken when Alu is buried under thousands and thousands of tons of concrete of an immense building called Al-Najma, the Star. In an ironical coincidence he is once again saved by two old sewing machines which hold up a gigantic girder. Alu’s original name Nachiketa has a special significance at this moment. In the upanishads, Nachiketa is the name of the boy who obeying his father waits at yama’s door. When yama grants him a boon, Nachiketa goes for the ultimate knowledge- the secret of life and death. The name’s significance becomes apparent when Alu is buried under the Star and given up for dead. Nachiketa/Alu is at death’s door for four days refusing food and water, but all the time in deep contemplation. As Alu’s friends go inside the ruins of the Star, Robert Dixon comments, "they find themselves lost in the postmodern space of collapsed glass and concrete doom." It recalls Saleem Sinai’s experience in Midnight’s Children when he is lost in the Sundarbans. Unlike the mythological Nachiketa, his quest is not for knowledge of the universe, the infinitely large, but about "cleanliness and infinitely small" (CR-235). In the words of G.J.V.Prasad, his quest "is not for the understanding of the life after but for knowledge of the cause of the ills of society, the life present." This once again reiterates that in the Indian
English Novel of the 80s, the quest for identity is in the terms of the concrete socio-political realities of contemporary existence.

His miraculous escape creates a mystical aura about Alu and elevates him to a semi-Messiah status. The quest for identity appears to be taking a definite form as, for the first time, Alu finds himself on the centre-stage of his life. When comes back the people of the Ras are eager to hear his words of wisdom, and he holds forth on “the germ”. He declares that the enemy of mankind is money, "which travels on every man and on every woman, silently preparing for their defeat, turning one against the other." (CR-281) The conscious use of the word “germ” establishes a correspondence between the passion of Alu and that of his uncle. This helps to anticipate the disastrous consequences of Alu’s new found passion. The transformation that he undergoes while buried in the debris is almost taken to the realms of fantasy. A subdued, withdrawn teenager, with no indication of a special calling, is miraculously and transformed temporarily into a Messiah. Once again, this is reminiscent of Saleem Sinai who gets his moment of enlightenment while lying hidden in the washing chest. The people of the Ras are intrigued by Alu’s refusal of food or water and his insistence of being left alone to think. When Alu finally emerges unscathed, they are eager to hear his words of wisdom. During the phase of reflection, hitherto disjointed elements of his past and come together to produce Alu’s theory of the real germ of mankind. His uncle’s passionate
devotion to cleanliness, inspired by Pasteur’s battle against germs perhaps combined with sub-conscious loathing of the money power of Bhudeb Roy finds expression in Alu’s analysis of money being the greatest scourge of mankind. He felt that Louis Pasteur’s experiment with germs was incomplete because he had dealt with only physical germs, Alu’s perceptions were broader. Perhaps taken aback by his sudden elevation to the position of spiritual authority, Alu withdraws into silence and detachment, taking up weaving as an attempt once again to weave a realistic pattern of his life, leaving others to put his theories into practice. His enigmatic message delivered, Alu once again reverts to the role of observer, leaving others to enact a farcical drama. Inspired by his new found beliefs, the old mildness vanishes. An impressive aura now surrounds him, he "sat with his hands folded on his lap, absolutely still, but his voice grew in strength and power until it reached the courtyard and into the lanes and gullies outside" (CR-280).

The basis of an egalitarian society seems to be laid by Prof. Samuel’s plan of a common pool of earnings, aimed to reduce the workers’ attachment to money. Ironically, the plan boomerangs for it leads to increased material prosperity which in turn, increases man’s avarice. A shopping expedition by the people of the Ras is tragically misinterpreted by the new rulers of al-Ghazira. In a drastic measure to curb what they interpret as labour unrest, the regime unleashes a violent attack on the migrant workers, killing 153
and wounding some, and dislocating many. Once again, Alu has a providential escape. Once again his attempts to live a meaningful existence, to search for an identity is brutally aborted. He finds himself once again adrift and homeless. However this time he has the support of Zindi and Kulfi, a young woman with whom he has established an undefined yet obviously intimate relationship.

There is a distinct parallelism between the first and the second stages of Alu’s quest for identity. In the former, Balaram’s basic obsession with cleanliness precipitated the disaster. In the latter, it is Alu’s passion for a different kind of cleanliness which results in disaster. In both cases it is evident that passions become dangerous when they ignore the reality of human nature and existence. This similarity is clearly reinforced through the motif of carbolic acid. In the first section, carbolic acid is used to cleanse the power and money hungry Bhudeb Roy. Similarly it is used in the second section, to cleanse the biggest germs of al-Ghazira, the business establishments and the Muggadams.

In the first section he had been a passive victim of his unrealistic passions, where as in the second he is directly responsible for his predicament, the loss of direction and balance in his quest for identity.
Weaving has been the predominant symbol throughout Amitav Ghosh’s work. His Ph.D. thesis at Oxford was on the history of weaving and the cloth trade between Britain and India in the 19th century. In *The Circle of Reason*, weaving is a recurrent symbol which functions at various levels. In the context of the protagonist’s search for identity it clearly stands for the evolution of a pattern of living. Alu, who had taken up weaving after his miraculous survival, suddenly finds himself with atrophied thumbs on his way to El-Oued. His atrophied thumbs are a physical manifestation of his inner mental paralysis. It seems as if his search for identity has reached a state of stasis.

The third and the most decisive part of Alu’s quest unfolds itself in El-Oued. Even as the denouement of the plot is placed in the little town of El-Oued, Alu’s life too embarks on a new beginning. For the first time Alu comes across a complete person in his life. The fugitive party comprising of Alu, Zindi, Kulfi, and the sick child Boss can hardly believe their luck when they see an Indian woman walking down the road. She too is equally surprised to see them and gives them shelter.

The Indian woman Mrs. Verma, a brisk and no-nonsense doctor takes the new arrivals under her wing and persuades them to participate in the staging of the dance drama 'Chitrangada'. More importantly she manages to disabuse Alu of the dream of a world purified by rational methods. As
Kulfi dies at the climax of the rehearsal of Chitrangada, Mrs. Verma's personality, a fine balance between reason and spirit comes out forcefully. The compassionate Mrs. Verma struggles with adverse circumstances to arrange a traditional Indian funeral for her in the middle of the Sahara. In spite of the vehement protests of Dr. Mishra, what she says form the crux of her character:

Rules, rules, she said softly. All you ever talk about is rules. That's how you and your kind have destroyed everything—science, religion, socialism—with your rules and orthodoxies. That's the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human (CR-409).

In other words Mrs. Verma makes a passionate plea for reaffirmation of the basic qualities of the heart. As Mrs. Verma points out when she is trying to go through the rituals before the burial:

What does it matter whether its Gangajal to be used for cleaning the place 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? (CR-411).
Mrs. Verma's sincere efforts have a tremendous effect on Alu's sensibilities, particularly in contrast to the callous manner in which Zindi had been rejected by the very relatives who owed their prosperity to her. Instead of theorising, Alu learns to participate in life, when he chops wood for the funeral of his "wife" Kulfi. When it-comes to lighting the funeral pyre, he realises that his thumbs have become normal, which in its atrophied condition earlier had troubled him a great deal. Mrs. Verma's words are significant when she says "It is a little muscular atrophy but you can do whatever you like as long as you want to" (CR-417). A rejuvenated Alu emerges from the depths of despair. It is significant that this occurs immediately after they have consigned the Life of Pasteur to the funeral pyre, suggesting that pure reason cannot take man very far on the path of human compassion. But the death of reason is not a pessimistic view of life as Mrs. Verma points out; "If there's one thing people learn from the past, it is that every consummated death is another beginning" (CR-414). The most important thing to learn is to "make do with what we've got, and in the meantime try to be a better human being" (CR-414). The book Life of Pasteur the original culprit which is crucial to the narrative starts in the first part and makes its way through the middle parts and is finally and symbolically consigned to the flames in the last part. The novel drives home the point that reason will remain incomplete without the touch of human emotion. On a larger scale the author/text seems to be saying that the crux of the socio-political imbroglio of this country is precisely due to the gap between passionate commitment and human touch.
Thus disburdened of false dreams, a new Alu is waiting to go back home. For Alu, life has come a full circle as he settles down to wait for Virat Singh and the ship that would carry him home. For Alu hope is the beginning. And now it is not too far-fetched to visualise a new Alu at the loom harmoniously weaving a pattern of his life in the time to come.

**THE SHADOW LINES: SEARCH FOR IDENTITY**

Amitav Ghosh’s second novel *The Shadow Lines* at the outset establishes a rhythm which sets the tone, mood and tenor of the narrative. As in his earlier novel *The Circle of Reason*, Amitav Ghosh takes the narrative beyond the national frontiers and opens out the narrative to encompass experiences that are cosmopolitan. The quest for identity unfolds itself against the mood and background of a new internationalism. This new mood directs the protagonist’s consciousness to new thresholds of experience.

These novel experiences are seen and understood through the narrator’s consciousness. A distinct hue and message that eventually combine to make the quest meaningful mark each experience. The name of the narrator is not revealed, as a part of the narrative design, its aim is to suggest a contemporary consciousness, an all-encompassing identity. But at the same time the narrative subtly fuses personal experiences, to make
the search a fascinating and living experience. As a young boy, his grandmother's passionate nationalism and her poignant nostalgic reminiscences of her life in East-Bengal, opens the narrator's mind to the meaning of nationalism and the unifying power of memory. As a young man he sees Ila's desperate attempts to accommodate herself to an alluring way of life in London, and her pathetic failure leads him to the realisation of the limitations and incomplete nature of such experiences. In short neither of these two constitute a totality of experience. It is the enigmatic Tridib, who opens the narrator's consciousness to the power of imagination. This perception of the power of imagination helps him open his mind to new vistas of knowledge within and beyond the frontiers of this country. Armed with this superior imagination, the narrator sets out to forge an identity amidst the complex realities of a larger world.

At the outset, the grandmother holds sway over the narrator's sensibilities. Her strict disciplinarian exterior, which actually hides a tender heart, evokes in the young narrator awe and admiration. The story of her determined effort to forge a meaningful life after being widowed at a young age gives him an insight into the resilient quality of human beings. His grandmother seems to have risen from the depths of despair, literally from the proverbial ashes. Her tender reminiscences about her happy days of childhood and the heartbreak of the dis-integration of their joint family are vividly transmitted through her imagination and memory. It captures
the young narrator's imagination and makes it a living experience. This fact is well conveyed when he says:

I could see Kana-babu's sweet shop at the end of their lane with absolute clarity, I could even see the pink cham-cham stacked in their trays... I could hear the buzzing of the flies, and I could see Kana-babu sitting hunched behind his cash-box, scratching his stomach (SL-194).

The grandmother's stories of frustration and aspirations during the struggle for freedom exposes the narrator's mind to the meaning of nationalism. He is astounded by her fierce determination and is over awed by the nature of her involvement in the freedom struggle when she says, "I would have killed him [the English magistrate]. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free" (SL-39).

Tha'mma's illusions and the nostalgic feeling of comfort are soon shattered when she does visit Dhaka after a long time. As Sharmila Guha Majumdar aptly puts it "Unlike so many of their brethren they did not have to feel the pang of being uprooted and to face the daunting task of rebuilding lives from the debris of history."28 consequently Tha'mma could cling to her nostalgic memories of her past. Her consciousness refuses to
accept the new realities of life in the sub-continent. This illusion is soon shattered when she does visit Dhaka after a long time. Even before she starts for Dhaka she is confounded by the complex procedure she has to go through to visit to visit her “Home”. Quiet unable to come to terms with aberrations like the partition, her questions about it have a child like simplicity. She wants to know if she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. She strongly believes that the physical division of the country would be indicated by "trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land" (SL-151). She is even more confounded when her son tells her "This is the modern world. The border isn’t on the frontier; it’s right inside the airport. You’ll see. You will cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things” (SL-151-152). As K.Damodar Rao aptly says, "The myth of nationalism gets broken in the absence of these physical equivalents of the division."²⁹ She then wonders “What was all for then partition and all the killings and everything if there isn’t something between?” (SL-151).

It is an extremely poignant moment when she arrives in Dhaka her home and quickly realises that it is no more her home. Th’amma notices that everything has changed completely on the way to her sister Mayadebi’s house, even as the driver points out to her the new theatres and hotels, just one refrain emerges from her lips, "It’s all wonderful. But where is Dhaka?"
(SL-206). It clearly indicates the new profile of Dhaka which is alien to her. Like her, Jethomoshai, her own surviving link with the past, he stubbornly holds on to his conviction. He had chosen to ignore the shadow line, "Once you start moving you never stop...I don’t believe in this India-shindia...but I suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line some where? what will you do then?" (SL-215). Her attempts to bring him back to Calcutta are gruesomely aborted on the streets of Dhaka during a mindless communal riot, a perpetual bane of the sub-continent. In the bargain she also loses her nephew Tridib who is dear to her. This mindless carnage has a devastating effect on her psyche. And as Novy Kapadia says, "Her home in Dhaka, which was like a pastoral retreat, a garden vision is now a remainder of death and communal border for the grand mother."30 Commenting upon the episode of Tha’mma’s visit to Dhaka, Girish Karnad says, "The grandmother’s visit to the ancestral home along with Tridib and his English girl friend is surely one of the most memorable scenes in English fiction... past and future meet... leading to a shattering climax."31 On returning to India, she is a completely changed woman, as the narrator’s sharp perceptions quickly notice. She gives vent to her feeling of rancour when India goes to war with Pakistan. Novy Kapadia makes a pertinent observation in this context “Her idyllic vision is shattered. The desire is changed. To use the phraseology of social Psychology, the grandmother also now thinks in terms of "Us and them."32 As a war donation she gives away her gold chain her most valuable possession, as she now firmly believes that “We have to kill them before they kill us" (SL-273).
Tha’mma also launches a scathing attack on Ila for her western ways and pretensions. She tells the narrator that:

Ila has no right to leave there (London) she doesn’t belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country hundreds of years of war and bloodshed. They know they’re a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood, war is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were this or that, Muslims or Hindus, Bengali or Punjabi, they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don’t you see? (SL-78)

This is one of the reasons for her being upset at the narrator’s involvement with Ila who she believes is hopelessly out of tune with her own life. The severity and associated heart aches of the struggle for freedom, India’s war with China and Pakistan have all added up to severely restrict her sensibility and vision. Thus blinded by emotional nationalism, she holds out the alarming prospect that feelings of nationalism can only develop through the process of war and sustained bloodshed. The narrator perceives the limitations of her vision which is so sadly out of tune with the new cosmopolitan consciousness, because if its failure to take a larger world view.
The narrator’s gradual realisation of the limitations of Tha’mma’s vision is complemented by an equally clear understanding of the limitations of an entirely different vision represented by Ila.

As a child the narrator would await Ila’s arrival from some fascinating distant country. To the boy, brought up within the humdrum routine of a small puritanical world Ila appears in Nandita Sinha’s words, "As a exotic butterfly with easy intimacy with places which are magic names in the boy’s atlas.” Even as children they are miles apart in their understanding and perception of places. Ila in spite of having travelled so extensively, had merely moved without seeing, and on the other hand the narrator in spite of not having travelled at all, had the ability of seeing places through his superior imagination, a gift bequeathed to him by his uncle Tridib. As a result, the narrator is able to convert those mundane places into exotic locales. Even as they grew up, Ila’s perceptions had not changed whereas the narrator’s perceptions and assimilation had become keener. This aspect is well illustrated years later, when the narrator goes to London to collect data from the India office library on the textile trade between India and England in the 19th century and mentions Cairo to Ila. All that she could remember was that “ladies” in the airport was on the other side of the departure lounge” (SL-20). The narrator had conjured on the other hand in his mind the enigmatic Pyramids and had wished to touch them. The reasons for Ila’s failure to react is summed up by Tridib when he says,
"The inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she lived in many places, she had never travelled at all" (SL-21).

As a child the narrator had also been fascinated by her life in London and intrigued by her stories about Nick Price, the son of their old family friends the Prices. It is only later that he realises that her stories were concocted, especially about Nick Price. Even as a child she had hidden the essentially mean and the timid in Nick Price. She relates one harrowing incident of racial prejudice, where she projects Nick Price as a knight in shining armour rescuing a damsel in distress, herself. In reality he had run away from the scene for fear and embarrassment at being seen with a non-white. Even when she grows, up she persists with her self-delusion and does not hesitate to marry him, despite his proven qualities of inconsistency and waywardness. When the narrator goes to London and gets to observe her life from close quarters, he is saddened by the mess she has made of her life due to her own stubborn refusal to face reality. What she thought was liberation, from a middle class culture was nothing but a camouflage for a servile obsession with western culture. As Louis James says, "Ila desires freedom from a middle class orthodoxy, but she discovers that the free world she had tried to build for herself was not free from the squalor of betrayal." 34 Thus her love for a man like Nick Price and her marriage to him can only be construed as a desperate attempt to clutch on to a way of life she has glamourised, for which Nick Price is a gateway. Ila’s inability
to assimilate the rich pageantry of the world is one basic flaw in her consciousness the other being her inability to assimilate the past or envisage the future. As a result the Lëlt Book House with a rich past nor Cairo with its majestic and awe inspiring Pyramids fail to evoke any vibrant response from her.

Ila’s attempt to identify herself with the western world is highly incongruous. This idea is brought to the fore when in London the narrator identifies the building in which Alan Tresawsen and his friends Dan, Mike, and Franscesca had stayed during the World War, much to the astonishment of Ila and Nick. The mood during the World War then becomes the bone of contention between Ila and the narrator. Ila believes that Tresawseen and his friends shared a particular kind of happiness during the war in spite of the turbulent times. But the narrator strongly disputes it. This confrontation leads to a highly presumptuous lecture by Ila, where she believes that she and her companions in Southwell would be a part of the future just as Tresawsen and his friends had been. It is a blatant contradiction of her sensibility, as she does not value the future. She is dismissive of the insignificant life led by the narrator in a country where according to her nothing significant happened except for riots, floods and famines. Her misplaced conceptions expose her limitations about politics and its seriousness. Interestingly her friends do not take her too seriously. To them she is merely a decorative piece nothing more than their, "our own
upper-class Asian Marxist" (SL-97) in short a non-entity. Ila, it is clear that she is living in a world of self-deception and shallowness. Another example of her shallowness is her taking up a job with childrens' organisation without any liking for children. She is ultimately out of tune with both the worlds the native as well as the adopted, and sadly ends up belonging to neither. Ila's seeming cosmopolitanism only ends in her losing her own identity in an attempt to ape a borrowed one.

In a subtle juxtaposition, the author projects, May Price as her alter ego. Her cosmopolitanism is real. In spite of being firmly ensconced in the western sensibility she, unlike Ila, is able to respond to other realities. Her trip to India on Tridib's invitation initiates her into realities of a different kind in the sub-continent. May, is quick to respond to the new ethos as can be seen in the incident in the railway station when she meets Tridib for the first time. It is very clear from the outset that she is a broad-minded uncomplicated person. May's belief in certain life convictions is best illustrated through her action in relieving a street dog of its misery with the help of Tridib and the narrator on the streets of Calcutta. Her convictions suffer a severe jolt when she attempts to rescue on the streets of Dhaka, Jethamoshai and Khalil, the rickshaw man from a bloodthirsty mob. She is horrified at the new aspect of reality in the sub-continent. May blames herself for the gruesome death of Tridib, Khalil, and Jethamoshai. And for the rest of her life she makes a sincere attempt to understand this reality.
On the personal level, the narrator shares an excellent rapport with her. Even as a child he had been fascinated by her. As he grew older, he could not fathom the depth of the relation between her and Tridib. He comes to view her as a simple and uncomplicated person. Many years later in London he meets her and is impressed by her sincere approach towards life. Unlike Ila and her friends, she is truly committed to, and without pretensions, to social service. May spends long hours standing in street corners, raising money for the needy. Possessed of an interest in Third World causes, she goes beyond Oxfam. The narrator, who is himself a participant in one such drive, observes her total involvement in the cause, going about the work without a feeling of superiority, or a patronising attitude. May’s weekly fast in order to experience the pangs of hunger from which a part of the world suffers has a ring of sincerity about it, and is in total contrast to Ila’s artificiality. May Price is the redeeming consciousness in a world surrounded by misconceptions and distorted visions. Despite his misbehaviour with her, she is still warm towards the narrator, and redeems him by her affection which is an integral part of her nature. Ila had dismissed his sincere love with a patronising "you were the brother I never had." (SL-111) His dejected love finds solace in May’s sincere affection. In the end, it is May who reveals to him the truth about Tridib’s death. She pours her heart out to him, holding herself responsible for Tridib’s death. May corrects this misconception when she fully understands the nature of Tridib’s sacrifice. May’s sincere endeavour to come to terms with new
realities coupled with the simple design of her life makes a lasting impression on the narrator's mind. Ila and May, the narrator realises, are alter egos, in the sense that they represent a pseudo cosmopolitanism and a truly cosmopolitan consciousness respectively.

The assimilation of Tridib's cosmopolitan vision into the consciousness of the narrator forms the concluding portion of the search for identity.

Tridib, the narrator's uncle, is easily the most unusual character in the novel. His enigmatic presence not only pervades the whole novel but also lends credence to the human drama and narrative design. To the narrator, even as a child, Tridib is his undisputed hero, in spite of his grandmother terming him a "loafer and wastrel". Tridib's encyclopaedic knowledge combined with a streak of intensely worldly shrewdness has the ability to transform mundane and monotonous street corners into places of interest and fascination. Tridib introduces him to the fascinating world of the imagination. He expands the frontiers of his boyhood world giving him worlds to travel and eyes to see with. Tridib had always advised him to use his imagination with precision. And as Nandita Sinha says, "The narrator learns to value the imagination as revealing a world as concrete and real and infinitely more exciting than the world experienced through the senses."35 This aspect comes to the fore when his keen imaginative perceptions are pitted against Ila's lack of imagination. As a result Colombo
acquires a new dimension an equally memorable is the narrator’s vision of war torn London. Many years later, in London, the recollection is vivid. Although he could not see the uprooted trees or splintered windows or buckled flagstones that have been lost in a forty year old past, he realises that he has been shown something more valuable—England in her finest hour. As the narrator says "Despite the clear testimony of my eyes it seemed to me still that Tridib had shown something truer about Solent road a long time ago in Calcutta." (SL-57). Thus, in spite of it being his first trip to London, he identifies each and every place with precision and passion, much to the astonishment of Ila and Nick Price. The whole panorama comes with a photographic clarity on the screen of his imagination. Thus Tridib’s advice of:

Knowing through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust, a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror (SL-29).
Is fully realised and assimilated in the narrator’s consciousness. It emphasises the point that Tridib is the chief architect in shaping the narrator’s consciousness. To the others, including his own family members who failed to gauge his depth, May Price with her cosmopolitan vision comes into his life like a breath of fresh air. Her involvement with Tridib is deep in spite of it being an unusual relationship. In Tridib’s company May is exposed to new realities in the sub-continent. Her sensitive and humane attitude towards life is evident, when she puts a street dog out of its misery on the streets of Calcutta unmindful of the danger to her own life. Tridib’s question if she would do the same thing for him if he ever needed it, serves as a premonition of his own death.

As Tridib makes the trip to Dhaka along with Tha’mma and May Price to bring back Iethamoshai, a more sinister drama unfolds itself in the sub-continent which ultimately brings to the fore the gruesome realities of partition. May Price is witness to Tridib’s death at the hands of a bloodthirsty mob, on the streets of Dhaka. She holds herself responsible for his death and carries that guilt in her conscience. In London fifteen years later, the narrator is told the truth about his death by Robi and May Price. The narrator is shocked beyond words. Robi’s sense of disgust and despair comes out when he says, "Why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole sub-continent and give every little place a new name?" (SL-241) The last story told by Tridib to him before leaving for
Dhaka about a hero called Tristem, a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman across the sea, signifying a world without borders, becomes achingly relevant to the present time which endlessly harps on boundaries.

May Price and the narrator realise that Tridib had sacrificed his life, had deliberately plunged into the mob knowing fully well that death would be imminent. Her guilt is dispelled when she realises the true heroism of his sacrifice; in which her contribution had been insignificant. Tridib’s death is a parable of our times. It shows the increasing violence besieging the sub-continent, violence engendered by demarcations of class, caste and creed.

The narrator in his search for identity realises that Tha’mma and Ila represent a narrowness of vision and pseudo-cosmopolitanism respectively. It is May’s humanism combined with Tridib’s vision, that can mould the Psyche of the contemporary consciousness. It can be noticed that Tha’mma’s ties are based on physical, highly emotional bonds whereas Tridib’s vision is based more on the imaginative and the intellect. It is only when the window of the mind opens out to a larger world, but with the roots firmly embedded, does the search for identity become fruitful and meaningful.
These various experiences help the narrator to realise that identity is not limited to natural geographic boundaries but goes beyond its realms, to root itself in a wider world. The author presents this realisation not through direct commentary or explanation but an unobtrusive juxtaposition of a variety of world views.

**THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY: ENGLISH, AUGUST**

Upamanyu Chatterjee’s maiden novel, *English, August: An Indian Story* has been described by C. Sengupta as “a subtle metaphor of contemporary youth’s quest for self realisation.”

The novel has a brilliant visual appeal by virtue of its photographic descriptions of places and situations. Long after the novel is over, the mind continues to visualise the setting and the story in all its minute details.

The novel can be read at two levels. On the surface level, the book is a commentary on the administrative services of India, the corruption in high places, the high-handedness, inefficiency, the oppressiveness of the system, its utter indifference to the eradication of social evils, the acute class consciousness among the IAS hierarchy, the little snobberies and petty jealousies. At the deeper level, it is an exposition of the predicament of the modern youth in this vast and complex country. There is a sense of
dislocation and a general meaninglessness, as a result the protagonist’s search for identity is sometimes pathetic, sometimes humorous, even ridiculous. However it ultimately turns out to be a journey from rootlessness to maturity, in short, a struggle to come to terms with oneself against the complex realities of this country.

The crux of Agasthya’s quest lies in striking a balance between his megalopolitan sensibilities and the realities of life in a backward town of this country. Madna, a provincial town, serves as the background to Agasthya’s quest. The protagonist of the novel, Agasthya Sen, is a megalopolitan youth, educated in the best public schools of Darjeeling, whose schedule and life style turns topsy turvy when he reports in Madna as an IAS trainee officer. Right from the first day in Madna, Agasthya suffers from a sense of rootlessness. The reason for this rootlessness is not too hard to perceive. As Meenakshi Raykar comments, "His background has been a very powerful alienating force which has left a sense of displacement."37 His elitist education and the frivolous luxuries afforded by cities like Calcutta and Delhi have obviously conditioned his mind to just one way of life. Nizzam Ezekiel has perceptively pointed out, "It is Agasthya’s Darjeeling School that establishes his alienation of which he remains conscious virtually through this Indian story."38 For people like Agasthya who have no special devouring interests and very little ambition, the megalopolitan cities are the right places to live in, for they afford them
the luxury of anonymity. In Madna he can no more remain anonymous and
by virtue of being an IAS officer, he is a demi god, and thus the focus of
attention. This change demands a re-orientation of his perception of him- self
and of his life. Agastaya finds himself in the type of places he had read
about only in newspapers- "places where floods and caste wars occured,
etire harijan families were murdered" (EA-4). This disparity between the
two worlds obviously creates a strong sense of dislocation in the
protagonist. The novelist himself spells out his protagonist’s predicament:

Anchorlessness that was to be his chaotic concern -
in that uncertain year, battling a sense of waste
was to be another fodder too, in the forrago of his
mind, self pity in an uncongenial clime, the
incertitude of his reactions to Madna, his job, and
his ability to relate to it- other abstractions too, his
niche in the world, his future - the elusive mocking
nature of happiness, the possibility of its
attainment (EA-24-25).

For a year Agastaya was to move from one room in the rest house to
another room in some other house; it was homelessness of a kind, a physical
manifestation of an inner sense of restlessness. His experiences on the
first day consisting of an integration meeting, the sea of humanity waiting
for justice around the collector's office, the collector's overbearing manner leaving him with a lambent dullness. As a result Agastya's new life begins on a note of despondency. He is out of tune with his surroundings, as he had feared at the outset, when he felt "I'd much rather act in a porn film than be a bureaucrat. But I suppose one has to live" (EA-3). His accommodation in the rest house is drab and uninteresting and to add to his woes, is an indifferent cook Vasant who serves him insipid meals. A painting by an amateur artist Tamse, an ex-engineer, hanging in his room gives him his first lesson about loneliness. Tamse's painting painting, mediocre as a work of art, was a sincere attempt to recreate home, and his poem behind it brought out his loneliness. It was the attempt on Tamse's part to share a mood, an experience, which turns Agastya's initial reaction of indignation at the painting, to one of sympathy and understanding. Agastya had always wanted to be alone but had not bargained for this kind of loneliness. The initial response to the discord between his past and present is that of escapism. Agastya feels the urge to get away from the stifling bureaucratic ambience to the comfort of a secret life in the rest house. Drab and dull though it is, to him it is more actual and exciting than the world outside. Thus Agastya begins to lead three lives in Madna, The official with its social concomittance, the unofficial, which included boozing with Shankar and Sathe and later with Bhatia, and the secret in the universe of his room, which encompasses jogging by moonlight (EA-48).
The attempt to juggle with three lives enhances his sense of dislocation. However, his sense of smugness and unconscious pride in the thought that he alone felt dislocated is soon dispelled. His inter-action with Bhatia reveals to him that he is not the only one afflicted with this syndrome. In the months of adjustment, he writes several times to his father about his feeling of dislocation. All the time there is no real involvement either in his social or official life, as he feels that his situation is somehow unreal, and just a temporary sojourn in Madna. He goes through the motions of a hectic social life without it making any impression. The sense of bewilderment is even stronger in his official inter-actions. Appreciating the commitment of men like Srivastav, while deploring what Vinay Lal refers to as “lording it over the millions”39 he is confused about his place in the bureaucratic set-up. In Madna, he is exposed to the petty power play of the bureaucracy which allows a woman like Mrs. Srivastav to impose her half-baked knowledge on hapless victims. The inability to reconcile this reality with his father’s inspiring vision of an IAS officer’s responsibility aggravates his feeling of anchorlessness. As a result he found it difficult to read and assimilate anything when the mind was in such turmoil. Among all the books that Agastya carried with him, Marcus Aurelius afforded him some measure of comfort. He identified with the wise sad Roman as both of them were concerned “not with the soul squashing problems of being poor but the exhilarating abstract problems of one immersed wholly in his self’(EA-68). The fact that Agastya seeks solace in an ancient Roman
writer exposes his pseudo-Intellectualism and the urge to escape from concrete realities of life in Madna.

In spite of his determined effort to avoid involvement, certain encounters hold out the possibilities of other solutions. Shankar, an executive engineer who also feels banished in Madna, abandons his destiny to goddess Jagadamba. Agastaya is however unable to identify with this determinist philosophy. Equally unacceptable is the attitude of the judge, which is as fatalist as Shankar's philosophy. Having already spent a considerable period of time in Madna, the judge is yet unable to grapple with the feeling of dislocation. He feels that, for him, salvation is only possible with his retirement. To Agastaya, this holds out an alarming possibility for his own future. The notion embodied in the judge, that "age was in no way connected with the intensity of a sense of dislocation" (EA-89) carries the temptation "to slink away from having to think, to wish to be that pair of ragged claws that had so tantalised him in his college years, scuttling over the floors of the silent seas" (EA-114) carries a warning for Agastaya-the necessity of finding a constructive solution to his own sense of dislocation. A small but decisive turn occurs when he meets Govinda Sathe, a cartoonist by profession, hence called the "Joker of Madna". Sathe gives Agastaya a copy of the Bhagvat Gita and insists that he read it. Agastaya had always associated the Gita with age, when the after life begins to look important. As a result he approached the Gita with
a degree of apprehension. Agastaya read those passages in the Gita which discussed the problem of the restless mind, where Krishna tells Arjuna "It is indeed hard to train. But by constant practice and by freedom from passoins, the mind in truth can be trained" (EA-83). He had earlier taken recourse to Marcus Aurelius, finding in problems a bonding with the ancient Roman philosopher. On the other hand, the Gita offers the possibilities of solutions. Although unable to comprehend many obtuse passages, he implicitly understands that it can unfold solutions to his problems. This shows Agastaya's newly formed desire to look for solutions rather than brood on the problems. It is thus a positive step in Agastaya's quest for identity.

Another positive development is Agastaya's acknowledgement that he has become more perceptive and sensitive in Madna. His first trip into the district opens his eyes to new realities. In retrospect he realises that in Delhi and in Calcutta, he was insensitive to his surroundings as he was "busy with trivia, talking rubbish with someone, filled with impatience to get somewhere in time for something... his mind was just too cluttered up for him to notice anything" (EA-123).

In spite of these positive indications, his frustrations continued to build up, slowly rising to a crescendo. The rains came to Madna, refreshed and put new life in everything around it. But Agastaya's mind continued
to be restless and unsettled. His bureaucratic life—the over-bearing presence of Srivastav and Kumar with their intimidating behaviour, his social life with its trivialities are both equally unsatisfying. In such a mood, "he was enraged at himself for not having planned his life with intelligence, for having dared to believe that he was adaptable enough to any job and circumstances for not knowing how to change either, for wasting time" (EA-112). He felt that he was neither master of his fate nor time. Agastaya strongly felt that most men like him "chose in ignorance and fretted in an uncongenial world, they ultimately ended up compromising with or without grace or slipped into despair" (EA-113-114). His anger is also directed at the failure of reason to direct significant action. He who had earlier believed in the power of reason begins to question its efficacy. He frets "I want to know in the present, he said to himself, I want my reason, and not even my intuition, but my reason to tell me, here, you are now master of your time to come, act accordingly" (EA-113). Agastaya resolves that reason is incapable of answering overwhelming questions. At the same time he also realises much to his dismay that all human relationships are futile; he comes to believe that all human beings are cocoons, all engrossed in themselves and that no one is anyone's confidant. The realisation dawns on him that he is alone in his quest for identity.

The contrast between his life in Madna and in Calcutta and Delhi exposes the shallowness of his existence. The feeling of loneliness starts
haunting him. He writes to his father saying that he could not get used to the job and that he was wasting his time. He also indicates in his letter that he would also like to change his job. Under the cumulative effect of overwhelming questions for which he finds no answers, his mind reaches a state of stasis. In that state of stasis, he stops analysing himself. The mind was restless due to the constant flux of warring thoughts which wracked his indeterminate mind. Earlier he had worried about the future but now he could not see it at all, engulfed as it was in a void. Life had suddenly become a black and serious business "with a tantalising painfully elusive, definite but checked goal, how to crush the restlessness of the mind" (EA-135). Unable to confront this reality, his static mind had even contemplated suicide as a release from this burden that too he felt required too much effort. Very strangely he did not long for a megalopolitan life: He missed nothing, felt no contempt for the world; all that he wanted was "peace". The idea that men were at sometimes masters of their fate now teased and haunted him. He felt that the precious seconds of his life was ticking away uselessly and that his unhappiness proportionately increasing every moment, with the bitter agony of not being able to confront it. Agastaya wondered if he should resign himself to fate or else take solace in the words of an ancient Hindu poem which held that action is better than inaction. To get away from everything was Agastaya’s immediate concern. In that state of mind, action is interpreted as escape from Madna. The trip to Delhi is thus regarded as an opportunity to recast his life’s
design, little realising that he is once again relapsing into escapism. Agastaya departs to Delhi with the thought, that he did not want challenges or responsibility. But just to be happy, to lie on the roof of his house in Delhi and be immersed in himself.

Agastaya's sojourn in Delhi marks another significant step in his quest for identity. The trip elicits unexpected perspectives which shake his newfound faith that escape from Madna would solve his problems of restlessness. In Delhi, Agastaya, to his dismay, discovers that his bosom friend Dhrubo, is unhappy with the unreal nature of his job in the corporate world and is even contemplating joining the IAS. His indignation when told of Agastaya's desire to quit his job is evident when he remarks:"Just who and where do you think you are, an American taking an year off after college to discover himself?" (EA-153) His cousin Tonic's anger is equally clear when he admonishes Agastaya, telling him that leaving such a job "is a ridiculously high price to pay for trying to regain some of the shallow pleasures of your past life" (EA-170). He suggests that as an IAS officer, he has a real chance to do something constructive about the social system. Madan, his other college friend is also deeply frustrated with his job in a chartered accountant's office. These encounters rather than reassuring him as expected places his mind in further turmoil. He realises that restlessness crosses the boundaries of place, that his friends in Delhi were as restless as he had been in Madna. The illusion that Madna was the source of his
restlessness is soon dispelled. The sight of people sticking out like tongues from over crowded buses, brings home to him the contrast between the concrete realities of their predicament and the nebulous nature of his own condition. The expectations of reassurance, with which he had come to Delhi remaining unfulfilled, he returns to Madna with his mind in even greater turmoil.

Back in Madna, his mind is, for the first time, open to positive influences. He is stirred by the single minded dedication of John Avery, the English man who had travelled over half the globe to pursue a dream—to pay respects at his grandfathers grave in a remote place. He is moved by Baba Ramanna's labour of love, his rehabilitation of lepers, "a singular story of the immensity of human ambition" (EA-235) and the naxalites fiery determination to create social awareness and to put an end to the exploitation of the tribals. He is influenced by Dr.Darshan Multani's sense of satisfaction and happiness in his chosen profession. His identification with the myth of the fisher king, where the fisher king is able to resolve his problems and divine a meaning in life, is another positive step in this stage of his quest for identity.

The opportunity to give a concrete shape to these positive inclinations comes with his posting to Jompanna as the Block Development officer. The bureaucratic hauteur and the inefficacy of the entire set up which had
so deeply troubled him in Madna is neutralised in the obscure tribal village of Chipanthi. The sincerity of his efforts and his human understanding rise above the artificial barriers of language. Chipanthi brings him face to face with the soul rending realities of life where tribal parents were compelled to risk "the lives of their children for half buckets of mud." (EA-259) which passed off for water. Agastya's first constructive step is taken when, overriding official apathy and insensitivity, he finds a solution to their acute water problem. He is warmly appreciated for his timely action; the farewell accorded to him by the people of Jompanna is replete with affection. Back in Madna, Sathe's words of wisdom "whatever you choose to do, you will regret everything or regret nothing. Remember you're not James Bond, you only live once." (EA-285) strikes the decisive chord in Agastya's mind. The lure of a lotus eating life, escaping responsibility and action, is banished from his mind. He realises that the crux of his search for identity and the solution for his restlessness lies in coming to terms with the harsh realities of life in the sub-continent. The feeling that life is lying on the terrace to seeing the lives of children being risked for what appears to be a bucket of water -has been one long odyssey for Agastya. As David Kerr comments, "Sen undergoes a slow awakening from a life of self-centered sensuality into an awareness of human suffering and human responsibility." Nevertheless, the hope that this new awareness will at some time help him to succeed in his quest for identity is a reassuring thought.
As Milan Kundera comments in the course of an interview, "It is through action that man steps forth from the repetitive universe... It is through action that he distinguishes himself from others and becomes an individual."41 This comment can be applied to what happens to Agastaya. The fulfillment of the quest for identity for him is definitely not too far away.

The study of the theme of the search for identity attempted in this chapter thus constantly reinforces the transnational and cosmopolitan scope of the novel of the 80s. The protagonists are invariably presented as cultural travellers moving freely in a frontierless world. They have to forge their identities against the background of this new consciousness, coming to terms with the sheer expanse geographical, cultural, intellectual and psychological- which constitute the complex contemporary reality. The effect of this concern is seen in an exhilarating openness which clearly demarcates the novel of the 80s from its predecessors. The themes of the East-West encounter or the spiritual quest which were in the forefront in the earlier depictions now appear obsolete.

Another significant difference in the search is the refusal of the new novelists to consider retreat as a viable solution to the protagonist’s dilemma. Almost all the major earlier novels dealing with this theme R.K.Narayan’s The Guide, Raja Rao’s The Serpent and the Rope, Arun Joshi’s The Strange Case of Billy Biswas- take recourse to withdrawl from
the world around them. Such a solution appears simplistic almost escapist in contrast to the new protagonist's determination to grapple with the reality, however confusing or problematic. The world in which the protagonists have to realise their identities is dynamic, constantly in motion unlike the comparatively static world of the past. The solution in the new novels is in terms of looking ahead or moving forward rather than withdrawal or retreat. While protagonists in the earlier novels increasingly disassociated themselves from the world around them, their counterparts in the new novel conversely move towards an increasing association and communication. From the midnight children's conference to Picture Singh Saleem's life has been one long endeavor to forge links with his fellow human beings. Although Omar Khayyam Shakil in *Shame* begins with a self-centered approach to living, his search for identity turns positive with his association with Sufiya Zenobia. Alu'a Quest in *The Circle of Reason* is series of associations starting in Lalpukur in Bengal moving through al-Ghazira and culminating in El Oued. The unnamed narrator similarly finds himself in a chain of associations which take him from Calcutta to London. Agastaya Sen in *English, August*, too realises that disassociation from his surroundings cannot provide peace of mind. Meaning in life can only be found through positive action and interaction with others as he realises through his experiences in a remote tribal village.
A realisation of this importance of association, communication and positive action leads to the most significant factor of the search for identity in the novel of the 80s, its emphasis on the basic element, human compassion and fellow feeling. The technical virtuosity of these novels often results in an over emphasis on the stylistic pyrotechnics. A sensitive reading of the texts however elicits the contrast between the glossiness of technique and the simplicity of the ultimate message. In spite of the search for identity taking the protagonists through various continents, countries and cultures, the solution is startlingly simple. Paradoxically, it is practical and realistic, drawing attention to a basic element of human existence. The search for identity in the protagonists is ultimately linked with a discovery of compassion within themselves and others. The crux of a truly cosmopolitan culture revolves on this pivot of fellow feeling, binding disparate worlds together.

This perception can help us to view the novel of the 80s from a hitherto unexplored angle. A mere geographical or intellectual expansion of the world cannot create an authentic cosmopolitan consciousness, we need to erase the 'Shadow lines' in our minds.
NOTES


Northern Book Center, 1990) 167.


32. Kapadia, 203.


35. Sinha, 181.


