Obliteration of Binaries in The Circle Of Reason

Amitav Ghosh’s concerns are with the marginalized, the colonialized, the oppressed, the displaced, the rootless, the migrated, and with human development. Through his writings, he tries to bring in the South Asian communities to the centre and wants to make the world aware of their strong presence. This is done by techniques of deconstruction. The traces of deconstruction in his fiction can be traced from his extensive use of magic realism, multiple meaning, relative truth, binarism, intertextuality, histriographic metafiction, indeterminacy and hybridity. Deconstruction is a way of reading a text and the emphasis in this critical method is never to learn the intended meaning of the author but rather the subjective interpretations of the readers. As already mentioned in the introduction, the nature of deconstruction is subversive as it undermines the traditional valorization of one of the two entities of binary antithesis like conformity / nonconformity, solemnity / humour, order / disorder, perfection / defection, presence / absence, emplacement / displacement, finality (consummation) / irresolution, concord / discord, literal / metaphorical, and serious / playful.

Amitav Ghosh’s novels always take the readers on their subjective flight of understanding and meaning without labelling the texts with a predetermined motive of the novelist. He always sets his readers free to interpret his novels liberally and unreservedly through the distinctive features of deconstruction such as the endless play in language and literary texts, the unreliability of any meaning, the openness of texts, instability of language, the indefinite end and the intrinsic relationships between words, meanings and texts. One can trace the above mentioned nature of deconstruction in his The Circle of Reason through the subversion of myriad binaries.

His fiction strongly rejects boundaries and binaries of systems of thoughts. Critics have high regard for The Circle of Reason. Prof. Shubha Tiwari opines, “The book itself is sort of a paradox. It exudes restlessness with extreme control and poise. The new thrust and lift that came to Indian English fiction during late eighties and early nineties is partly due to this path breaking work. It internationalized our fiction. It brought a refreshing ‘contemporaneity.’ It is daring in its experimentation with the form, content and language of the novel.”
Amitav Ghosh’s major novels mark the origin of non-linearity with Indian puranic examples of storytelling to modern hypertext analysis of text. He puts folk and puranic literature of Asia into focus of his literary world. His range of stories is like Panchatantra or Thousands and One Night. The Circle of Reason records the physical and ideological journey of Alu who mostly remains a silent pivot in the novel around which all discursive threads revolve. Through this revolution, the novelist is able to produce generic fusion with features of the picaresque novel, magic realism, the novel of Ideas, the detective novel and Hindu epic.

Amitav Ghosh began his career with The Circle of Reason by deconstructing the binary constructions in the Western-originated ideology such as science and religion, purity and impurity, body and soul, East and West, ideal and practical, automatized form of perception, reason, passion, technology, logic and madness. The deconstructive analysis of the novel challenges the systems of thoughts that are based on binary discourse, which relies on any one entity of the dichotomies. The arguments presented in this chapter illustrate how binary discourse creates a privileged position for only one element in the binary. The dominance of binary structures is disproved as a misleading notion which fixes boundaries, which in turn, restrain the expansion and growth of the Other/ignored/neglected element of the binary.

Consequently, Amitav Ghosh moves towards the making of new connections transcending the barriers of hitherto acknowledged binaries. The novel also points towards the lessening of philosophical and theoretical binarisms. It makes use of “the lexicons of both liberal humanism and poststructuralism,” (Dixon 16) brilliantly transcending the border between these two approaches that have traditionally been realized as opposite. Interestingly, the novel appears to be reaching towards “a syncretism that is an anti-humanist, postmodern recognition of difference and is also at the same time a humanist secular ideal” (Mondal, “Allegories of identity: ‘Postmodern’ anxiety and ‘postcolonial’ ambivalence” 30). This, the end seems to lead to the deconstruction of the binary of ethics and politics, or universality and difference. The unforeseen connections and representations in the novel lend a new form of deconstruction.

Through his focal characters like Balram and Alu, Amitav Ghosh persuasively presents his world of perception which focuses the large head of Alu who seems to
represent the unappropriated mind of modern mechanical beings. The novel begins with a very crucial statement, “The boy had no sooner arrived, people said afterwards, than Balaram had run into the house to look for the Claws” (1). Alu, Balaram and Claws are very significant to the understanding of the novel. Balaram is the most obsessed character of the novel. Claws work as metaphor implying the mechanical tool referring to the technological development of modern age. The narrator informs the reader:

The villagers through long familiarity knew it to be harmless; but still they also knew it was little less terrifying when seen for the first time. It was a kind of instrument, with three arms of finely planned and polished wood, each tapering to a sharp point... Balaram had designed it himself, soon after he discovered Phrenology... Only, at first sight, it looked as though it had been specially designed for gouging out eyes. (4)

It is made clear that the claws has horrible structure and terrifying effect on others. Balaram’s obsession suggests that when people are over obsessed with knowledge or ideas of modern age, they are insignificant beings who depend on either ideas or scientific knowledge or try to possess an unusual instrument which cause their tragic suffering and death. Such people who are obsessed with one thing or the other have to face catastrophic situation(s) as also shown in the case of Balaram’s end. Such people fail to comprehend their life and the world they live in.

The novel can be seen as a deliberation on the concept of purity. The idea of purity in Western rationalist ideology of binary constructions is crucially linked with the idea of pure origin and unique essences. This idea implies that the individuals are essentially separate and unique from one another. Each individual possesses certain features whose opposites are to be found in the other individuals. Thus, the individuals are regarded as “pure” who are free of the traits obvious in the other individuals. This is the usual way of forming binary constructions. The novel hints at deconstruction of these binaries.

The theme of purity moves through all three parts of the novel. The first part, “Reason” records Balaram’s quest for purity on a scientific and practical level as he attempts to disinfect the village of Lalpukur with carbolic acid. He aims at destroying
the germs brought in by freshly arrived refugees. This concept of purity is also deconstructed through the comical student organization called the rationalists, who blend ideas from the Hindu religion with Western natural science (“the Brahma is nothing but the Atom”(47)) and launch a campaign against a dirty underwear. Another important thread is the suspicious science of phrenology, which defies the purity of the mainstream natural sciences in treating both the inside and outside, the mind and the body of human beings.

Reason is perceived differently by different characters. In the first part of the novel, Alu (because of Balaram’s decision) learns various languages and becomes apprentice weaver. Balaram, a village school teacher, is devoted to a transnational or supernational idea of reason and science. The novelist takes keen interest in portraying this character with minutest detail in the first section of the novel. Balaram is a dedicated practitioner of phrenology, which he considers as a way of coalescing the outside and the inside, body and soul of human beings. The work of Louis Pasteur, *Life of Pasteur*, motivates him and later on he launches a campaign against germs and superstition in the village to win the simple villagers with his idiosyncratic vision of reason and sciences.

In the second part, Alu, miraculously ends his distinctive silence and continues the thematic preaching of reason by forming “a mock-socialist group” of the inhabitants of the Souq, an ancient multicultural trading area in Al-Ghazira to eliminate germs and the personal ownership of money. In the third part, Balaram’s copy of *Life of Pasteur* which is the unique motivation for purity and reason in the novel, is cremated with Kulfi’s dead body. This scene of the novel is very significant which puts forth the need of the adaptation of the ancient rituals to the demands of the practical present. I shall come to the detailed discussion of this point later in the chapter.

The second part, “Passion”, is packed with ideological purity signified by the money and private ownership which is regarded impure. It is shown through the mock socialist uprising. The third part, “Death” attempts a ritual purification of a dead body. It also describes the merging of all thematic binaries of the narrative: tradition vs. modernity, East vs. west and religion vs. science. The modified version of Tagore’s play, *Chitrangada* plays a very vital role. It enacts as a cultural symbol of India before
Algerian people. Yumna Siddiqui opines this “exalted representation of Indian culture is undercut by the circumstances in which the performance is cobbled together” (198). Kulfi is herself an absurd misrepresentation of the character of Chitrangada. In the play, Chitrangada in the beginning charms Arjuna with fake beauty (that she miraculously got for one year) but she bears high moral character and wins him ultimately with her inner worth. Kulfi who plays her role, was forced to work as a prostitute by her husband in the past, puts efforts to lure Das with her deliberate erotic charm.

The last section of the novel presents the clash between traditional rules and rituals on the one hand and the claims of the realistic present on the other as is presented through the burial of Kulfi’s dead body with carbolic acid treated as holy water. Interestingly, the collision is not only between science and religion as systems but there is a distinctive disparity between science and religion as collections of rules and rituals to be read from books and their application on the alarming requirements of the immediate and urgent practical present. The novel poses this situation where the reader is made to think about the need to modify and unite elements of religion and science which can be further useful to apply them to the real needs of human beings in their particular circumstances.

The third part is insightful because it also highlights a significant truth that life would be impossible without germs. This insight comes from the same book that has prompted all the earlier quests for purity in the novel, Rene Vallery-Radot’s Life of Pasteur. This book seems to reflect Western rationalism and reason which in the novel are symbolized by the concept of purity. Significantly, the circle of reason is completed now. It has destroyed itself in deconstructing one of the premises of Western modernity that started it. The entities of binary constructions are not uniquely distinct but rather interconnected as they can not exist without one another.

Another binary subverted in the third part of the novel is that of the mind and the body. As mentioned earlier, this issue is already focused in the first part of the novel where Balaram complains, “what’s wrong with all those scientists and their sciences is that there is no connection between the outside and the inside, between what people think and how they are” (17). He defends his interest in phrenology by saying that “in this science the inside and the outside, the mind and the body,
are one”(17). Phrenology gives importance to the shape of a person’s head that indicates his/her character. One can examine the mind by examining the body. This remark on the perhaps artificial separation of various branches of science, either body or soul, into unique, different fields is again touched upon in the last part of the novel, where Mrs Verma, a microbiologist, reflects upon the origin of the microbes she examines in her work. She first compares a microbiologist and a car mechanic, then bacteria and rust and “grime or dust somewhere in the machinery” (412). She then associates the body with a machine and states that “at least the surgeon sees the whole machine, even though it’s all shrouded and chloroformed, face covered and weeping mothers hidden away, every trace of its humanity blanketed” (412). This crucial sentence fuses natural science focusing body (surgeon, machine, chloroform) and human sentiments signifying mind (weeping mothers, blanketed humanity). It foresees the next step in Mrs Verma’s reflections:

And when you find something in a specimen can you really help wondering sometimes where all those microbes and bacteria and viruses come from? Whether they can really, all of them, be wholly external to our minds?"

And just as you let yourself wonder whether sometimes they are anything other than a bodily metaphor for human pain and unhappiness and perhaps joy as well you cut yourself short, for it draws on you yet again that ever since Pasteur that is one question you can never ask. (412)

She concludes by observing that the “tyranny of your despotic science” forbids the doctor in a general practice from telling some of the people who come there to complain about their bodily pains that “there’s nothing wrong with your body- all you have to do to cure yourself is try to be a better human being”(413). Thus, the novel broadens the problematic mind-body relations into the problematic relationship between natural sciences and humanist ethics. Alu’s boils and withered thumbs can be seen as another instance of the association between the mind and the body. The withered thumbs and the fact that they heal gradually with the disappearance of the various dichotomies towards the end of the novel indicate that there is a clear connection between the body and the mind. If this connection is
broken, both will become “withered.” Further to say, this “tyranny” of science is the result of the idea of purity, of distinct sciences that construct the world according to certain premises and that therefore cannot see anything these premises will not allow them to see.

The method of cremation of Kulfi’s dead body ignites the flame of dispute between Mrs Verma and Dr Mishra. Dr. Mishra argues that the officials will not allow for cremation and the situation does not meet the requirements being set for proper cremation by the old scriptures. The victim is not suitable and they lack the necessary accessories for cremation. Dr. Mishra stands for the purity and determination to hold on the percepts of Hindu religion to prove that they can not move on with the burial. He advocates the rules of the cremation set by ancient religious doctrines of the “scriptural times” (407). Amitav Ghosh also makes valuable statements on the self-centered intention of Hindu priests who try to mould the ancient scriptures according to their profits.

it was certain that the pandits and Brahmins had distorted the ancient Hindu idea of God, the Brahma, into their thousands of deities and idols, so that they could make money quicker...As for the real Brahma, he was without attributes, without form, nothing but an essence, in everything and in nothing. (47)

The comic tone of the novel, well meaning and full of positive energy of Balaram in the first part, takes on a dark and cynical nature with Dr Mishra’s ironical comments in the third part. The inclination of Balaram towards the betterment of his village, makes him see Budheb Roy as his adversary and their conflict is shown to arouse humour because of their obsession towards their own ideologies. In the later part of the novel, another conflict is made visible through the arguments of Mrs. Verma and Dr. Mishra.

Mrs Verma is ready to modify the ritual to overcome the constrictions caused by the situation as she uses ordinary wood, carbolic acid and butter instead of sandal wood, ganga jal and ghee respectively. The use of carbolic acid beautifully coalesce the cleaning “rituals” of ancient religion (holy water) and modern science (carbolic acid). When Dr. Mishra complains that there are certain rules that have to be followed, Mrs. Verma answers, “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” (409).

Consequently, the modified version of ancient Hindu burial takes place, inspite of Dr. Mishra’s arguments. Mrs. Verma has a pragmatic thought to abandon rules and purity by arranging for Kulfi’s cremation for the fact that they are Indian migrants living on the edge of the Algerian Sahara in Africa. She also justifies her action by telling Dr. Mishra, “Nothing’s whole any more. If we wait for everything to be right again, we’ll wait for ever while the world falls apart. The only hope is to make do with what we’ve got” (417).

The Hindu religion is here seen quite as pure, distinct and rule bound as Western Science. There is a dire need to abandon the old rules and rituals, the concepts of wholeness and purity in modern migrant world of strange and sudden connections and situations. That is why *Life of Pasteur* is burned along with Kulfi’s body. Both Mrs. Verma and Alu have understood that in the modern world, the message of this book - concerning the defence of mankind against the germs, the infinitesimally small and by a clear analogy against the subaltern and the Other- is no longer valid and applicable.

The novel significantly opens new avenues of thought for the readers by pointing towards the fact that the various purities, considered as nations or people either in East or West, modes of knowledge (sciences and religions), have to be free to new influences and open to interaction. Thus, the final scenes in El Oued are very solemnly enlightening. They preach humility; favoring the migrant's adaptive “making do” and “being human” over the purist strictures of science and religious tradition.

To further the argument, another vital issue of tripartite narrative structure of the novel can now be touched upon. The thematic contents introduced above are meticulously woven into the narrative structure. D.A. Shankar opines that the tripartite structure is reminiscent of Indian philosophy and the three qualities that make individuals what they are: *Tamas, Rajas* and *Satwik* form the order of the soul’s upward evolution (583). This is the reason the novel can be seen as a picaresque *Bildungsroman*, with different stages of Alu’s journey through out the novel.
However, in the novel, the order of the stages is reversed: Satwik: Reason, Rajas: Passion; and Tamas: Death.

However, if one follows the original order of the stages from the philosophical tradition and re-look at the first part of the novel under the title of Death, one notices that the death of Balaram and others in the explosion in Lalpukur actually begins Alu’s journey, both physically and mentally. Death is considered not only end but also the beginning. And if one examines last part as Reason, one can conclude that the revelation that comes after the dismantling of the notions of purity, wholeness, distinct essences and binary constructions actually brings reason with it. Noticeably, this reason is very different from, indeed almost the opposite of the one based on the ideology of Western modernity.

If one follows the order given in the novel, it is easy to see that the obsession of Balaram and other educated middle Indians with Western originated science and rationality fits in quite well with the title “Reason” of the first part. “Death” as the third section refers both to the death of Kulfi and the death of the idea of wholeness and purity as the goal of and basis for human existence and endeavours. The first part of the novel can also be seen as a metaphor for the educated Westernised middle-class Indian babus who form part of set characters and who are totally absorbed in the achievements of Western natural science (Balaram) and literature (Gopal).

In the same vein, the second part “Passion” foregrounds the uneducated illiterate lower classes of Souq with their interests in daily survival and story-telling. It is very important to see a certain contradiction beautifully presented in the novel. Balaram’s undertakings in the first part of the novel are more passionate than those of the residents of the Souq, who definitely possess more practical wisdom than Balaram. Critics have seen the death in the last part of the novel as the symbolic birth of Jyoti Das, Alu and Zindi who set on their journeys to Europe and India after dismantling of the modernist binaries through the symbolic combining of purity and impurity and the burning of Life of Pasteur. Thus, this tripartite structure of the novel obviously is suggestive of the deconstruction of the notions of distinct pure essences.

In the narrative, weaving is an important metaphor connecting all parts of the novel. It is the symbol of interaction and medium of translating human emotions. Balaram hails from Dhaka, the capital of former East Bengal and settles in Lalpukar.
an imaginary village in Calcutta. A riot which breaks out in Dhaka forces him to leave
the place and he reaches Calcutta where he decides to stay for the rest of his life and
he joins the Presidency College there. Balaram’s nephew, Alu and his family
immigrate to India after East Bengal became East Pakistan. He comes to live with his
uncle in Lalpukar when his parents were killed in a car accident. After learning
weaving from Lalpukar, he leaves the place to travel across the Indian Ocean to the
oil town of al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf where he resumes weaving which shows
that loom recognizes no countries and continents. It has tied the world together. It has
been instrumental in making the new worlds by connecting places, languages and
discourses.

Balaram supports this argument when he says, “Man at the loom is [...] a
creature who makes his own world like no other can, with his mind.” Interestingly,
although each weaver creates his/her own world (pattern), weaving ‘has created not
separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of world. [...] It has
never permitted the division of reason” (55). According to Balaram, “Weaving is
Reason, which makes the world mad and makes it human” (58). He views reason as
action. It becomes the medium to produce one’s own discursive truth by
interconnecting, or weaving various discursive threads into their own personal fabric,
instead of following the universalized discursive wholeness of scientific reason.

The novel is, then, a polyphonic and carnivalesque celebration of stories and
narration. The novelist has connected weaving with narration. He has beautifully
woven the stories together on the outsized loom of the reason and passion with
perspicuous and deft techniques and patterns of the intricate buti work of the
narration. The stories have same rhythm, throbbing and tinkling as that of the
“rhythmic clatter of fly-shuttles and the tinkling of needle-weights hanging on
Jacquard looms” (67). The words and narration of the novelist produce narratives that
connect different times, places and ideologies.

In the beginning of learning the art of weaving, Alu’s teacher Shombu
Debnath, does not allow him the access to the loom before he (Alu) knows what it is:
“The machine, like man, is captive to language” (73). Alu has to learn the names of
the different parts of the loom in several languages: “So many names, so many words,
words beaten together in the churning that created the world: Tangail words, stewed
with Noakhali words, salted with Naboganj words, boiled up with English” (73). The narrator foregrounds the complexities involved in naming words in weaving machine. He wonder, “Why so many words? They serve no mechanical purpose and do not seem to provide any help in the practical purpose of weaving.” He, then observes that words are important “because the weaver, in making cloth, makes words, too, and trespassing on the territory of the poets gives names to things the eye can’t see. That is why the loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world’s armies of pen-weilders.” Although the machinery has changed through time, those changes have been only mechanical; “the essence of cloth-locking yarns together by crossing them- has not changed since prehistory” (74).

The comparison of writing or narrating a story to weaving is obvious. The devices, writing machines and presses, even languages, have changed, but the fundamental nature of story telling has not changed. People are still “spinning a yarn.” Weaving and narration are also both actions. Consequently, in the beginning of the novel, the silent and passive Alu gradually becomes more active and talkative after the beginning of the weaving lessons. He is, therefore, transformed from being a submissive receiver of book learning into an active producer with a voice of his own.

In the first part of the novel, Amitav Ghosh also demonstrates the history of weaving to create a counter-narrative to the Western history of scientific and technological development, expansion and industrialization by staging the loom as the agent of every new step in the grand narrative of modernization. He concludes his demonstration as follows:

Once again the loom reaches through the centuries and across continents to decide the fate of mechanical man.

Who knows what new horrors lie in store?

It is a gory history in parts; a story of greed and destruction. Every scrap of cloth is stained by a bloody past. But it is the only history we have and history is hope as well as despair.

And so weaving, too, is hope; a living belief that having once made the world one and blessed it with its diversity it must do so again. Weaving is hope because it has not country, no continent. (57-8)
Story-telling is strongly articulated in the novel through a diverse group of characters hailing from different social and cultural backgrounds. Amitav Ghosh’s fluency in English is never a barrier in his description of the lower classes of society who are shown speaking in a language they do not know at all. The novelist avoids appropriation and tries to give these people agency and their own point of view by foregrounding their role as narrators of their own stories. Significantly, in the first part of the novel, the narration is done through the omniscient narrator.

The narrators in Amitav Ghosh’s novels are often from the middle or upper middle class of Indian society. Here also, in the first part, the narrator assumes a common discourse with Balaram, a university educated and socially respected than the illiterate villagers. But the second part of the novel which veers around the lower classes, has parts of it narrated as oral stories by the characters in the novel. These include Zindi’s story about the misfortunes that have fallen on her house (201-12), Abu Fahl’s story of the trip to the ruins of The Star to rescue Alu (229-34), Hajj Fahmy’s story of the coming of the oilmen(245-64) and Jeevanbhai Patel’s story telling of Alu’s return(274-84) The narrator moves backstage and these voices move towards the front by becoming more distinct and pronounced.

Every story has its own form and manner. Zindi’s story proceeds like a ghost story with its ominous magic incidents, Hajj Fahmy’s story is like a morality/or a didactic story with every part of it giving some lesson. The stories by Abu Fahl and Patel are narrated in the first person, while those by Zindi and Hajj Fahmy do not contain first person pronouns in spite of being narrated personally and in the form of oral stories. John Thieme regards the magic-realistic, or supernatural, features and events in the novel are largely due to gossip, or “oral folk imagination” (Thieme 255).

Magic realism is employed to foreground Alu’s rescue by two old machines. It hints at the emotional surge leading to the final transformation of Alu with ideas and articulative voice. The novel presents the stories told by the characters along with the reality presented by the narrator. When Alu is buried alive in the collapse of the huge shopping centre, The Star, the readers are given three explanations of the fall. First, Abu Fahl states that it happened because the contractors mixed too much sand into the cement. Second, in her story Zindi considers it yet another incident in the chain of misfortunes that has befallen her house. Finally, Hajj Fahmy constructs a long story...
describing the coming of the oilmen and the western capital which had been used to build The Star. He believes that the building has fallen because nobody wants it; it is only a whim of capital.

This layered narration of oilmen’s account reminds us of one of the strategies for the ethnography introduced by George E. Marcus:

In the framework of modernity, the character of stories people tell as myth in their everyday situations is not as important to fieldworkers tracking processes and associations within the world system as is their own situated sense of social landscapes. Reading for the plot and then testing this against the reality of ethnographic investigation that constructs its sites to a compelling narrative is an interesting, virtually untried mode of constructing multi-sited research. (93)

The above reference brings forth the differences between ethnography as a science and Amitav Ghosh’s works of fiction. Amitav Ghosh is both the creator and the researcher of his fictional worlds. In his worlds, stories are an important part of the social and cultural landscapes. By giving space and freedom to stories rising from various social circumstances, he actually places his narrator in those landscapes. His narrator studies the social background and practices in the novel as straight forward objects of description and the characters become subjects through their stories narrated through distinctive discourses.

The novel also underscores the importance of narration and the power of language to signify and to create alternative realities. As mentioned earlier in the discussion, the symbol of weaving is employed to create a counter narrative to the western history of scientific development and industrialization by staging the loom as an agent of every new step in the grand narrative of modernization. But Balaram’s statement that weaving has “made the world one and blessed it with its diversity” (57-8) also hints at a narrative strategy which creates connections with the Other while retaining the differences. This is shown through the interrelationship of different characters with distinct voice and agency of their own without appropriating them into any one discourse.
Amitav Ghosh acknowledges that the world is a narrative and discursive social construction where knowledge is produced discursively by those versed in the hegemonic language/discourse. In addition to this, he attempts to construct instances of communication which transcend the claim to knowledge requiring a specific language. As already stated in the study, weaving is also a kind of metaphor for translating human emotions and feelings. It is shown when Alu speaks to a crowd of people in "turmoil of languages":

It was like a question, though he was not asking anything, bearing down on you from every side. And in that whole huge crowd nobody stirred or spoke. You could see that silently they were answering him, matching him with something of their own. [...] tongues unraveled and woven together- nonsense, you say, tongues unraveled are nothing but nonsense- but there again you have a mystery, for everyone understood him perfectly [...] they understood him, for his voice was only the question; the answers were their own. (279)

Alu understands the loom and the art of weaving which have broadened his horizon. His mixture of languages does not promote any particular ideology or claim to power. This linguistic blend does not provide a definitive answer but it constitutes only a question, to which everyone can have his/her own response. Therefore, it addresses everyone, irrespective of class or language, without treating them as a homogeneous group. All this can be seen as a step towards a longing for a world before the separation of languages. It also emerges as a sketch of an aspect of reality where the differences among people or nations can be communicable without losing the distinctive features of these people. Huttunen aptly calls Alu’s use of linguistic blend as a symbol of equality: “His mixture of languages treats everyone as an equal” (The Ethics of Representation 303).

Such effort for communication enabling everyone engaged in it to have their own answers to Alu’s linguistic blend of a question, is very close to the theories of the ethical by Emmanuel Levinas (as stated in Totality and Infinity). In his view, knowledge is discursive and appropriates as well as changes the target of knowing. Levinas’ philosophy criticizes the Western ontological assumptions. In his view, the Other excludes the cognitive powers of the knowing subject. For him, the Other exists
outside the ontology of western philosophy, which conceives of all being as objects that can be internalized by consciousness or grasped through an adequate representation.

Consequently, the Other cannot be described in discourse, but is transcendental. The self can only know things by projecting on the Other (through language) what it already contains in itself. But here in this particular scene of the novel, there is no pure understandable or knowledgeable language for any person in this motley crowd. It is a discourse without will or capacity to create knowledge. It is a discourse retaining the alterity and independence of the person(s) it is directed to. Significantly, the crowd answers Alu through silence. Alu’s merging of languages is, then equivalent of silence as an act or a voice. It does not attempt to know or define anything through linguistically recognizable discourse. Thus, the communicative relationship maintains both the diversity of the group and its wholeness and secures the agency and independence of each of its participants.

Alu’s speech represents the way of approaching and searching of the Other in the form of a question. The Other or the one observed cannot be known because this would bring him/her within the realm of discourse, or knowledge production strategy, of the observer. The function of the question as approaching the Other is of much more importance than the answer. Interestingly, the observer and the observed are in contact simultaneously. They are both active participants in this communicative act with agency or voice, be that voice of silence or an indecipherable mixture of languages.

There is a remarkable transformation from Alu’s silence to the fusion of languages. Both strategies have a kind of communicative power. Alu’s speech has a transformative effect on the people of Ras who agree to follow his ideas and passionately involve in his movement of cleanliness by launching a drive against the evil of money. The way they are shown to conform to the reason stated by an individual and earn the rage of the state through their nonconformity reflects the image of contemporary situation where the people of some countries donot conform to the rules and principles of their nations and involve in illegal activities such as stikes, processions and demonstrations. Although, in the novel, the movement of the
people of Ras is badly curbed, yet there is a discernible portrayal of the sense of struggle of the migrated people with their spirited voices.

Thus, through oral stories narrated by different characters in the novel, Amitav Ghosh represents the world as socially constructed and creates discursive realities to examine the movements of power. He is also trying to find a way of escaping the realm of discourse controlled by the hegemonic Western mode of knowledge production and its ways of narrating the world. He seems to think that the only way for completely getting around this powerful way of knowing is by hinting at transcendent realities that can not be accessed through a certain language and discourse, as in the case of Alu’s linguistic mixture.

Another binary construction that has been subverted is the age-old personal and political or ethics and morality. The terms “ethics” and “politics” have always been considered opponents and used against each other. Traditionally, ethics has been regarded as directing the personal choices of the individual and as a moral code superimposed on him/her by the society. Levinas regards ethical norms as the basic guiding principles for action in society. In a just society, there has to be an ethically conceived basis for relationships between people. This basis could not state any rules or ways of action for the society but it can be crucial in initiating the moral and the political order. There has always been a conflict between the theories of the ethical and the more aware quarters of the political dimension of society. Amitav Ghosh seems to search narrative strategies to create balance between the two.

The transcendence of culturally constructed differences, lines and borders in order to have a genuine human interaction has always been central to the writings of Amitav Ghosh and it is prominent in the present novel also. These differences may be visualized spatially, temporally or culturally, and they may be related to class, race or ethnicity but the striking feature of Amitav Ghosh’s fiction is the possibilities of interaction, communication and translating human emotions, thereby constructing a new world. To achieve this end, both poststructuralist and postcolonialist deconstruction of discursive realities and an approach for creating connections with the Other are required.

The Subaltern Studies group can be referred here to make this point more clear. This group was formed in the 1980s to formulate a new narrative of the history
of India and South Asia. The narrative strategy of the group inspired by Antonio Gramsci, was explained by the founder of the group, Ranajit Guha. The group is critical of the traditional Marxist narrative of Indian history, in which semi-feudal India was colonized and politically controlled by the British and then gained its independence. They criticize the focus in this narrative on the political consciousness of elites, who supposedly inspired the masses for struggle, rebellion and revolution against the British. Instead they focus on the subalterns as agents of political and social change. They show their keen interest in the discourses of emerging political and social movements, thereby directing the focus away from visible actions like demonstrations and uprisings.

Amitav Ghosh’s PhD in social anthropology and his old association with many scholars of the group and his published work in its series, *The Subaltern Studies* make it relevant to examine his writing in the context of the group. In the late 1980s Gayatri Spivak published an essay containing both positive and negative critique of the group’s undertakings. She opines that the highly politicized, collectively produced studies were lacking in theoretical insight. R. Radhakrishnan gives outline of her politics:

> to be part of the subaltern solidarity and read subalternity against the grain, engage in hegemonic representational practices in the interests of political scrupulosity and undertake a radical and indeterminate deconstruction of representation as such; rigorously mark out the historical terrain of subalternity for all to see and realize subalternity as the allegorical vanishing point of representation as such. (115-116)

Spivak’s strategy is in vein of Derridean deconstruction. Each of the three “contradictory” pairs above is an example of the coming together of ethics and politics. Today, people need this sort of ambivalent approach to secure the subaltern its voice, agency and position of subject in the wilderness of hegemonic discourses and enabling its representation in connection with others without denying it these qualities. Significantly, deconstruction is here at work to create new connections. Spivak criticizes Foucauldian discursivity for ignoring the actual world and the Subaltern Studies group for over emphasizing politics for concentrating on the world too much. In a way, she links these approaches as “poststructuralism is lacking in
macro-political density, whereas an exclusively politically oriented subalternity fails to address itself symptomatically” (Radhakrishnan, Theory in an Uneven World 157).

Spivak considers the group has failed to address itself in its search for the subaltern consciousness (the subaltern agent or subject) which seems to be made active and conscious and conceived as already there, ready and just waiting to be found. Spivak further states that subject can not be there, just waiting to be found “in a positive and pure state” (“Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” 198). One can trace this statement’s similarity with traditional essentialist self-determining subject. In the same vein of deconstruction, she also proposes the idea of a subaltern subject as a kind of subject-effect, an affected subject, caused by crossing discursive strands, the knots and configurations of which form an effect of an operating subject. She says:

Reading the work of Subaltern Studies against the grain, I would suggest that elements in their text would warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historical metalepsis and ‘situate’ the effect of the subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a strategic use of positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest. (“Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” 205)

In the novel, Balaram’s subjective attitude towards science and life, for instance, is presented as the meeting point of Western scientific discourse and local influences. In this context, he emerges out as a poststructuralist and discursively constructed subject who is only a loop in a cosmos of discourses. Amitav Ghosh places him in the specific historical circumstances and Balaram becomes absolutely corporeal. The poststructuralist subject-effect is strategically situated in a certain social-political context, which in a sense, essentializes it. This strategic essentialism means that people need to use certain aspects of the hegemonic discourse they are deconstructing just to make sense of the surrounding social and political situation. The subaltern and the marginalized have to be heard who have borne the burnt of oppression and silencing. They have contributed in various ways to the struggle against existing powers. Amitav Ghosh tries to acknowledge the subaltern for the struggle and also for their counter actions. At the same time, he also presents their muted and articulative struggle simmering side by side.
The narrative strategy of Amitav Ghosh can be seen as ambivalent in the same vein as Spivak’s theoretical strategy introduced above. The narration of the novel certainly comes through as a part of the subaltern commonality and cohesion. It simultaneously reads this subalternity against the grain. The subaltern realities in the novel are presented quite as constructed as are those of Western modernity. Both are discursive constructions that change through mutual influences. The novel also engages in hegemonic representational practices in the interest of political scrupulosity and undertakes a radical and indeterminate deconstruction of representation as such. Alu’s peculiar communication with the crowd surely provides an instance of the deconstruction of representation as such by transcending the idea of discourses based on a certain language and by staging silence as a form of communication in the encounter with the Other.

Deconstruction works both ways between the homogenic scientific discourse of modernity and the subaltern activity and discourse. The idea of pure essentialist binaries becomes gradually deconstructed, as becomes the idea of the purity of subaltern rituals and cultures. The narrative weaving of these two strings creates an ethical-political whole where deconstruction appears as an ethical practice used tactically to create connections. Similarly, the narrative marks out the historical topography of the subaltern and recognizes the subaltern as the allegorical vanishing point of representation as such. As Radhakrishnan explains:

There is no pure way back to the indigenous or the precolonial except through double consciousness. We have all been touched by the West. The important question is not about ontological purity, but about strategies of using the West against itself in conjunction with finding one’s own ‘voice.’ […] Spivak’s position is that ‘we are both where we are and what we think,’ and if in a sense, as a result of colonialism, ‘where we think’ is the West as well, it is quixotic to deny it. The way out is bricolage, transactional readings based on bilateralism, and multiple non-totalizable interruptions. (Theory in an Uneven World 157-158)

In the novel, for instance, through the denial of pure origins (the village of Lalpukur and the Souq) and the breaking of the inviolability of the old rules and
rituals, the ontological purity of the subaltern (as mentioned above) as a whole is deconstructed. However, this is an instance of affirmative deconstruction because the deconstructed entitities are not left adrift, but are tied to newly formed narrative routes that form new connections between people and ideologies. In the end, thus, no pure subalternity or Western discursive formation can be found in this “transactional bricolage” of narrative.

The novel also subverts the traditional belief of moving from one place to the other for settlement and better life opportunities in another geographical location as it records the life of migrants who are not even sure enough about the reason behind moving from one place to the other. It evidently proves that the environment of ambivalence pervades the whole novel from the beginning till the end. After Jyoti Das arrives in al-Ghazira, the narrator gives considerate remarks, “...foreign places are all alike in that they are not home. Nothing binds you there.” (266) Later, he comments, “...al-Ghazira wasn’t a real place at all, but a question: are foreign countries merely not home, or are they all that home is not?” (266)

Towards the end of the novel, Zindi expresses her fear of insecurity and bleak future, “I wondered what would happen to me if I died in a desert in a foreign land, without a house or friends to help me...I can’t go on any longer.” She then, like every human being, pins hope, “Boss and I are going back home. Boss is going to build me a house some day”(420). All these instances reflect the uncertainty and insecurity inherent in the lives of the migrated people.

The narration of the multi-layers of stories foregrounds the other aspects of the traumas of migration where the migrants cope with the new land forgetting their past and pinning hope of a promised future. This is made evident in chapter nine of the novel “Becalmed.” The people aboard Mariamma head towards al-Ghazira in the hope of a better and secure life. Karthamma tries to delay her own labour pains and even thinks of killing the child “while it’s still in her womb” (177) as she wants to have surety for her child to get a safe place and life in al-Ghazira after she signs some kind of forms. At another point of time, Zindi warns Alu about the tough life in the new land: “Don’t think you’ll find people pissing money there. There are hundreds, thousands of chhokren like you, begging; begging for jobs”(180). The narrator time and again reminds the reader about the increasing problems of migrancy, capitalism

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and monetary priorities of modern world. The novelist seems to foreground the spirit of the migrated people in tracing positive streaks in disorderliness and harsh realities of life witnessing joy by getting enriched through those experiences.

At the end of the part one of the novel, the narrator comments on the people migrating to al-Ghazira as “an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital” (189). Amitav Ghosh dismantles the illusory notion that a land of splendour and prosperity awaits for migrated people in an alien land. According to Fakrul Alam, al-Ghazira in the second section of the novel is the novelist’s metaphor for a permanently unsettled world in which the novelist portrays the exodus of thousands of men and women of Third World to the Middle East in search of an alternative viable future (139). The novelist presents the lost bargain that the lower and middle class people make by drawing themselves to the oil rich countries of al-Ghazira in search of prosperity and the stark reality is completely different. He himself supports this argument when he says:

This novel, The Circle of Reason, was the story of a journey, and its central section told the story of a group of immigrants – South Asian and Middle Eastern – living in a fictitious oil-rich sheikhdom in the Gulf. Looking back today, it strikes me that The Circle of Reason could, within the parameters that I have used here, be identified as an exodus novel, a story of migration in the classic sense of having its gaze turned firmly towards the future. The book ended with the words: ‘Hope is the beginning.’ (The Imam and the Indian 314).

In addition to the subversion of various types of binary dichotomies, subversion is also done at the level of characterization. Characters, here, are the novelist’s tactics to bring out the politics of subversion designed to deconstruct the privileged entities. The female characters are instrumental in articulating their insight and perception in the larger scheme of human assertion. Toru Debi, Maya, Zindi, Kulfi, Mrs Verma are all thinking beings who ignite their conscience with their individuality, determination and strength of mind to strengthen their agency of voice. Being entrapped in one complicated situation or the other, all of them have acute understanding of life and people around them. Some of them manage to get towards a better future after overcoming patriarchal and other economic, social and political
restrictions and obstacles. These women characters manifest a strong gender representation where they are seen as conscious beings having the sense of deliberation and awareness of the world around them.

Toru Debi, wife of Balaram, is sensitive towards her sewing machine because she has no child of her own. Sewing machine is another important metaphor that links all the parts of the novel. Towards the end of part one of the novel, Toru Debi has the fatal intuition from her sewing machine that it has ghost in it and the end of life is near. She asks Alu, with a voice full of trust, to throw the “dead” sewing machine into the pond and pleads him to “get me(her) another, Alu my bit of gold, won’t you?...]. A better one?” (148). This desire of Toru Debi motivates Alu to search better sewing machine in al-Ghazira. She does not like Balaram’s obsession for phrenology and his philosophical bent of mind, “If only you read a little less and knew the world a little more” (92). Her comment highlights her perceptive vision. This aspect of anxiety for her husband echoes that of Moyna for her husband Fokir’s interest in “gaan” than “gyan” in The Hungry Tide.

Maya, another dominant figure of the first part of the novel where Alu’s personality is submissive and silent, is comparatively more vocal and aware of the surroundings. When Balaram hands over the fee to her, she took the notes in her hands to tear and asserts before her father Shombhu who till then has not begun teaching Alu the art of weaving, “it’s stolen money...He’s [Balaram’s] paying you to teach him(Alu) weaving, and you’ve taught him nothing”(72). So much so, when Rakhal offers Alu that he will sell his clothes in Naboganj, it is Maya who replies on the behalf of Alu, “That’s fine [...] That’s settled, then” (77). Even the narrator describes her getting “already wise with poverty.” Her womanly courage and worldliness’ (69) make her stand apart and so she always manages to have her own way. Her low class birth does not detain her individuality and independence. When her father suddenly comes along with Parboti-Debi and their infant daughter, Maya assures him that she will take care of the child that night. She becomes so mature and strong; “strong enough to embrace every element of his (Shombhu’s) being with love and compassion...” (134).

Zindi, at-Tiffaha is introduced in the novel with the comic description of her massive physical formation as if “had somehow outgrown her extremeties”
and "great quivering breasts rested on her stomach and then ballooning over her massive hips to fall to the ground like a tent, over her feet" (172-173). Jeevanbhai Patel remarks her as "a woman large enough to fill a room" (276).

The core professionalism of Zindi for being a "madam" taking women "across the sea" (173) does not hold up her emotions for the girls, "The whole of al-Ghazira knows Zindi’s girls are reliable and hard-working; everyone comes to me and I say, Ya Shaikha, you know my girls, they have to get a little extra, and they say, Yes, yes, Zindi, they’ll get whatever you ask for. And so I get a little extra, too, not much. It’s not a business; it’s family, my aila, my own house, and I look after them, all the boys and girls, and no one’s unhappy and they all love me." (181)

Zindi is attentive in observing her surroundings and is adept in recounting every realistic and minutest detail in various stories. The narrator comments on the acute skill of her story telling:

They had lived through everything Zindi spoke of and had heard her talk of it time and again; yet it was only in her telling that it took shape; changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing, a block of time which was not hours or minutes or days, but something corporeal, with its own malevolent willfulness. That was Zindi’s power: she could bring together empty air and give it a body just by talking of it. (212-213)

Zindi is not all empowered, her helplessness is articulated through her desire to own a shop to secure safe future for herself and a shop can create work for the other people also. After the collapse of The Star which has given work to so many people, Zindi envisions to have possession of Jeevanbhai Patel’s shop named Durban Tailoring House with her own people working in it. But her dream is not so easy to achieve. Alu’s appeals not to get swayed by money are followed by the people of Ras and Karthamma takes away the money from Zindi’s old blue biscuit tin.

Zindi tries to make others understand the futility of getting overwhelmed with the passionate movement. She feels Alu’s campaign against the lust for money is a total whim of passion and is disappointed to see her people going against her. She asserts, “Sometimes broken bones and pain aren’t necessary to make things terrible; being a spectator is terror enough” (300).
Zindi is so conscious and alert that when Jeevanbhai asks her to give the details of all the happenings in Ras to Jyoti Das, she doubts it to be a police case. She has the acute sense to understand things better with her thought process. She refuses him, “You know that’s one thing I couldn’t do to them. Whatever happens in the future, in the past they all ate my bread and salt. They’ve become part of my flesh. You shouldn’t have said that…”(304).

Like a mother, she tries to protect them. She is at the same time seen in varying emotions: sometimes she bullies, uses rough tongue, cajoles, wheels and goes at far end to keep her family together and afloat. Although the house she inhabits with her people is because of their need and chance yet it proves to be matriarchally governed place with care and control balanced properly. When she comes to know about Jeevanbhai’s arrest and suicide, she hurries towards Hajj Fahmy’s house and requests him not to move on with their procession, “Don’t go today. Take my word for it[...] You’ll be taking my whole house with you and a woman can’t sit by and watch her children walking to their end…”(332)

However, Zindi is too defiant to succumb before others. When she agrees to come to Jeevanbhai’s shop envisioning the future possibility of possessing it, he shows his eagerness to know about her meeting with Jyoti Das. She asserts herself, “I’m not your bought slave like Forid Mian. So don’t give me orders. I’ll do what I want, and I’ll tell you when I want” (307). Jeevanbhai expresses his feelings for Zindi in drunkenness, “In my own way I’ve always loved you. as much as I can love, and with as much as I had to spare from my wife” (319). Zindi shows clear understanding of his love and remarks, “You’re like all men; what you loved was the reflection you saw of yourself in my eyes”(319).

Zindi is characterized as a human being with emotions and sensitive attitude towards other people inspite of her profession of a madam. Her love for life and liveliness is never crushed and she is always there to inspire others even in the time of difficulty. Her huge body is contrasted against her emotional vulnerability as she places much importance to the people living in her house.

Mrs Verma, an impartial and unbiased character is given the central voice in the last section of the novel. She is a microbiologist who has rational and practical attitude towards life. Through her portrayal, the novelist subverts the binary of
presence and absence. She is so close to her father and his lessons that she feels his presence even in his absence. Not only that, the readers never feel his absence in the beginning of this section when Mrs. Verma “could see him[…] his bespectacled eyes bright…, smiling, sucking his teeth, standing as though for a photograph…” (353). Her memories are so afresh that she is again and again reminded of her father, “there he was, in front of his bookcase again, smiling. She could see his smile clearer than ever now…” (354). Her intuition works actively which makes her think that Kulfi’s explanation to be in El Oued is all bogus and she states, “To me…it sounds rather as if you were running away from something” (362). Later on, she becomes doubtful about the behaviour of Kulfi, Alu and Zindi.

Amitav Ghosh has made strong gender representation in this novel also. Mrs. Verma is a fine illustration who is well informed about the social and political events. She is a thinking being with influential and articulative voice. She does not hesitate in making blunt statements and like an adept orator, she knows what to speak, when to speak and most important how to speak. During her discussions with Dr Mishra, she puts across her views and opinions. When he deliberately states a negative view of “a more realistic picture of our culture” by illustrating from “fancily dressed-up brides…doused with kerosene…roasted alive…rich landlords massacre Untouchables…how Muslims are regularly chopped into little bits by Hindu Fanatics…colour pictures of police atrocities?” (379-380) Mrs Verma retorts by recalling the second socialist conference in Meerut in 1936 about which her father had informed her:

…in the villages we talked of socialism as hope…You laughed and said: Comrades, leave for villages for a while; peasants can’t lead peasants…Who fell over themselves in their hurry to join the Congress in 1947 so that they wouldn’t have to waste any time in getting their fingers into all that newly independent money? Who broke the Praja Socialist Party when the real socialists were away, struggling in their villages?…We know your kind inside and outside, through and through:we’ve heard your sugary speeches and we’ve seen the snakes hidden up your sleeves…we’ve heard you spouting about the Misery of the Masses while your fingers dig into their pockets…So please don’t give me any clever lectures about India and Indian society, Dr Murali Charan Mishra, for my father gave me the measure of your kind when I was still a schoolgirl. (380-381)
She is not a mere observer or an object but she participates in discussions and debates. She ponders over the ways of making the most of the life. Her desire to do something different and try something new is clear from her choice of enactment of the play Chitrangada at hospital’s get together where she wants to show to “rational and scientifically trained people” that “some of us(Indians) at least are in the modern mainstream”(381). She accepts Dr Mishra’s challenge to manage the performance of the play otherwise she has to apologize before him in public.

She is responsible enough to give a clean burial to the dead body of Kulfi because she dies in her own house. She can not let the authorities to take the dead body and dispose it brutally and unemotionally. When she gives water to Alu to “wet her (Kulfi’s) lips,”(401) Dr Mishra again argues with her that it is “not Ganga-jal. You can’t give it to her” (402). He further says that “as a rational, educated woman” how can she advocate “that a bit of dirty water from a muddy river can actually do them any good when they’re already dead”(402). Mrs. Verma believes that the foremost significant thing is human existence. One should believe in dignity of human beings. She firmly articulates, “We can only do what we think is right” (402). But Dr Mishra keeps on giving her reminders that there “are certain rules” which are above human existence and its dignity.

It is due to Mrs Verma that Kulfi gets a proper funeral defying rational skepticism. As a true human, Uma Verma feels that “we shall have to cremate her ourselves…” But Dr Mishra continues playing the same harp, “There’s a proper procedure for these things” (405). Dr Mishra represents all the fanatic Hindu beliefs that put procedures and rules for certain situations and occasions. He refers to Baudhayana Dharmasutra in which it is said that one who dies accidently is not entitled to a proper funeral and “can’t enter Pitrloka”(407). He further takes recourse to Smritis which state that if a person “makes a gift of a cow to Brahmin before dying,” he/she will never “be stuck on the banks of the Vaitarani, with the cow to lead her across it into the underworld.”(408) He teases her saying “you don’t know any Sanskrit.” Dr Mishra gets so rigid when at last he refers to “law-giver Manu” because he labels Kulfi as an adulteress and states that fallen women are not cremated with proper rites and rituals.
Through the character of Uma Verma, the novelist presents the subversion of acceptability of traditional and ancient rigid beliefs and thoughts that place rules so high that human beings tend to have no importance. The novelist sums up their arguments with her firm reply,

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 your orthodoxies. That’s the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human. (409)

This is very important statement by Dr Verma that one has to have a considerate outlook and believes that humane feelings and sensitive attitude toward other are the pre-requisite for a venerable and dignified living.

Dr Mishra finds it ridiculous to see carbolic acid being used to clean the place and dead body of Kulfi. Mrs. Verma gives a very sensible reply:

What does it matter whether it’s Ganga-jal or carbolic acid? It’s just a question of cleaning the place, isn’t it? People thought something was clean once, now they think something else is clean. What difference does it make to the dead, Dr. Mishra? (411)

The analogy between a microbiologist and a mechanic is so intelligently presented just to prove that humanity is very pertinent issue in our existence. One can not just have to look different organs differently “every trace of its humanity blanketed” (412). The novelist poses a pertinent question if a microbiologist thinks while running tests on “a bit of someone’s piss or pus” that “where all those microbes and bacteria and viruses come from?” or “whether sometimes they are anything other than a bodily metaphor for human pain and unhappiness and perhaps joy as well…” (412).

This important issue of being human is beautifully put forward when the novelist further explicates that doctors finds during their general practice with “people straying in...with nothing wrong with them...complaining: I have this pain, Doctor, and that pain, Doctor...till you realized yet again that the tyranny of your despotic science forbade you to tell them the one thing that was worth saying...There’s
nothing wrong with your body—all you have to do to cure yourself is try to be a better human being” (413) [italics mine].

Uma Verma represents all those sensible, realistic, pragmatic and levelheaded people who do not oppose or argue over issues just for the sake of being in opposition. With the changing times, one has to change oneself allowing no rigidity and senseless rules and appeals to wholeness of systems. Mrs Verma sums up, “Nothing’s whole any more. If we wait for everything to be right again, we’ll wait for ever while the world falls apart. The only hope is to make do with what we’ve got” (417). Thus, one can trace that the women characters in The Circle of Reason form the pivot of the plot who are translators for other characters as they translate the anomalous emotions and jarring reality of life. They experience oneness and camaraderie with other people.

Shombhu Debnath, one of the central characters of the novel, is the novelist’s major voice to emphasize the subversion of class division. He is a low caste man in the village Lalpukur and it is not highly regarded to learn weaving from him but Balaram privileges him by requesting him to teach his nephew weaving. This gives the narrator enough space to reflect upon the historical perspective of the skill of weaving.

It has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognizes no continents and countries. It has tied the world together with its bloody ironies from the beginning of human time...Human beings have woven and traded in cloth from the time they built their first houses and cities. Indian cloth was found in the graves of the Pharaohs. Indian soil is strewn with cloth from China. The whole of the ancient world hummed with the cloth trade [...] It was the hunger for Indian chintzes and calicos, brocades and muslins that led to the foundation of the first European settlements in India. All through these centuries cloth, in its richness and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal, bountiful trade...But it couldn’t last. Cotton changed the world too fast, made too many demands, called for too much subtlety[...]But even the English were handed
down their word...by the Arabs, from their *kutn* (*how fine an irony when several centuries later hundreds of thousands of Egyptian fellahin were tied in bondage to the demands of the cotton mills of Lancashire*). [...] Lancashire poured out its waterfalls of cloth, and the once cloth-hungry and peaceful Englishmen and Dutchmen and Danes of Calcutta and Chandannagar, Madras and Bombay turned their garotte to make every continent safe for the cloth of Lancashire, strangling the weavers and techniques they had crossed oceans to discover. *Millions of Africans and half of America were enslaved by cotton.*

And then weaving changed mechanical man again with the computer. In the mid-nineteenth century when Charles Babbage built his first calculating machine, using the principle of storing information on punched cards, he took his idea not from systems of writing nor from mathematics, but from the draw-loom. The Chinese have used punched cards to discriminate between warp threads in the weaving of silk since 1000 BC. (55-57) [italics mine]

The above passage is significant in its historical perspective not just because of the events or states of being but because of the themes that run them. The anti-colonial note against the monopoly of Lancashire cloth is evident. Another important thing to be noted is the factually established link between loom and computer. The parallel between storing information in the form of dots in a punched card and the intricate structure of loom and its functioning is very lucidly established. It is in passages like the above mentioned that Amitav Ghosh is seen absorbed in the process of writing history with a new perspective telling the readers the whys and hows of the events and states of being.

Coming back to Shombhu’s story, one follows the narrator who defines him as “restless, unpredictable, fond of heights. [...] Shombhu had set out to do the impossible” (66-67). He is a weaver of coarse cotton and masters the art of the Boshaks of Tangail. With the urge to do something unique, he vanishes from his village and settles in Tangail as an orphan working as an apprentice “in a Boshak master-weaver’s family”(67). He learns the secrets of punching Jacquard index
cards...intricacies of their jamdani inlay techniques. He “even learnt to make the fine bamboo reeds which were the centerpieces of their jamdani looms, the only ones which could hold fine silk yarn without tearing it. That was a skill few even among the Boshaks could boast of...” (67) From there he learns their songs of love and longing and sings while working at the loom, “taking ...beat from the rhythmic clatter of fly-shuttles and the tinkling of needle-weights hanging on Jacquard looms” (67).

Shombhu understands loom and weaving very well. Before beginning to teach Alu the art of weaving, he explains a fact that so many things on a loom have different names given in different languages.

A loom is a dictionary glossary thesaurus... Words serve no purpose; nothing mechanical. No, it is because the weaver, in making cloth, makes words, too, and trespassing on the territory of the poets gives names to things the eye can’t see. That’s why the loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world’s armies of pen-wielders. (74)

Shombhu Debnath is wise enough to understand the enmity that Bhudeb Roy has for Balaram is mainly because he (Balaram) has kept Shombhu and his family in his house. He tries to convince Balaram to stop getting obsessed with his anger towards Bhudeb, “It’s me and her (Parboti), and the child that he wants. He has no quarrel with you; you’re two halves of an apple...one raw, one rotten, but the same fruit. I’m his real enemy, and I’ve won as much as I want to win, and now it’s time to run...” (141)

He tries to pacify Balaram but all his pleadings fall flat. He again and again warns him of the dire consequences, “Balaram babu, you’ll destroy everyone without even stopping to think about it. You’re the best sadhu I’ve ever known...but no mortal man can cope with the fierceness of your gods” (142). His concern for the safety of Balaram reveals another characteristic of his personality that he owns a peculiar understanding of other people’s mind and wishes for their well being. Fokir in The Hungry Tide seems to echo the nuances of his personality with having his indigenous culture strongly writ in the psyche. It further becomes the means to have clear perception of life and the surroundings.
Balaram, is the driving force of the first part of the novel and his ideology motivates Alu till the third part of the novel. He is so obsessed with reason and rationality that he can not look beyond. He gets so firm on his unchangeable logical path with no involvement with people. His so-called logic for things is always described with the premonition and intuition of his near and dear ones. As the narrator comments, “Gopal had a premonition: a premonition of disaster he would call upon himself and all of them, if ever he was allowed to take charge of the society” (50). Similarly Balaram’s wife also has the intuition of something going to happen bad so she puts his books on fire. Thus, the novelist shrewdly puts prophecy and rationality side by side as rationality of Balaram is put next to the premonition of his well wishers, which can be seen as contradictory forces are shown to be at work. It is the sheer artistic way of the novelist of showing the readers the reality of life. Life can not be defined as black or white. Amitav Ghosh attempts to provide a balanced view of contradictory elements.

Balaram’s obsession with phrenology and his own ideas of logic and reason are remarked seriously by the narrator, “...the trouble with people like Balaram was that theories came first and the truth afterwards” (13). His biggest mistake in life is that he does not allow any space for life to become a real living. He gets so detached in his mission to clean everything that he is surrounded by mist and fog of confusion and misunderstandings about the people around him. His undertaking to disinfect his village Lalpukur from infection is a commendable task, thereby disinfecting “every exposed inch of the new settlements” (61). But gradually, he himself does not notice the thin thread of rationally changed into his irrational obsession to take revenge on Bhudeb Roy and in the process, he merely ends up in his own destruction.

Through the characterization of Balaram, the novelist draws the attention of the readers towards the cause of education. He is very concerned about giving real education to his nephew Alu. Balaram poses some relevant questions as to what is the real aim of education? How should it be catered to children? Some people think education is just memorization of the factual information at one level and others regard it as a means of livelihood. At yet other level, education sharpens human sensitivities. It kindles social consciousness in children that is very important. Balaram states gravely, “Children go to school for their first glimpse into the life of the mind. Not for jobs. If I thought that my teaching is nothing but a means of finding jobs, I’d stop teaching tomorrow” (52) [italics mine].
Thus, education should provide this “glimpse into the life of the mind. In present scenario, the opposite is the case with our real burdensome curricula for children. Amitav Ghosh seems to advocate the pleasure in education, encouragement of their inquisitiveness and enjoyment in their training where their curiosity is not suffocated by authority. His idea of education becomes clearer when he deals with Louis Pasteur’s life and education because Pasteur’s life illustrates that the aim of education is to answer the common every-day problems of people. Bread alone is not the answer. Several other forms of thinking are needed for the benefit of society. Pasteur actually left the study of crystallography in order to answer the most common problems of brewers of France, ‘What makes our beer rot?” (49) This is how he came to discover the infinitesimally small germ and the good and harm it causes to human life. Life, thus, is the best teacher. Experience and exposure to real life situations are more crucial than classroom instruction. Education has to be intended for life.

Another important character is the protagonist Alu whose real name is Nachiketa. He completely transforms by the time the novel ends. The most remarkable thing about him is his “extraordinary head...It’s an Alu, a potato...So Alu he was named and Alu he was to remain” (3). Symbolically, Alu is someone rooted in soil and therefore in identity but as one sees in his torturous journeys, he seems only to satirize his name. His name has mythical allusion. Nachiketa is a character in Katha Upanishad who pursues the god of Death requesting him to reveal to him the secret of existence. He waits at Yama’s doors(Door of Death) in obedience to his father. He is the son of sage Uddalaka. In his pursuit of true knowledge, he brings upon himself his father’s annoyance. In a fit of anger, Uddalaka curses Nachiketa to go and suffer in the nether world, that is, Yamaloka( the world of the death god, Yama). Yama is an embodiment of justice and uprightness.

Nachiketa sincerely pleads to Yama to endow him with divine knowledge and gradually he wins Yama’s heart by his commitment to the chosen path. He receives the knowledge about the true nature of Brahman(Brahma gyan) from Yama. Yama checks his single mindedness and disinterested action by luring him to the pleasures of heaven which he refuses. Moreover, Fire, even in hell, is a purifying agent and does the work of cleansing. Here, it makes sense to connect the myth to the story. Carbolic acid is also a purifying agent. At various points of time in the story of the novel, it is used to purify places and people. Alu also waits at death’s doors when in
al-Ghazira he is buried alive after The Star collapses. Without food and water, he manages to sustain with his single minded thinking. When he comes out, he promulgates that money is the enemy of mankind for “it travels on every man and every woman silently preparing them for their defeat” as it turns one against the other. (281)

Alu’s metamorphosis can be discerned throughout the narrative. He is impassively silent in the beginning. As Balaram tells his friend Gopal, “He’s so completely impassive. Nothing, nothing at all, seems to make an impression on him”(25). But Alu has a deep passion for reading books. In Balaram’s study, he has read history, geography, geology, natural history, biology and learns different languages like Bengali, English, and French. Alu’s becalmed nature in the beginning is revealed through an incident in school when he is beaten by four school boys. Balaram tells Gopal, “…the strange thing was that even then he didn’t say a word. He didn’t cry or even complain. The whole thing seemed to have no effect on him at all”(28). But Balaram can not see in the beginning that the sentiments in Alu are plentiful as when he hears from Balaram (when he reads from Life of Pasteur) about Pasteur’s courage to use “his still untested vaccine” on a ten-year-old Joseph Meister, there are “tears in Alu’s eyes”(28). Here, the role of the book on the life of Louis Pasteur is remarkable. It exists as a bond between an uncle and a nephew and extends the tradition of reason from one generation to the other.

Alu’s gifted genius makes him learn the intricacies of the art of weaving. “Alu learnt quicker than Shombhu Debnath could teach. His loom poured out rainbows of cloth with magical ease.” His innocent love for Maya is teemed with unending devotion and support that he draws from her courage and individuality. There is a striking description of their physical act of love. The novelist skillfully places their physical consummation on the loom and spreads it out with overflowing emotions, “She turned all at once, and threw her legs across his, and sat straddling him, her face on his, bouncing with the rhythm of his legs as they pushed the pedals of the loom[...] the shuttle pounded through the parted, twitching limbs of the warp, and the cloth poured out, tangled and damp; gushed forth, in a surge of joyful abundance…”(85) (italics mine)

The first part of the novel records Alu’s emotions and sentiments towards Maya and Toru distinctly. His simplicity is reflected through the way he talks to
Balaram by revealing directly, “I want to get married [...] I already have a wife [...] I want to marry Maya” (112-113). His affection for Toru-debi is very remarkable. It is to him that she unburdens herself, “Nothing’s any use now...It’s the end...Throw it (the sewing machine) into the pond...It’s dead...But you’ll get me another...A better one...” (147-148). Alu never forgets his aunt’s desire to have sewing machines so he wonders at the machines he encounters before the collapse of the building The Star and his sentiments let him cover those machines without bothering to save his own life. After the blast in his house when the police seize it, only he is out by chance and sees “orange flames shooting into the sky...His whole mind went blank...” and becomes “inert and uncomprehending” (148-149). He went to Gopal in Calcutta where during his stay, he gets a reason for his life and that is “a sewing machine in a display window” (154). He keeps on talking about the structure of the machine and “the inexhaustible miracle which can join together two separate pieces of cloth” (155). The narrator comments, “Gopal did not know that that day Alu had won a battle for his spirit” (155).

The novel records Alu’s physical and mental journey. From Lapukur, he runs away to Calcutta, then to the forests of Nilgiris, spends time secretly in the Chalia quarters of scattered villages and then to Mahe which is situated on the west coast. From there, he gets on a boat Mariam for al-Ghazira (Egypt). The narrator tells the hopes that Alu pins from the place he sees for the first time, “He gazed at the distant pinpricks of light and his dazzled sight meshed with every other sense in his body till the lights grew and clamoured and burnt like suns...” All this reflects people’s typical desire to seek better opportunities, way for settlement and chances to earn at new places migrating with strong hopes and desires without actually realizing that they are becoming “wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital” (189). Alu’s journey finally takes him to a small town in the northeastern edge of Algerian Sahara.

The second part of the novel witnesses the transformation surging in Alu’s personality that gets full shape in the third part of the novel. The beginning of the second part is about the rumour of his death but the novelist brings in the element of magic realism by showing Alu being saved with “two massive concrete beams projecting out of the heap...there was a steel girder across him holding up the beams” (234). It is later that Abu Fahl tells others that the concrete stops there because
“beside him, on either side, were two sewing machines...”(240). Then, Alu tells them about his plans against germs to have a war against money.

Here, Alu is seen at best in his art of communication which advocates the intermingling of languages. He addresses people of the Ras to encourage them to join him in his mission to wipe out the germ of money from the society. The way he addresses the public, is first narrated through Jeevanbhai Patel. He notices the change in the silent Alu, “I saw a man I knew, but I heard a voice I had not heard before...there was a force in his voice which carried it over the clicking of the shuttle, so that nobody missed a word...” (279). Everything he speaks is put in a form of question and marvellously and “silently they (people) were answering him, matching him with something of their own...” (279).

Alu is seen talking in not just one language but “in three, four, God knows how many, a kichri of words; couscous, rice, dal and onions, all stirred together, stamped and boiled, Arabic with Hindi, Hindi swallowing Bengali, English doing a dance, tongues unravelled and woven together- nonsense...but...everyone understood him, perfectly...They understood him, for his voice was only the question; the answers were their own”(279). This intermingling of language does not bar the communication but it holds on the distinctiveness of language of every community. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Alu privileges complete purity in his idealism without realizing the fact that life would be impossible without germs. This momentous fact is illumined to him in the third part of the novel.

Jyoti Das is another important character that brings forth the subversive energy of the novel in focus. He is just introduced a bit in chapter two of the first part of the novel but is given extended introduction in chapter six. His little introduction brings forth the crucial issue of the upbringing of children where parents’ choice is forced upon them instead of dignifying their individuality and uniqueness. On his fourteenth birthday, during a visit to the Alipore Zoo in Calcutta, he encounters for the first time his biggest passion of watching birds when “his eyes picked out a pair of purple herons with their long bills raised to the sky and their brilliantly coloured wings outstretched”(37). Just before the scene, Jyoti’s father gets upset with the indiscipline caused by some young men there. His uneasiness is shown through his words, “Chaos; that’s all that’s left. Chaos, chaos...”(37). Jyoti’s sensitive attitude is
sharpened by his concern for his father. He loves observing and drawing rare and beautiful birds flying high but his father does not favour all this and Jyoti Das is wise enough to “buy safety for his own, real world”(38). He manages to clear Civil Service examinations and qualifies for the recruitment in the police department. His father is again unhappy with his result because he has always wanted Jyoti to enter Administrative Service like the Secretary or the Foreign Service and so on. He gives a contemptuous remark, “Do you think they have time for people who sit around painting birds? You mark my words; he’ll end up being suspended for immoral behaviour and spend the rest of his life hanging around our necks”(125).

Jyoti Das represents the channel of police who is responsible for maintaining peace and calm in society. It has become an anguished concern in postcolonial era in trying to be as efficient as India was during colonized times. Since the time Bhudeb files a complaint, the novel minutely traces the actions, concerns and anxiety of the concerned officials to try to prove their worth by getting restless to get the missing suspect in their custody as soon as possible. The whole process involves interaction with many informers, local people and the officers of other departments. He meets Dubey in Mahe who arranges all information about Alu.

Dubey is posted in Mahe and is fed up of working there as he is unable to understand the local language and people well. When Jyoti Das comes to know about it, he asks curiously, “you haven’t passed your departmental language examinations?... Doesn’t it hold up your salary increments?” Now, Dubey replies showing his helplessness of doing a tough job, “It’s much worse...Not only are they holding up my increments, now there’s talk of withholding payment into my gratuity and provident funds. It’s terrible...You chaps in your home states are lucky...”(162-163) When the crowd creates a roaring stir outside the police station, Dubey again unburdens himself before Jyoti, “How’s a man to live?...At least you people get city-compensatory allowance; in this place we don’t even get that...”(165).

At other point, Dubey shows his vulnerability, “Sometimes, I wish...that someone would smuggle me out- to another posting, I mean. I’m sick of this place...”(159). Amitav Ghosh seems to tell the reader the precarious job that the policemen have to do while serving on border areas. As a novelist, he feels it his responsibility to inform his readers about the ignorance and neglect that constables
and other policemen face there. Dubey tells Jyoti Das his apprehension about constables getting into revolt for not getting allowances on time, “Let’s hope they don’t join the crowd—they haven’t got their dearness allowance for three months” (164).

The system gets easily delayed everywhere in our country. The process of the approval of DIG’s application file (for the replacement for Jyoti Das’ post) is delayed till Jyoti Das personally goes to the Secretary (who happens to be his mother’s uncle and who is helped by Jyoti Das’ father to help buy him a house in Calcutta) and consequently his application is cleared and Jyoti Das finally arrives in al-Ghazira. Amitav Ghosh talks about the loop holes in the police system. Jai Lal tells Jyoti Das in al-Ghazira that the case could have been handled by him but the HQ take no timely action, “You see, that’s the thing: we chaps in the field do all the work, build up sources and our networks, and then they send you people out, with no experience of local conditions. And that, too, when it’s too late. There really wasn’t any need” (270).

Zindi gives him a fascinating and unique name “the Bird-man” because during his first meeting with Zindi, he keeps on talking about birds. Zindi tells Jeevanbhai Patel about the way Jyoti Das looks at Alu “like a timid falcon sizing up some unusual and frightening prey” (314). He keeps on tracing Alu from Ras in al-Ghazira to El Oued spotting him briefly at Alexandria, Tunis, and Kairouan. His stay at Mrs. Verma’s place makes him meet Alu and there is peace at the end for both of them. Finally, after so much of chase, running after the suspect and getting involved with local people and happenings of different places, Jyoti Das is “at peace” (423) in the end. The open endedness of novel leaves the reader with a radiant hope because “Hope is the beginning” (423) of everything. The novelist seems to privilege the potential of his readers to infer from the message of hope about the irresolute ending of the novel.

Thus, the aforementioned discussion on the destruction of binaries reveals a serious concern of the novelist to get his readers out from the misleading notion of any fixed boundaries and identities. The novelist underscores the need for doing away with any rigid concept of purity in life. As already discussed, the third part of the novel poses a high conflict between traditional rituals and demands of the pragmatic present which draws one’s attention towards the contemporary social conflicts of life.
The consideration of the author’s unique way of characterization accentuates the
obliteration of binaries which are indeed important in having the complete
understanding of the novel. The argument of this chapter has attempted to prove that
the novelist strives to generate a need for the analysis of ultra-modern society which
blindly runs after the privileged entities of binaries without understanding the basic
reality that existence is interdependent. The character-analysis has helped to build this
argument better that one can not live in isolation and one can not always just be rigid
for rules laid out once by society. The noteworthy actuality is poured out by Mrs.
Verma is “to make do with what we’ve got”(417). Zindi and Jyoti Das’ enlightened
selves make them realize in the end that leading life is all the more promising if one
has someone to reckon on. All the different discursive threads traced in the above
discussion finally weave a subversive pattern of buti-work (to continue the metaphor
of weaving) with the longstanding argument between man and machine, purity and
impurity, capitalism and socialism and above all fundamental needs of our human
living. The only hope in life “is try to be a better human being” (413).