CHAPTER TWO

THE CIRCLE OF REASON

The Circle of Reason

S. Sengupta compares Ghosh's novel with that of Fielding's:

> What the novel *(The Circle of Reason)* celebrates is a quest. In typical fashion, a picaresque protagonist moves from Lalpukur in India to al-Ghazira in Egypt to the little town of El-Qued in the north-eastern edge of Algerian Sahara.But this a journey has the appearance more of withdrawal and retreat than of the bold adventures of Fielding's hero. It is a search for a transforming vision.[1]

K. Damodar Rao expands on the theme of journey:

> *The journey as a motif* runs throughout the novel and unites Characters cross its three parts. borders "with almost the biological necessity if not always the case and nonchalance of migratory birds (G. V. Prasad). " is particularly This motif associated with Alu who is on the run having been branded as an extremist by the police and with Jyoti Das close on his heels always. He moves from Lalpukur to Kerala and then sets off

> to al-Ghazira in the Middle along with East a number of characters who travel in search of material wealth and more opportunities. Travel itself is converted into a homeland. For Jyoti Das, more than the professional O bliga tions, it was the prospect of seeing more birds on his travels that urges him to *move* on in pursuit of Alu. Ironically it was he who causes the journey of Alu once again from al- Ghazira through Alexandria, Egypt, Lisbon, Tunis to the little town of EI-Qued. He is accompanied by Zindi, Boss and Kulfi, and whenever Zindi says "we're going West where the sewing machine are" Jyoti Das seems to overhear them for he appears wherever they go.[2]

Travel writing, broadly speaking, is of two types, real 'nd fictional. The fictional travel is normally a product of the I author's imagination, for instance William Golding's *Lord of the Flies.* The other type relates to travel with a purpose. In this case, the traveller is a person who goes in quest of something-money, education or knowledge. Also, there are travellers with a purpose who are searching for their roots. For instance, V. S. Naipaul who undertakes a journey to India m search for his roots in *An Area of Darkness.* Sometimes, a writer is imperceptibly drawn by the place he visits. In the "Prologue to his travelogue *The Jaguar Smile)* Salman Rushdie writes: " I did not go to Nicaragua intending to write a book, or

indeed, to write at all; but my encounter with the place affected me so deeply that in the end I had no choice."[3]

Amitav Ghosh is a compulsive traveller. Born In Calcutta in 1956, Ghosh has a Ph.D. in social anthropology from Oxford and has taught in both Indian and American Universities. His oeuvre now includes four novels, *The Circle afReason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In An Antique Land* (1993), and *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), a travelogue, *Danciltg in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), and a number of essays, notably the scholarly article "The Slave of M. S. H. 6,' published in Subaltern Studies in 1992.

"Ghosh's writing," says Robert Dixon, "reflects the recent concern of anthropologists with the porosity of cultural a boundaries."[4] Renato Rosaldo argues:

> In contrast with the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can be argua bly be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and beyond its borders.[5]

The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but "dwell in travel" in cultural spaces that flow across borders-the "shadow lines" drawn around modern states. In his article, "The Transit Lounge of Culture," the American anthropologist James Clifford has attempted frame Ghosh's work in the context of recent developments

in the discipline of anthropology. Texts like Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* have shifted anthropology away from separate, authentic towards cultures between cultures; from separate away inter cultural studies." Such diaspora cultures **are** not oriented towards lost origins or homelands, but are produced by ongoing histories of migration and transnational lculturall flows. Once we begin to focus on these intercultural ocesses, Clifford argues, the notion of separate, discrete ltures evaporates; we become aware that all cultures haveing histories of border crossings, diasporas, and migrants.[6]

Rena to describes a Rosaldo symptomatic exchange contesting :ween delegates at conference where the a adigms within anthropology were vividly expressed in the taphors of a museum and a garage sale:

> . . . at a conference the on cnsis anthropology, Bois, Cora Du a retired Harvard professor, spoke of the distance she felt from "the complexity and disarray of what I once found a justifiable and challenging discipline. . . . It has been like moving from a distinguished art museum into a garage sale." The images of the museum, for the classic period, and the garage sale, for the present strike me as being quite apt, but I evaluate them rather differently than Du Bois. She feels nostalgia on the distinguished art museum with everything in .its place, and I see it as a relic from a the colonial past. She

> detests the chaos of the garage sale and I find it provides a precise Image for the postcolonial situation where cultural artefacts flow between unlikely places, and nothing is sacred, permanent or sealed off.The image of the garage sale depicts our present global situation. . . . Ours is definitively a postcolonial epoch. . . the third world has imploded into the metropolis.[7]

The remaking of social analysis Rosaldo describes in his book has re-defined anthropology's field of study, while at the same time drawing attention to the role of the observer in producing that field. In this new context, "the fiction of the uniformly shared culture increasingly seems more tenuous a than useful." "More often than we usually care to think," Rosaldo argues:

> Our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets and eruptions of all kinds. Along with 'our' supposedly transparent cultural selves, such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation.[8]

After this theoretical reading of the themes of quest and journey in *The Circle of Reason,* we, temporarily, go to analyse the three headings of the novel, namely, *Satva:* Reason; *Rajas:* Passion, and *Tamas:* Death. Hemanta Ganguli says:

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In the *Samkhya* system *duhkha* is not merely an emotion, but is one of the three most basic classes of material constituents otherwise known as *satva, rajas* and *tamas.* These three as the most elemental types of matter are respectively characterised as manifestation, motion and stagnation, and also as pleasure, pain and - languor. . The *Samkhya* philosophy underlines a moral assessment of the ontological process in as much as it invests the very primordial and indestructible material stuff of the world with the basic triad of an emotive content. The very fact that *satva) rajas* and *tamas)* the basic constituents of matter, are conceived as *sukha) duhkha* and *moha* is a pointer to the moral necessity of complete detachment from the world as the only means to spiritual emancipation. Feelings are the psychic expressions of *sukha) duhkha* and *moha* which as *satva) rajas* and *tamas* constitute of matter. A piece But *satva* belonging to the *stuff* of intelligence is translucent enough to capture the reflection of the pure spirit or consciousness. Hence intelligence in all forms of its modifications, whether cognitive, emotive or conative, attains expression by virtue of its having the *satva* constituent which shines in the reflected glory of the, spirit. *Purusa* or Thus the manifestation which is borrowed by *satva* in the form of reflected consciousness

> illumines also its inseparable companions, *rajas* and *tamas*. Properly speaking, mind and matter are not external to each other, for both of them are the modifications of material *prakrti* which is the equilibrium of *satva) rajas* and *tamas* supposedly caught. in an expressionless tension in the most primitive stage.In this stage these three types of elements are arranged in such a way that their equal forces, equally opposed to each another, are neutralised in a condition of equilibrium seething with an internal tension that fails to gain an external expression.[9]

Sukha as *satva* is subject to constant change under the impact imparts motions it, which is *for rajas rajas* which to is the motive force of evolutionary synonymous with *duhkha* unrest. Ganguly further says:

> In the triad *rajas* representing the principle of change and unrest cannot rest In equilibrium for long preponderance, the disturbs It gains equilibrium and signals the process of evolution in which perpetual unrest is manifest as a chain of constant change from cause to effect. ". . .In the *Samkhya* system, however, *duhkha* gets a more pronounced is ontological confirmation, for it identified with *rajas*, the very principle of unrest, which is supposed to be the most powerful basic constituent of matter. As such

it is the motive force of evolution. Opposite the *Tamas,* principle of stagnation, ennui and gloom, also has to succumb to the pressure of *rajas.* But its opposition exercises a sobering effect upon *rajas* by introducing order and discipline into the relentless process of change which is thus prevented from being abrupt, chaotic and fortuitous. . . . *Tamas,* -6 the principle *of* rest and inertia, as opposed to motion and unrest, does not tamely submit to the irrepressible impact *of rajas* before bridling the latter's rash onrush and channeling it into an orderly course *of* evolution. That the world has an *order* in its system *of* causality is due to the indispensable service *of tamas* whose opposition becomes constructive through contradiction with *rajas.* It hence unfortunate that religion, is uninformed by philosophy, sometimes tends to turn *tamas* into a derogatory term, the nadir of evil. Thus *duhkha* as *rajas,* through the influence of tamas, comes to be the causal order that we call the world.[10]

The *Samkhya* conception of evolution, *of* its triad of Siltva, *rajas* and *tamas,* has found ready reception even in the opular religions *of* the *Mahabharata* and the Puranas. The the *Bhagavad Gita* is unmistakable. Lord Krishna Arjuna thus: exhorts entities there are, born *of Satva* (the quality Ifgoodness), and those that are born of *Rajas* (the

principle of tivity) and *Tamas* (the principle *of* inertia), know them all as o!ved from Me alone. . ." (12). "The whole *of* this creation deluded by these objects evolved from the three modes of *'akrti-Satva, Raja:S* and *Tamas;* that is why the world fails to recognise Me, standing apart *from* these and imperishable(13).

It is significant that *The Circle of Reason* is divided into three sections: *Satva:* Reason; Death. S. Sengupta explicates this division: *Rajas:* Passion and *Ta mas:*

> What Ghosh tries to show is that ultimately Reason proves to be inadequate and he celebrates the triumph *of* human goodness. Pasteur, the epitome a of science and reason, reigns supreme in the first section. Balaram, his ardent devotee, believes that just as Pasteur had destroyed the germ with the help *of* science, he would bring relief to the society around him by using carbolic acid.[11]

It is an irony that through the lips *of* a micro biologist, Mrs. Verma, that Pasteur stands discredited:

> And when do *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 let yourself wonder as whether *you* 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 dawns on you yet again that ever since Pasteur that is the one question you can never ask.[12]

S, Sengupta proceeds to analyse it more clearly:

> Through Mrs. Verma the author celebrates love that endures and nurtures humanity. She comes as a fresh shower of rain in the arid world of reason. By the end of the novel Ghosh makes us realize that there is a terrible one-sideness to the technocratic world man has fashioned for himself out of a cold scientific rationalism. Modern science built for man a cage of reason in which he finds himself trapped. Mankind's salvation now depends on a change in direction. It is time to stop seeing everything through the cold haze of scientific logic. There is need to restore to man the qualities of the heart. The way out of the cold prison may even be a funeral lovingly conducted which even the "backward" Algerians would understand. It is the only way to become whole again in the wasteland of modern civilization.[13]

In the first part titled *"Satva"* Reason has its suzerainty as apotheosized by Balaram Bose. Reason gives

Balaram courage, courage to fight germs like Budheb Roy and his power of money with carbolic acid for Reason has nothing to fear. As Balaram points out: "Bhudeb Roy lives in moral fear; there's nothing in the world he fears so much as carbolic acid. . .. He fears it as he fears everything that is true and clean and a child of Reason."[14]

Again, Balaram's campaign against dirty underwear aeems to be based on Reason and Dantu is quick to point out ita limitation: "Dirt doesn't lie in underwear.It is the world, the world of people which makes dirt possible. How can you hope to change people's bodies wi thou t changing the world?"[15] But his protest fails.It is the same obsession with Reasoner a while falls into a bed of smugness and complacency fed the power of the money. And so Balaram conceives of the ch lIIof Reason: The first task before the Department of ,at manifests itself in the Pasteur School of Reason which to disinfect the whole village. But a Reason proves to be self-destructive. Shombhu debnath's warning to Balaram comes too late:

> Balaram-babu, you'll destroy everyone without even stopping to think about it. You are the best sadhu I have ever known, Balaram-babu, but no mortal man can cope with the fierceness of your gods."[16]

His words prove prophetic and Balaram is destroyed along with his family. Only Alu survives.

S. Sengupta concludes:

> This facet of Reason *(Satva)* which manifests itself as a crusade for cleanliness and fight against dirt has its sway over Alu at al-Ghazira for sometime, especially in his attempts to experiment with Socialism. By the end of Part II, it degenerates into Passion *(Rajas)* and in a .chapter appropriately called "Dances" socialism crumbles as lust for money (dirt asserts itself).[17]

In Part Ghosh shows the death of Reason and through Mrs.Verma makes a. passionate plea for reaffirmation of the basic qualities of the heart. As Mrs. Verma points out:

> What does it matter whether it's Gangajal to be used for cleaning the place where Kulfi's dead body is to be placed 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?[18]

But the death of Reason is not a pessimistic view of life. Ghosh points out: "If there's one thing people learn from the past, it is that every consummated death is another beginning."[19] The world of Reason has come full circle. It is born, grows and dies and its death heralds

the birth of a new world where the heart will come into its own. Ghosh gives us a glimpse of the new world in the figure of Jyoti Das as he walks jauntily away to a new life, a new beginning: "Jyoti Das's face was radiant, luminous, as though a light were shining through him Hope is the beginning."[20]

Mrs. Verma tells Alu that she has become a microbiologist because of *Life of Pasteur* which she gets from Dantu, her father. Dantu, Hem Narain Mathur, had been presented this book by Balaram Bose. Mrs. Verma now hates microbiology and tells patients that they have to do to cure lI:\hemselves is to be better human beings. The Infinitely Small holds no terrors to her. Fittingly Alu and she decide that the *Life of Pasteur* deserves a funeral along with Kulfi. As she tells Alu whose atrophied thumb starts working again, "You can do whatever you like as long as you want to."[21]

The journey and quest of Balaram Bose are of great importance in *The Circle of Reason*. Critics, commen ta tors, 8Cholars, and academicians have not sufficiently focussed on chapter would do justice to Balaram's one ambition in childhood was to study science and emulate the great masters of science, Pasteur and Jagdish Chandra Bose.

Balaram was born in Dhaka, then the capital of East Bengal, now of Bangladesh. His father, who had moved to Dhaka from the little village of Medini-mandol in the nearby district of Bikrompur, was a prosperous timber

merchant. The year, 1927, was a turning point in the life of Balaram. father festooned their house with electric bulbs.

> His Had Balaram been accustomed to those bulbs with a their spiral filaments from his childhood, had they arrived a year before or after he reached the enchanted age of thirteen when the whole world comes alive for the first time, they would probably never have been touched with magic. . . . He was bewitched from the very first time he used one of those large, unwieldly switches. . . . He read about the Chinese and Benjamin Franklin, and Edison became one of his first heroes. In school he pursued the physics teachers with questions. But it was too late. His teachers had decided that he had a gift for history, and this new enthusiasm for science would pass. Balaram did everything he could, but his teachers-in those days in Bengal teachers knew everything-would not let him change his subject to the Sciences. So instead Balaram *read.*[22]

But Balaram had no taste *for* history, Suniti *for* Prof. Chatterjee, and Prof. Dr. S. Radhakrishan. Balarama, a young student, listened to the advice of his teachers quietly, and they took his silence *for* acquiescence. For him

> Calcutta. . . was the city in which Ronald Ross discovered the origin of malaria, and Robert Koch, after *years* of effort, finally isolated the bacillus a which causes typhoid. It was the Calcutta in which Jagadish Bose first demonstrated the extraordinarily life-like of patterns stress *responses* in metals; where he *first* proved to a disbelieving world that plants are no less burdened with feeling than man. Balaram knew of Presidency College, too: it was there that Jagadish Bose had taught two young men-Sat *yen* Bose, who was to appropriate half the of elementary universe particles with the publication of the Bose-Einstein statistics; and Meghnad Saha, whose formulation of likeness between a star and an atom had laid the foundation of a whole branch of astrophysics. And of course there was the gigantic figure of C. V. Raman, whose quiet researches in the ramshackle a laboratories of the Society *for* the Advancement of Science, Calcutta, had led to the discovery of the effect in the molecular scattering of light which eventually came to be named after him.[23]

Balaram's father would not allow him to go to Calcutta. Calcutta was an expensive city. Dhaka University-was a good university. Sat yen Bose was teaching in Dhaka University. Ghosh writes of the inner thinking of Balaram:

"He (Balaram's father) could never have understood that Balaram was launching on a pilgrimage, a quest to retrace the steps of J,gadish Bose and Meghnad Saha from their native district of Bikrampur to Calcutta and Presidency College."[24] The journey of Balaram to Calcutta was in quest of retracing the steps of Bose and Saha.

This quest of Balaram leads him to the rationalists at the a Presidency College. Gopal, his new friend at Calcutta, lent him a copy of Mrs. Devonshire's translation of Rene Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur*. This is the second turning point in his life. The Rationalists, under the presidentship of Gopal, had their aim to apply "the application of rational principles to everything around them-to their own lives, to society, to religion, to history. It didn't matter what. That was what made the Rationalists unique."[25]

When Gopal announced that "Brahma is nothing but the Atom,"[26] we, therefore, begin "all our meetings hereafter with salutations and prayers to the cosmic Atom,"[27] Balaram proposed that they should, instead, "salute the Boson,"[28] because ever "since Professor Sat yen Bose published his famous paper, all the elementary particles which obey his statistics have been renamed Boson."[29] When Gopal requested the Rationalists to turn "their minds to the business of finding a rational substitute for the superstitious incantations which Brahmins chanted at weddings,"[30] Balaram advocated the rection of this abstract object, and instead, advocated a thought which can link them with the masses. He advocated the example of Pasteur who, on asked by the

brewers of France: What makes our beer rot?, discovered "the infinitesimally small "-the Germ, In other words. He etorically asks the Rationalists:

> Has anything changed the world as much as the discovery of the germ? Has there ever been a greater break in history than the moment when men were unburdened of their responsibility for their bodies and all disease was assigned to the treachery of the elements? . . . . Nothing but the everyday suffering of helpless children and their mothers. It was that which sustained him when all the world laughed and said: Pasteur is mad, bitten by his dogs.[31]

Gopal's sense of foreboding warns him that he was a man who could bring disaster to anyone he is associated with:

> As he watched Balaram go, Gopal had a premonition: a premonition of the disaster he would call upon himself and all of them, if ever he was allowed to take charge of the society. He decided then, with an uncharacteristic determination, that he would do everything in his power to keep that from happening.[32]

"It is but obvious," says G. V. J. Prasad,

> that the first part *'Satwa:* Reason' should start with a chapter titled 'Heads'. It is, literally about heads as it deals with the

> phrenological adventures of Balaram Bose. Phrenology is an expression of Balaram's search for a unified theory to explain the .....universe. It is this quest that motivates all his misadventures. It is again apt that this section *'Satwa:* Reason' should be largely about Balaram, once president of the Rationalists.[33]

Balaram got *Practical Phrenology,* a tattered old book, in a pile of second-hand books in the College Street. He says to Gopal: "In this science the inside and the outside, the mind and the body, what people do and what they are, are one. Don't you see how important it is?"[34] Bhudeb Roy comes to Balaram for his help, with the aid of phrenology, to find out the future of his sixth son, who is born recently. He says to Balaram:

> The astrologers had already seen the boy, he confided to Balaram swaying his gnarled head forward, but their prognostications were not good, and he was worried. The palmists would be of no use until the boy's hands grew a bit. In the mean time, he said, drawing his rubbery lower lip back in a smile, I may as well have, phrenology. After all, it's scientific, and I'm a man of the future.[35]

The request of Bhudeb Roy flatters Balaram. He visits the newly-born child, sees him with horrified look and walks out of his room. He tells Bhudeb Roy:

> The exhibit, that is to say your son, had distinct protuberances above the asterion and over the temporal muscles over its ears. Furthermore, his mandible and zygomatic arches are already developed to so extraordinary a degree that I can / only tell you, with the utmost regret, that he reproduces almost exactly the structure of the Typical Homicidal. With careful nurture you may perhaps be able to hold him down to mere felony, but no further, I fear, no further.[36]

This encounter of Balaram with Bhudeb follows a classic pattern-he manages to provoke and humiliate Bhudeb who retaliates more and more ferociously. When Balaram tells Bhudeb about his sixth son, Bhudeb takes his first vengeance on him by axing six of their coconut palms and all their lemon traces were uprooted during the night. Balaram's wife, Toru- debi, shouts and dares him come out of his knowledge of phrenology again in the village. He shuts his door and ceases to visit the village with his knowledge.

> The note books of observations of over three hundred of the village's living heads that he had so carefully compiled in a decade's painstaking work were frozen. Balaram's study became a prison and his evenings would not pass."[37]

Balaram's another encounter with Bhudeb creates a fresh row and vengeance. He knocked Ma Saraswati's clay Image

with his knuckles. Bhudeb felt insulted and humiliated. He retaliated by poisoning fish in the pond.

> An almost exactly the same time, Alu, who was eating in the kitchen, heard screams in the bamboo forest behind their house. He pushed away his brass thala and ran out of the house by the back door.[38]

Out of rage, Toru-debi tips

> his books out of the bookshelves, Balaram did not even try to stop her. . . it took Toru-debi a long time to carry the, books out into the courtyard. But she did a thorough job. . Then, after sprinkling kerosene over the huge mound of books in the courtyard, Toru-debi struck a match and set them alight. . . . That night, when all that was left of Balaram's books was a pile of ashes and a few charred bindings scattered around the courtyard, Alu crept into Balaram's room. . . . Alu climbed on to the arm of his easy chair and slipped a book out of his shorts into Balaram's lap. Then he put his arms around his neck. It was the *Life Pasteur.*[39]

The role played by the book *Life of Pasteur* is even more intricate. We are first introduced to it in the text when worried about the seeming lack of emotion in Alu, lectures to him about passion. In embarrassment at the boy's wide-eyed silence which touches him, he reads to Alu

from the book and stops to see "tears in Alu's eyes." When Alu retrieves *Life of Pasteur-"this* time the tears were Balaram's."[40] So the book helps in forging a new bond between generations. G. J. V. Prasad comments:

> And the bond extends to a passionate fight against germs-the seeming root cause of illnesses and by extension the ills of society. In, this confusion, cleanliness and purity merge and carbolic acid becomes a weapon not only against infectious diseases but against the wicked, the Impure- against all enemies of mankind. *Life of Pasteur* Inspires a young Balaram's campaign for clean underwear, as it does his campaign against infectious diseases during the war. The weapon used in the second campaign is then used in his fight against Bhudeb Roy and what he stands for.[41]

Bhudeb Roy is the very apotheosis of the power of money. It as, as if, through Bhudeb Roy, Ghosh tries to point out the degeneration that takes place when money takes .....complete possession of a man's mind. As a young man Bhudeb had "looked like a fairly ordinary young man. . . with thinning hair and a large pleasant face. He was stout even then but far from fat, and in his starched white dhoti and kurta he had even possessed a certain kind of grace."[42]

The description of the same man as he looks years later under the influence of Mammon is nauseating:

> When Gopal saw him years later he had flinched, as anybody would on seeing for the first time that huge slab-like face nodding upon the rolls of flash of a massively swollen neck. The sockets of his eyes had bulged forward as though to startle a hangman, but curiously the eyes themselves had shrunk into tiny, opaque, red-flecked circles. His mouth had grown into a yawning, swallowing, spittle-encrusted chasm, stretching across the entire width of his jaw. His upper lip had shrunk away altogether, while his lower lip had looped upward almost to the tip of his nose. . . . His ears stuck out of his head at right angles and waved occasionally like banana leaves in a breeze...[43]

This hideous worshipper of Mammon cannot contain his pleasure when he finds his sons equally avaricious: "He smiled as he watched them sensuously running their fingers over the rustling paper. That's right, he said, his tiny eyes bulging. You can't ever know what money means unless you feel it."[44]

When the final showdown occurs between Balaram and Bhudeb, the Images of Bhudeb and Middle Parting of Presidency College merge; the antiseptic (the weapon that Balaram uses against Bhudeb) and the clean underwear (the movement that Balaram started in Presidency College) become weapons for fighting evil in this world. Balaram gets quite a bit of help from Shombhu Debnath. He disrupts a public meetmg

addressed by Bhudeb and douses him and a. few others with carbolic acid. In retaliation, Bhudeb saw to it that the huts of Shombu, Maya, and Rakhal were, burnt. The house of Balaram also go up in flames, sometimes later.

Ghosh's Ph.D. thesis at Oxford was a history of weaving between Bri tain and India in the, In each of his subsequent texts, weaving *it* a synecdoche of that "intricate network of differences" in which all cultures are enmeshed with their neighbours. When Balaram decides to make young Alu a ,weaver, he tells him a history of the technology of weaving that evokes cultural borrowings across borders. According to Balaram,

> . . . (the loom) has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognizes no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together with its bloody ironies from the beginning of human time.[45]

Balaram develops the idea that the culture is a process circulation that has nothing to do with national borders:

> Indian cloth found of the the graves was in Pharaohs. Indian soil is strewn with cloth from China. The whole of the ancient world hummed with the cloth trade. The Silk Route from China, running through Central Asia and Persia to the ports of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe" bound

> continents together for more centuries than we can count. . . .All through those centuries cloth, in its richness, and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal, beautiful trade.[46] The history of weaving, then, has no single route, but follows complex international routes. Robert Dixon says: "It is not a 'traditional' craft opposed a binary sense to Western In science, but another part of a diaspora that unravels the distinction between Orient and Occident."[47]

Robert Dixon again says:

> Yet Ghosh's understanding of these routes is also resistant the framework of Postmodern to inter-cultural studies which James Clifford in attempts to place it. Clifford's border crossings run the risk of de-contextualizing specific local instances: the passengers in his transit lounge of culture are caught up in a seemingly universal postmodern condition that is innocent of specific economic determen ts. Ghosh, by contrast, understands that the routes of international trade are over-determined by economic forces; that they tell a history of imperial exploitation.[48]

Balaram continues his lecture on the history of the loom by placing it in the context of British imperial trade:

> Lancashire poured out its waterfalls of cloth, and (the) once. . . peaceful Englishmen. . . of Calcutta . . . turned their trade in to a garotte to make every continent safe for the cloth of Lancashire, strangling the very weavers and techniques they had crossed oceans to discover. [49]

Dixon notes: "As the image of the garotte suggests, the trade routes may cut across national borders, but they are infected by blood and overdetermined by the asymmetries of economic and military power."[50]

Lalpukur is "churning like cement in a grinder, and busy chasing its shooting boundaries with buckets of carbolic acid, his hair wafting behind him, in the air."[51] Balaram reduces the village of Lalpukur to rubble in his efforts to apply European theories to Indian life. G. J. V. Prasad says: "Carbolic acid runs through the book connecting the three parts."[52] K. Damodar Rao elaborates: Carbolic acid, functioning as structural dimension and a metaphor, runs through the novel like a cleansing mechanism. Balaram uses it as an effective disinfectant to keep the settlements of the refugees clean and free from dirt, disease and death. It also works as a psychological therapy, as a means of awakening the dormant villagers against the repressive suffocation unleashed by the village strong-man, Bhudeb a Balaram Roy keeps 'constant vigil on the

drums of carbolic acid which was taken as an act of sedition and extremist activity and hence the police raid.[53]

The journey and the quest run as two themes throughout the novel and unite its three parts. Characters cross borders 'with almost the biological necessity if not always the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds."[54] The theme of journey is also associated with Alu who is on the- run having been branded an extremist by the police and with Jyoti Das on his heels, always. He journeys from Lalpukur to Kerala and then sets off to al-Ghazira in the Middle East along with a number of characters in quest of material wealth and more opportunities.

In the first page of *The Circle of Reason* Alu's real name 18 revealed almost as an aside, as Nachiketa. in the Upanishads, Nachiketa is the name of the boy who obeying his a father waits at Yama's door. When Yama grants him boons, Nachlketa goes for the ultimate knowledge-the secret of life and death. The name's significance becomes apparent in the second part of the novel when Alu is buried alive and given up for dead in a building collapse. He is at death's door for days refusing food and water but thinking. G. J. V. Prasad throws light:

> His quest is not for knowledge of the secret of the universe, the infinitely large, but about 'cleanliness and dirt and the Infinitely Small' (p. 235). His quest is not for the understanding

> of the life after but for knowledge of the cause of the ills of society, the life present.[55]

After the branding of Alu as a -terrorist by Bhudeb, the police are after his blood. He leaves Lalpukur, lands in Calcutta and, takes refuge in Gopal's house. - In Calcutta, Gopal for "nights without end" would

> sit in his easy chair and weep for Balaram, friend of his youth, his tears splashing heavily into the open book on his lap; and, weeping, he would watch Alu and wait for the first hint of an answenng tear-for a sign at least-of grief, anything but that dumb, blank bewilderment. But there was nothing.[56]

Alu's chance, meeting with Rajan is a turning point for his journey to Kerala. "For Rajan was of Kerala's great caste of Chalias who for centuries have woven and, traded in simple white cloth. There was no 100m anywhere that was a mystery to Rajan."57 Armed With eight thousand rupees, probably bequeathed to him by Balaram, and a copy of *Life of Pasteur,* and a few addresses from Rajan:

> he passed down a chain of Rajan's Chalia kinsmen, scattered over every factory along the South-Eastern Railway, paying out parts of his 8000 rupees where Rajan had told him to, down, down, steadily southwards, stopping to catch his breath in the great mills of Madurai and Coimbatore, till whispers came that the police had orders

> and a sketch, Rajan had been taken in. . . . Then it was time to leave the railways behind, time to slip into the forests of the Nilgiris, led by Rajan's great- grandfather's cousin's great-grandson, Along elephant trails and deer tracks through clouds in blue mountains, then over the watershed, into Kerala. . . . He spent the nights secreted away in the Chalia quarters of scattered villages. . . but then again suddenly rumours of informers of reports to the police, so faster still westwards, down through the mountains, faster and faster. . .[58]

Rajan confesses to Dubey and Das that "He's on a boat for al- Ghazira . . . (in) *Mariamma*.It left two days ago."[59] Alu's compamons are Professor Samuel, Rakesh, and Zindi and Kulfi-didi. Professor talks about the theory of queues:

> A queue's not just one man or two men or ten men standing in a line. Even if those two men or ten men weren't there you'd still have a queue, stretching away in principle. It's a thing of the mind, with its own humours and properties. . . . And there it was on- an almost-empty statistics shelf, its blue hardboard cover plastered with dust and perforated by weevils. He'd picked it up idly- it hadn't looked very *interesting-The Theory of Markov Processes*. But then somehow his thumb had caught on the last

chapter-ten sparse pages on the theory of Queues.[60]

Kulfi-did:

> was a slight, fragile woman with long, slender arms and a thin, hollowed-out face. Her cheeks looked as though they had collapsed, like the skin of a punctured oddly drum... Her age seemed oddly indeterminate, for with her worn face and haggard cheeks combined an incongruously girlish she manner.[61]

Zindi has in al-Ghazira

> a kind of boarding house. Also a little tea-shop. Everybody knows it; those Zindi the parts You'll out; in Apple's house famous find is everywhere you go you'll hear people saying: *Beyt* Zindi, *beyt* Zindi. People crowd to my house; boys like you offer money to be taken in. They know I know people and there's no end to the jobs you can get al-Ghazira you if know people-in- in construction, sewage and drainage. . . sweeping, gardening, even shop work. Oil work's difficult, for they usually find their own people. Still, I can find any man a good job.[62]

Rakesh

> was a travelling salesman for a small Ayurvedic

> pharmacy in Bhopal which specialized in a patented herbal laxative.It was the only job he had been able to find-despite his bachelor's degree in commerce-and that, too, only after a year's efforts.[63]

Zindi Alu al-Ghazira work, place and a in gives something good in construction. *Alu resumes his craft of* weaving, but is accidentally buried alive when a new concrete building in which he is *working* as a *labourer collapses.*

> The building was at one end of the Corniche which swept around al-Ghazira's little bay of tarmac. Though it was not quite finished, it had a name: it was called an-Najma, the Star, because of the five pointed arms that out angled from its domed centre. People said later that the fall shook the whole of al-Ghazira, like an emptying wave shakes a boat. A tornado of dust swirled out of the debris while the rubble was still shuddering and heaving like a labouring beast, and for a few moments the whole city was wrapped in darkness, despite the full mid-afternoon brilliance of the desert sun. . . . When it fell it was an avalanche of thousands and thousands of tons of bricks and concrete and cement, and Alu was almost exactly in its centre.[64]

The collapsed building, The Star, is contrasted with the traditional market place, the Souq:

> the old bazaar's honeycomb of passageways was a live thing, coiling through the tunnels, obscuring every trace of the world outside. . . . Inside the Souq the passing of the day was marked only by the innumerable clocks and watches in shop windows, . . . Nor did any but the most alert in the Souq feel the soil of al-Ghazira tremble when the Star fell. . . .[65]

Robert Dixon says: "But the Souq does not represent a discrete culture rooted in one nation. Rather, it is a part of a network of trade routes, confirming Balaram's argument that weaving produces not one world but many."[66] Alu has begun weaving again at the 100m of his Egyptian neighbour, Hajj Fahmy, who abandoned his traditional craft for the more profitable construction business. As part of his revival of weaving, Alu must now learn Arabic as he had earlier learned English. His landlady, Zindi, plans to install Alu as her manager when she buys the Durban Tailoring House from another diasporic Indian, Jeevanbhai Patel. Patel is a Gujarati Hindu from Durban in South Africa, who has come to a!-Ghazira after a marriage of which his parents disapproved. His movements evoke the flow of the Indian Ocean trade: "the Indian merchants along the coast pulled (the couple) northwards like a bucket from a well.First they went to Mozambique, the Dar es Salam, then Zanzibar, Djibouti, Perim and Aden."[67] Zindi's house is full of migrant labourers whom she hopes to divert from the construction industry to the now declining

cloth trade: al-Ghazira "was a merchants' paradise, right in the centre of the world, conceived and nourished by the flow of centuries of trade, Persians, Iraqis, Zanzibari Arabs, Omanis and Indians fattened upon it and grew rich." [68] Like the village of Lalpukur, the Souq does not represent a stable authentic culture, but a network of trade, centuries old, that unfurls like cloth through a vast, borderless region.

When Alu is buried in the Star, Ghosh contrasts this mobile trading culture with the modern oil economy that threatens to subsume it. Alu's friends Rakesh and Ismail go inside the ruins to search for him. They find themselves lost In the space of a collapsed glass and a concrete dome. "It was iike the handiwork of a madman-immense steel girders leaning crazily, whole sections of the glass dome scattered about like eggshells, and all over, everywhere, thousands of decaying plants"[69] The "voice" heard by the rescuers in the chapter "A Voice in the Ruins" turns out to be a transistor radio accidentally switched on during the collapse of the building, which echoes through the ruins.[70] Alu is trapped inside. When the rescuers reach him, they find him lying beneath a slab of concrete that is kept from crushing him by , two antique sewing machines. When Yam a grants Nichiketa boons, Nichiketa goes for the ultimate knowledge-the secret of life and death. The name's significance becomes apparent in the second part of the novel when Alu is buried alive and given up for dead in a building collapse. He is at death's door for

days refusing food and water but thinking. His quest is not for knowledge of the secret of the universe, the infinitely large, but about 'cleanliness and dirt and the Infinitely Small."[71] His quest is not for the understanding of the life after but for knowledge of the cause of the ills of the society, the life present. When he comes back the Ras people are eager for the wisdom he has gained and he holds forth on "the Germ":

> but he (Pasteur) had never been able to find him. All his life he had tried to launch war but, like a shadow, the enemy had eluded him, and in the end Pasteur had died defeated and bewildered. . . . What is it that travels from man to man carrying contagion and filth, sucking people Out And Destroying them even in the safety of their Own houses.. ? Which is the battleground which travels on every man and every woman, silently preparing them for their defeat, turning one against the another, helping them destroying themselves?[72]

"He shouted in Arabic. *Wa ana warisu,* and I am his (Pasteur's) heir, for in the ruins of the Star I found the answer. Money. The answer is money."[73] The knowledge that he has gained a sows the seeds for a revolution for the creation of an egalitarian society. Prasad observes:

> But this small utopia still needs the market reality of al-Ghazira for the major motivation

> of Alu's listeners and followers is the promised material prosperity, the bigger savings that they will have. Though Alu Nichiketa doesn't seem to have much control over what he has unleashed, and like other major characters confuses the literal and the symbolic, he does seem to have gained some knowledge during his vigil at death's door. Not surprisingly, Alu need not have been there either, in his case it is not the father's command that- he obeys but his aunt Toru Debi's last wish for better sewing machines.[74]

But Alu had not taken account of man's cupidity and soon his principles fail.

When Jyoti Das makes al-Ghazira hot for Alu, Alu journeys to Alexandria, Egypt, Lisbon, Tunis, to the little town of EL Qued. He is accompanied by Zindi, Boss and Kulfi. Here Alu comes into contact with Mrs. Verma, the only whole person in the novel, a person who has affected a proper balance between reason and spirit. This comes out clearly and strongly when Kulfi dies rehearsing for *Chitrangada* and Mrs. Verma tries to give her a proper cremation despite the vehement protests of Dr. Mishra, the pseudo-intellectual:

> Rules, rules, she said softly.All you ever talk about is rules. That's how you and our 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.[75]

Mrs. Verma makes Alu perform the ritual of cremation of Kulfi. It is this kind and firm contact with Mrs. Verma that finally bnngs solace to Alu's troubled spirit. The novel ends on a note of optimism as Alu decides to return home to India. Jyoti Das, the policeman who has followed Alu from Lalpukur to Calcutta, to Kerala, to al-Ghazira and finally to EL Qued, realizes that this victim is no terrorist. Alu's quest for psteurized solution to evils, to dirt, falls in shambles. His journey from India to so many places abroad, brings him back to India. His thumbs which used to operate the loom, in the end, get atrophied. His economic plan had failed. He is achastened man, when he sets to return to India.

G. J. V. Prasad finds another quest, the quest for the holy sewing machine. We are introduced to the subject of sewmg machines very early in the novel when Toru De bi pamcs about Alu: "Toru-De bi knew nothing of children. Children inhabited another world. A world without sewing machines. They neither hemmed, nor chain-stiched, nor cross-stitched, nor quilted. What did they do?"[76] Her reality is constructed around and mediated through the sewing machine. If a nephew arrives unexpectedly he has come for 'the clothes she would make him on her sewing machine."[77] Ghosh reads her mind:

> Ten years earlier she might perhaps have pushed the machine away altogether, but at the middle age it was too difficult to cope with the unexpected. Besides, the Singer had been part of her dowry; she had seen it for the first time on the morning after the traumas of her wedding night; it was her child in a way her husband's nephew could never be.[78]

Later she tries to buy peace by shouting out to Parboti Debi, Bhudeb Roy's wife, that she would make her six blouses. She [ee~ she's done what she can. When Parboti Debi comes with *Shombhu* Debnath and takes refuge in her house, Toru Debi thmks she has come for the blouses. She hurries back to her "*oom to* make them as early as possible.

> Ah, Parboti-didi, she said, I'm glad you could come, but you shouldn't have bothered. Of course, I knew you were comIng, I dreamt-I dream a lot, you know-I knew you and Bhudeb-babu would come today. But you shouldn't have gone to so much trouble. I haven't forgotten, really. It's just that. . . so much work. But never mind. I'll finish them, right now. You can show them to Bhudeb-babu and tell him that he doesn't have to come.[79]

When Alu tries to explain the situation to her and says that it has nothing to do with blouses, Toru Debi slaps him for the first time and cries out:

> Cant's you see how serious it is? He's coming, and it'll be the end of everything if the blouses aren't ready. Only the sewing machine can save us now. Whatever happens, I'll never let your uncle say that it was because of the blouses.[80]

But the machine dies on her when only one blouse is left to be stitched. Toru Debi isn't aware that Parboti has already left. She only knows of her failure and the calamity that it means: 'What's the use?" she said, "It's the end."[81]

It is her reading of reality and she is entitled to it. For it IS the end for their Lalpukur house which is to soon go up in flames. She has made her last ditch stand and lost. She requests Alu to throw the sewing machine into the pond and get her another, a better one. It is possibly this slowing down of A.lu, her recalling him from the door and saddling him with the heavy sewing machine, that possibly saves his life. And Alu's slow recovery from the shock is helped by his seeing a sewing machine in a display window in Calcutta. It's the only time that he has something to say to Gopal who doesn't understand "that the day Alu had won a battle for his spirit."[82] It is possible that later, in al-Ghazira, Alu is trapped in the building collapse *because of two* sewing machines or so Rakesh feels:

> The truth is that Alu was the first *among* us *to hear* the *rumbles and the* noise of the falling bricks and plaster. At the time he had just

> discovered two sewmg machines, meant for display, under a tarpaulin sheet. When he heard the noise, he left the machines uncovered and pushed us out of the basement. . . . I couldn't see much because there was dust everywhere, but, still, I'm certain I saw him carefully covering those two machines.[83]

But if these two very machines that save his life. "Do you know why? Because beside him, on other side, were two sewmg machines, of the old kind, of black solid steel. But, if it weren't for them, our friend Alu would have been flattened long ago. "84 It is in the company of these two sewing machines that Alu mediates on the root cause of the ills that plague mankind. It is to retrieve these sewing machines that the Ras people go when they are attacked by the al-Ghazira police. Is it any wonder that Jyoti Das shouts to him at the end asking him not to "worry about the sewing machine; they make them better at home now."85 It seems, says G. J. V. Prasad, "as if the whole novel has been about the quest for the holy sewing machine! And in a sense it is."[86]

There is only one character who accompanies Alu in his journey through three parts of the novel, that is, Jyoti Das. Officially he is in charge of the sedition case against Alu and is in his pursuit. Dubey says to Das:

> That's why I wanted to get that man (Rajan) to confess that the Suspect has connections there-

> all for your sake. Now you can safely put it in your reports. It's very simple: there are hundreds of terrorist groups and things there and he's bound to get involved with them. You must follow up that angle and even use a bit of pressure perhaps. And you watch; if you're sensible you'll get a foreign trip. To al-Ghazira.[87]

Jyoti Das did not answer. He was thinking of al-Ghazira. "A new sky, a whole new world of birds. Wasn't al-Ghazira on one of the major migration routes? He would have to do a bit of reading at the National Library. What would the colours be like ?"[88]

> It would have made no difference whether the bit of land was al-Ghazira or Antarctica. The journey was within and it was already over, for the most important was leaving. . . Even six months of hellish confusion were worth a Journey which helped you through time even before it had ended.[89]

In Al-Ghazira he meets Lal. Lal knows Jeevanbhai of Darban Tailoring House. He has been arrested by the police. Jai Lal assures Jyoti Das:

> It's very lucky I happen to know this chap. They're willing to take us along as observers. They'll hand over your Suspect (Alu) once they've got him, and you can take him back. They have no interest in keeping him of course but, still,

> it's very generous, you know, because we don't have an extradition agreemen t with them.[90]

Ironically it was Jyoti Das who causes the journey of Alu once agam from al-Ghazira through Alexandria, Egypt, Lisbon, Tunis to the little town of El Qued. He is accompanied by Zindi, Boss and Kulfi, and whenever Zindi says "we're going West where the sewing machines are" Jyoti Das seems to overhear them for he appears wherever they go. But by this time Jyoti Das is suspended from his service for his sneaking sympathies with the man whom he chases and now he lands even in El Qued to see more birds, rare vultures and atone for previous lapses. He is picked up by Mrs. Verma. She introduces him to Kulfi and Dr. Mishra:

> May I introduce you to our very own *avatar* of Arjuna? Mr. Jyoti Das. . . . He's not been well. . . . We met him quite by chance a couple of days ago, when he was brought to the hospital with a mild case of heat stroke. He'd been here a few days already and apparently he'd spent all his time at the bus station watching the buses from the border come in, and on the dunes, where he was looking for a vulture. Just imagine-a vulture I are you a corpse, I said, that you're looking for a vulture in this blazing sun![91]

Mr. Jyoti falls in love with Kulfi. But ironically he is viewed as a vulture by Zindi for, she says, he seems to bring death wherever he goes: "That man carries death with

him wherever he goes. He can't help it; it's in his eyes. Think of what happened to Jeevanbhai; think of Karthamma and all the rest. And this times he's come with a vulture."[92] All alone in the desert "terrified of the future, without a past, aware of the prickings of his painful virginal flesh."[93] Jyoti Das is enchanted by Kulfi but even as he starts wooing her when they rehearse for the dance drama, "Chitrangada," Kulfi dies of heart attack. The sense of foreboding of Zindi is proved right once again. Having nothing to fall back in India he sets off to Dusseldorf in Germany to stay with his engineer uncle. When he is informed that Alu and Zindi were moving to Tangier on their way back home he could visualize a sky beaming with different birds over Tangier: a sky alive with shearwaters and honey buzzards, white storks and steppe eagles."[94] He takes the permission of the suspecting Zindi to accompany them up to Tangier: "I am migrating myself-to Dusseldorf. I've got nowhere else to go. Can I come with you, too?"[95] Then Jyoti Dag bought a ticket for the ferry to Algeciras in Spain. When the ferry began churning up the harbour, Jyoti Das was already on deck, waving.

> Then he looked down and saw a humped back caracoling through the water. Then he saw another and another and suddenly there was a whole school of dolphins racing along with the ferry, leaping, dancing, standing on their tails. He looked up at the tranquil sky and gloried in the soaring birds. . . . It was very beautiful and he was at peace.[96]

While for Jyoti Das his past and future were "continents of defeat-defeat at home, defeat in the world,"[97] for Alu the world has come full circle as he settles down to wait for Virat Singh and the ship that would carry them home; despite his hopeful travels on previous occasions, for him, "Hope is the beginning."[98] Yet again even at the end of the story. The quest and journey for individual self, truth, spiritual and corporeal explorations, the promise for alternative worlds and visions are carried on through the stages of *Satva, Rajas* and *Tamas,* and finally the circle is completed by a return to *Satva* or Reason.

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