Chapter Two

Coloniality, Rationality and Identity in *The Circle of Reason*

> Most forms of formal knowledge, scientific disciplines and social sciences were seen as having originated in the 'colonial transfer of knowledge'. Scholarly debates revolved around the question of acceptance or rejection of these forms of knowledge. These debates were happening in several disciplines, if not all of them, ranging from history to literature, architecture to aesthetics; but invariably the reference point was the knowledge of the colonial mint.
>
> — G. N. Devy (*The Crisis Within*, xii)[1]

I

Amitav Ghosh's debut novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) deals first and foremost, as the title suggests, with the issue of Reason or rationality. To be more specific, the novel examines the impact of colonialism-borne Reason upon individuals in the Third World countries. By 'Reason' the novel alludes to post-Enlightenment Western rationality. Reason is the key element, as it has already been pointed out in the previous two chapters, of the Enlightenment and modernity. Reason is the epistemological foundation of colonial modernity. There are many manifestations of Reason; but Western Science (mentioned as 'Science' henceforth) is, perhaps, the chief among them. Science had been deployed by the

colonisers not only to carry the 'white man's burden' in the colonies, but also to effect hegemonic subordination of the natives. In alignment with modernity, Science both liberates and subordinates the colonised. This hegemonic subjugation is most nuanced in case of an individual who comes to believe in and uphold the superiority of Science over the indigenous knowledge. In the novel Ghosh investigates the impact of such internalisation of Reason/Science on individual's subjectivity and identity.

Ghosh is chiefly preoccupied to weigh the viability of Reason or rationality in the context of the post-colonial Third World. In general sense, rationality implies logic and Science which stand in opposition to emotion and belief. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary describes 'rational' as — (a) '(of behaviour, ideas, etc.) based on reason rather than emotions,' (b) '(of a person) able to think clearly and make decisions based on reason rather than emotions.' Popkin and Stroll note that Reason implies certain procedures only through which "we can discover knowledge in the strongest sense, knowledge that can under no circumstances possibly be false" (*Philosophy*, 239). In Science, such knowledge is equated with 'truth'; it is opposed to any metaphysical or mythical knowledge. Reason entails a rationale and mechanism to reach objective, verifiable, experience-based facts or truth that is universal. Concomitantly, Reason envisions a subject who would be very rational and logical in his approach to the world; a subject who would not be carried away in the flow of impulse and emotion, and who would be self-reliant, free and autonomous.

In post-Enlightenment/modern period, Reason has been advocated by Western culture as the only factor that can usher in universal emancipation of mankind from primitivism, ignorance and superstition. Reason in the form of Science and technology was fielded as the only harbinger of progress. But there is another side of the picture. The fact is that Reason became a tool for Europe's colonial occupation in Asia and Africa. In the expansion and consolidation of empire, Reason, a Western phenomenon, was deployed as, what Mignolo

calls, 'truth without parenthesis.' "Rationality became," observe Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, "such a core feature of 'modern' thought that its origin as a specifically European mode of thinking was forgotten by the time Europe came to dominate the world in the nineteenth century" (*Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 146). But in reality rationality/modernity is full of paradox as it hides suppression and marginalisation. It became an excuse for colonial oppression. It also generates alienation in an individual in the Third World because of its incompatibility with the lived experience of that individual. In the previous chapter we have seen the views of Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo on the complicity between coloniality and rationality/modernity in establishing the unequal colonial power structure. Rationality/modernity's claim of universal applicability, irrespective of local differences, is the chief strategy to ensure 'the colonial matrix of power.' Mignolo has very insightfully pointed out that epistemology is one of the chief players in the 'colonial matrix of power.' If that be the scenario, then Western epistemology is the most enduring and most insidious means of colonial suppression. This is because colonialism ends but the epistemology of the coloniser is internalised and replicated by the colonised. What is the outcome of such internalisation and replication? Does Western epistemology truly liberate the colonised? Does it make the colonised self-reliant, rational and autonomous? Being a writer with a keen interest in human predicament, Ghosh found these questions to be of enormous significance. And, indeed, these are the questions he investigates in his novels. Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* (mentioned as *The Circle* henceforth) takes up the issue of the hegemonic aftermath of Reason in post-colonial times.

My reading of the novel conflates Mignolo's ideas with those of Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Both Chatterjee and Chakrabarty have written extensively on nation and modernity vis-à-vis British colonial rule in India. I shall, however, limit myself only to their select ideas. For Chatterjee the concepts of anti-colonial nationalism and post-colonial nation

are fraught with ambiguities. He considers nationalist thought to be 'a derivative discourse' because while aiming to liberate the nation from European rule, it draws its epistemological sustenance from post-Enlightenment European Reason. In fact, the very concept of nation is a European one. The avowed purpose of anti-colonial nationalism to build a self-reliant nation on the basis of scientific and technological progress was "plagued by anxieties of imitativeness" (Leela Gandhi, 114), and hence, inevitably "suicidal" (Leela Gandhi, 118) because it implicitly accepted the colonial categorisation of the modern West vs. the primitive East. Chatterjee writes:

> Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could 'modernize' itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based. (*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 30)

It is like that the battle is lost even before it began. The same dilemma is carried over to the independent nation. As in the case of India, the new nation has been built on the same epistemological and bureaucratic foundations upon which the colonial nation was established. Thus independent India imitates almost everything from colonial rule for its functioning: civil administration, police force, judiciary, education system, army, and the list goes on. The only noticeable change is that in place of the British, the country is now governed by a privileged, elite class of people who deploy the same mechanism of oppression and exploitation of the majority of people.

The irony of the new nation lies in the fact that, in order to achieve modernisation and material development, it strongly follows the same Reason which was the instrument of

colonial subordination. In "The Cunning of Reason" which is the final section of *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Chatterjee contends that "the universality – the sovereign, tyrannical universality – of Reason remains unscathed" till date because nationalist thought is not equipped to handle the massive and protean force of Reason (Chatterjee, 168). One of the main reasons for this failure is that Reason is itself very cunning in taking the form of capital. Chatterjee posits:

> Nationalist thought has not emerged as the antagonist of universal Reason in the arena of world history. To attain this position, it will need to supersede itself. For ever since the Age of Enlightenment, Reason in its universalizing mission has been parasitic upon a much less lofty, much more mundane, palpably material and singularly invidious force, namely the universalist urge of capital. (*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 168)

Reason is subservient to capital, and for nation, capital accumulation is the prime means of self-dependence. Notwithstanding all its rant, nationalist thought is clueless about how to resist the amorphous force of capitalism. In case of post-colonial nation, the task becomes even more difficult because of the universal consensus on the issue of ever-eluding 'development'. Does it then mean that the post-colonial subjects are ever doomed to remain confined in the invisible prison of Reason? Chatterjee does not offer any definite answer; but we can deduce that it depends upon individual consciousness. As Chatterjee puts in the second section (titled "The Thematic and the Problematic") of *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, nationalism and nationalist thought recognise that the colonial subject has a subjectivity; he is not passive; and he thinks, illusorily may be, that he is "active, autonomous and sovereign" (Chatterjee, 38). It turns out that Reason has an ambivalent reception by the post-colonial subjects.

In a similar strain, Dipesh Chakrabarty also draws attention to the ambivalent status of modernity in post-colonial India. In *Provincializing Europe* (2000) he contends that the generalised tendency of implementing Western modernity as an ideal upon the new nation generates many disjunctions as the lived experiences of Indians are not always compatible with the overarching European ideas that tend to obliterate spatial and temporal differences. One of the reasons for this, Chakrabarty thinks, is that every human society has a pre-existing past—involving "concepts, categories, institutions and practises"—which the European modernity must encounter and get configured differently because of this encounter (*Provincializing Europe*, XI). And like any society, Europe has a past and its ideas are deeply rooted in it. So Chakrabarty infers:

> That the so-called universal ideas that the European thinkers produced in the period from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and that have since influenced projects of modernity and modernization all over the world, could never be completely universal and pure concepts (*Provincializing Europe*, XIII).

One can ask how the specific European ideas came to be designated as universal in the first place. What is the purpose of proclaiming European ideas as universal ideas? The answer lies in colonialism which appropriated the Enlightenment ideas to disguise its real purpose. That is why the overt motive of colonialism is to spread the light of civilisation and modernity in non-European countries (which were certified as primitive and barbaric) though its covert motives had been political domination and economic plunder. It turns out that Western modernity has been a close ally of colonialism. So, it is not for nothing Walter D. Mignolo has viewed colonialism as the dark side of Western modernity. The problem in post-colonial period is that colonialism ended but Western modernity continues, and with it continues a kind of psychological colonialism.

In post-colonial times, argues Chakrabarty, it is impossible to imagine a nation without falling back upon European thoughts and categories. Despite the end of colonialism, Europe remains an invisible and ubiquitous presence, shaping every aspect of the new nation. The fact is that today it is almost unthinkable to analyse any social phenomenon in India without Western framework. The Sanskrit critical thought or the Persian thought tradition is hardly looked upon in Indian academia at present as theoretical reference to analyse social phenomena. These traditions are deemed as long outdated. Only ideas of European thinkers are used as analytic tool to understand and explicate social phenomena in Southeast Asia. This is because the institutions of the nation-states are founded upon these ideas which are decontextualised and looked upon as ahistorical. The new nation-state like India which is run on the legacy of Western modernity raises several questions. Are Western ideas adequate to contain the reality of a country like India? Can the uniqueness of India graft itself on to Western modernity? Does Western modernity create any disjunction in people's life? To what extent can an individual be interpellated by Western modernity? Does Western modernity face any resistance from individual? Can India do without Western modernity? If it can, then how? What are the decolonial options? Chakrabarty opines that Western modernity has an ambivalent relation with India. As a legacy of the long colonial rule, Western modernity has permeated every aspect of the nation-state and people's daily life. But, at the same time, it is incapable of grasping the variety and immensity called India. So modernity is, writes Chakrabarty, "both indispensible and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practises that constitute the historical and political in India" (*Provincializing Europe*, 6). In *The Circle*, Ghosh deals with this duality of Western modernity in order to map how the individuals negotiate with this legacy of colonialism. He has focused on the impact of Reason upon certain individuals. In doing so, he instigates the readers to rethink about Western modernity and the possibility of decolonisation.

II

The novel is set in the mid to late twentieth century, in the years after the independence of India from the British in 1947, but it retrospectively covers incidents from the early twentieth century and even from the late nineteenth century. In spatial dimension, the incidents stretch from Asia to Africa to Europe. The novel starts in Bengal and moves to Mahe, a tiny South Western coastal Indian town in Kerala, and from there it moves to al-Ghazira, a fictional town in the Middle East, and from there to El Qued, a small Algerian town in Africa. The novel baffles easy categorisation, and has received different tags such as magic realist novel, picaresque novel, buildungsroman, petrofiction, police fiction etc. In the midst of its generic complexities, it is, however, a triumph of the wonderful art of story-telling. The exigent, breathless manner in which individuals' trysts with the opportunities and challenges of life are narrated conveys the immediacy of experience with extreme vividness. The novel is anything but a realist novel; the reality it represents does not correspond with everyday reality. The novel uses elements of magic realism and postmodern fabulation in order to represent the complex cross-currents of post-colonial milieu. Apparently improbable occurrences are deployed to confound easy, linear comprehension of reality on the part of the reader. Written in the wake of Salman Rushdie's trailblazing *Midnight's Children* (1981), Ghosh's novel throws a protagonist whose physical deformities are reminiscent of the disintegrating physique of Rushdie's protagonist Saleem Sinai. Alu, the protagonist, has unusual bumps on his head and rotting boils on his skin, and his thumb is frozen. The preponderance of chance incidents in the novel is a structural as well as thematic device to defy normal causality. A plane falls on a school; a five-storey building collapses on the protagonist but he survives miraculously, protected by two sewing machines which stop a concrete slab just inches away from crushing him to death. All these techniques are used to

achieve the effect of defamiliarisation as well as to dramatise a critique of colonial modernity.

The urgency of narration, both on the part of the narrator as well as some characters, gives the novel its aesthetic appeal. Narrating a story becomes an imperative not merely to represent reality, but also to create and structure reality both for the author and the characters. K. Damodar Rao points out that the characters are in a quest for "a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of experience...through their creative/manipulative capabilities while the novelist himself realizes this through magic and irony and by diverting some of his story-telling abilities to the characters" ("Magic and Irony as Principles of Structure: A Reading of *The Circle of Reason*," 32). The novel is told in three parts — "Satwa: Reason," "Rajas: Passion," and "Tamas: Death"— by a third person narrator whose voice often seamlessly merges with the voices of other characters, thus giving the novel a polyphonic edge. Ghosh, the master story teller, weaves the three sections together in the vein of Indian classical raga music.

Roughly, the novel can be divided into three narrative blocks corresponding to its tripartite structure. The first block happens at Lalpukur and charts Balaram's adventures/misadventures in Science; the second block moves to al-Ghazira where Alu initiates a passionate revolution for egalitarian society; and the third section shifts the scene to El Qued, with the focus on Mrs. Verma's conscious re-evaluation of Reason. In each section, Reason appears as a different purificatory metaphor: purification of germs, purification of money and purification of dead human body. The characters who link the incidents from the first to the last are Alu, the protagonist and Jyoti Das, a police officer. The entire novel is structured upon certain metaphors and structural as well as thematic parallelisms. Weaving, carbolic acid, sewing machines and the book *Life of Pasteur* are nodes in which the narratives of individuals intersect with the network of Reason. Structural

parallelisms are premised upon the recurrent tropes like fire attack, death, book burning, sewing machine and carbolic acid. What stands out from these tropes is the lived experience of individuals whose configuration/reconfiguration of identity makes us rethink about our cherished ideas regarding colonial modernity.

The novel has a vast and varied ensemble of characters including middle class intellectual as well as rustic Bengalis, North Indians, South Indians and Arabians. Almost all the characters are caught, whether willingly or unwillingly, in the whirlpool created by capitalism, globalisation and modernity. As a Postcolonial writer, Ghosh's immediate concern is to represent the fate of the subaltern in the face of capitalism and neocolonialism. In "Who Can Save the Subaltern? Knowledge and Power in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" Sujala Singh contends that *The Circle* captures the subaltern subjectivity through the interplay of three discourses: "discourses of global migration, national power as bureaucratic fetishism, science as social mission" (47). In "Re-Writing the World: *The Circle of Reason* as the Beginning of the Quest" G J V Prasad points that Ghosh is "interested in unravelling existing (meta-)narratives and understanding the ways in which they trap us into roles the narratives have devised for us, and thus in rejecting such roles and such (meta-)narratives while constructing one's own narrative and role and significance" (57). Reason/Science is the obvious grand narrative that is put under microscope vis-à-vis individuals' micro narratives. Each individual, on his or her part, is in quest for "some measure of personal dignity, some degree of personal and collective significance" (Prasad, 57). This personal quest helps us to understand Ghosh's underlying critique of Reason.

What is peculiar in the novel is that the major characters try to organise and give a shape to their chaotic and trouble-ridden life by sticking to Reason. A similarity in their attempts is quite recognisable; but the differences in outcome are rather startling. In fact, Reason is invoked as the key component in the formation of individual subjectivity and

identity. But there is hardly any simple, linear correspondence between Reason and individual. The way individuals respond to Reason's vocation problematises its transcendental appeal.

In the novel, the character who introduces the imperative of Reason is Balaram Bose, a Bengali 'bhadralok' who worships Science. Several incidents in Balaram's life demonstrate why rationality/modernity is a problematic concept in Indian situation. In order to understand Balaram's frantic idealism regarding Science, we have to locate him in the context of anti-colonial and post-colonial nationalist thought. Though never openly articulated in the novel, we can detect in Balaram's Science fanaticism an underlying nationalist zeal in the years immediately preceding and following the Indian Independence in 1947. Balaram's obsession with Reason for the purpose of common good is symptomatic of the new nation's recourse to the Enlightenment thought. But the way his pursuit of Reason falls apart, making him a grotesque parody of a rational being, is indicative of the inherent incommensurability of Reason at the levels of both individuals and the Third World nation.

Born in Dhaka in 1914 in a prosperous timber-merchant family, Balaram has been a precocious child who is fascinated by scientific discoveries. When electric bulbs came to his house in 1927, he was simply enamoured of the magic of electricity, and pestered the Physics teacher at school with questions. Having passed the matriculation examination at the age of sixteen, he came to Calcutta to study History at Presidency College. His father initially wanted him to study at Dhaka University; but what he failed to fathom is that "Balaram was launching on a pilgrimage, a quest to retrace the steps of Jagadish Bose and Meghnad Saha from their native district of Bikrompur to Calcutta and Presidency College" (*The Circle*, 44). We must remember that Calcutta has always been looked as a centre of modernity by the Bengali gentlefolk.

At Presidency College, his infatuation with Science matured into a deep, lifelong love. He comes in contact with other devotees of Science. Particularly important is his friendship with Gopal Dey who was the secretary of a Science organisation named "Society for the Dissemination of Science and Rationalism among the people of Hindoostan." For the sake of convenience, its members called themselves "the Rationalists." The motto of the society was "Reason rescues Man from Barbarity." It is this Gopal who gifts Balaram a copy of René Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur* which was to influence Balaram's philosophy of life deeply. Balaram, in turn, gifts another copy of the same book to Hem Narain Mathur alias Dantu, a fellow Rationalist. The book also shapes Dantu's philosophy of life, and causes tremendous upheaval in his daughter's life.

Despite their lifelong friendship, there are many instances of striking difference between Balaram and Gopal on their perception of Reason/Science. As a secretary of the society, Gopal specifies that the Rationalists' "aim was the application of rational principles to everything around them—to their own lives, to society, to religion, to history" (*The Circle*, 49). Gopal expresses his conviction that ancient myths of India can be reinterpreted through Science. The goal of the society should be to make the common people of India aware of the scientific explanation of the myths so that they can understand how they have been exploited by the Brahmins. But Balaram objects to Gopal's way of running the organisation because rational reinterpretation of myths would not solve any of the practical problems in the daily life of the masses. As for the practical value of Science, Balaram cites the example of Pasteur whose research was inspired by the practical problems of some European brewers who wanted to know from him what causes the beer to rot. The search of answer to this question led Pasteur to his groundbreaking discovery of the microscopic germ which was responsible for hundreds of diseases. The discovery of the 'infinitely small' germ helped much to

improve the quality of life across the globe. Inspired by Pasteur, Balaram develops his philosophy of the universality of Science:

> "Science does not belong to countries. Reason does not belong to any nation. They belong to history—to the world" (*The Circle*, 57).

This conviction is nothing but the replication of the Enlightenment epistemology that had been deployed by the colonisers. It is his unwavering conviction in this philosophy which makes Balaram the man he is: a diehard rationalist who is committed to apply Science for the betterment of everyday life of common people.

Gopal, however, does not subscribe to Balaram's universalist idealism for Science. For Gopal, "Even Reason discovers itself through events and people" (*The Circle*, 41). Actually every scientific discovery is always bound with a particular socio-political-economic context and particular politics of power. It is undeniable that Pasteur's discovery revolutionised modern medicine and massively reduced mortality rates of children. But there is another side of the altruistic version of the story. It is the less acknowledged story which reminds us of Mignolo's contention that colonialism is the darker side of modernity. The fact is that Pasteur's research was deeply implicated in colonialism and capitalism. In "Historicizing Scientific Reason in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" Claire Chambers contends that Pasteur's breakthrough was crucial in bringing into being "tropical medicine, a branch of healthcare which, in the nineteenth century, was oriented towards maintaining the health of soldiers and administrators in the colonies" (Chambers, 46-47). Moreover, the branch of 'tropical medicine' was deployed by the colonisers as a symbol of superiority of Western knowledge over indigenous medical knowledge. Balaram's adulation of Pasteur for the latter's practical concern for humanity gets skewed when one remembers how Pasteur's discovery helped flourish luxury trades like those of beer and silk. Balaram praises Pasteur

for saving the brewers and the farmers of Europe from poverty; but he forgets how the European colonisers reduced Indian farmers to extreme poverty in the same period. It turns out that "Pasteur was working both in his own interests and those of his social milieu; certainly not for the good of what is vaguely known as 'mankind'" (Chambers, 46). Thus, Science is not really as transcendental and transcultural as Balaram believes it to be, but is always involved in vested interest and asymmetrical power relations. But as the novel does not directly relate the dark side of Pasteur's research, it may seem that Ghosh is in awe of Pasteur. In "Who Can Save the Subaltern? Knowledge and Power in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" Sujala Singh's contention that it is a misreading to "suggest that the idealism of Pasteur features in the novel because of Ghosh's unawareness of the fraught relationship between science and colonialism" (Singh, 56) seems, after all, to be a misreading of the novel. Singh's assertion that Ghosh's "faith in Pasteur can be explained in terms of the romance of the researcher that underlies much of Ghosh's work" (Singh, 56) is quite untenable because at the end of the day Ghosh is neither an anthropologist nor a historian but is a novelist who presents his themes and concerns through characters and plot. Singh's assertion that Ghosh is sympathetic to Pasteur does not seem a sound allegation when one probes into the trajectories of the characters in the novel.

But Balaram's idealism regarding Science is undermined by irony throughout his life. As a President of the Rationalists, Balaram decrees to clean underwear, inciting disgust in the members of the society. Dantu has the premonition that Balaram's eccentricities would only bring disaster in future. Balaram's infatuation with Science and scientists receives a jolt when as a subeditor of the *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, he goes to meet at Dum Dum airport the stalwarts of Science, the Nobel Prize winning scientist Madame Irène Joliot-Curie and her scientist husband Joliot Curie. He was over-excited to meet the renowned scientist because for him Madame Curie "was a legend come alive, a part of the secret world of boyhood, an

embodiment of the living tradition of science" (*The Circle*, 16). But there he makes himself the butt of ridicule by commenting on impulse. His silly remark earns him a public snubbing from his idolised scientists who, he used to believe, are not subject to physical exhaustion because they live "in the highest reaches of imagination" (*The Circle*, 16). He tries to dilute his humiliation by forcing a generalised apology for Scientists: "Nothing mattered to them—people, sentiments, humanity" (*The Circle*, 18). Instead of pondering on his humiliation, he flounces from Dum Dum to College Street, and diverts himself to *Practical Phrenology* which subsequently becomes his lifelong obsession. When he shows the book to Gopal later that day, Gopal tries hard to dissuade him from his infatuation with Science. The omniscient narrator presents their contradictory viewpoints thus:

> Balaram, he said warily, you've never studied science. You know nothing about anatomy. People like you and me just don't know enough about these things. We should leave them alone.
>
> How does that matter? Said Balaram. There are ideas in science like anything else. Do you ever tell me to stop reading history? Do I ever tell you to stop reading novels? (*The Circle*, 18)

The answer to this debate can be derived from the life trajectories of Balaram and Gopal. For Balaram, Science is as universal and general as history and literature. For Gopal, Science should better be left with the scientists. Balaram, a history graduate pursues Science and only invites misery in his life; Gopal, an English literature graduate and former president of the Rationalists, becomes a successful lawyer. The irony of Balaram's philosophy of rationality lies in the fact that he thinks himself eminently practical, but in reality, as Gopal rightly diagnoses, "the trouble with people like Balaram was that theories came first and the truth

afterwards" (*The Circle*, 14). Gopal shines in law, one of the manifestations of Reason, because he does not run after its universal significance.

Unable to bear the slighting faces of colleagues due his foolhardiness, Balaram quits his reporting job and takes up the job of a primary school teacher at Lalpukur, a small village 160 kilometres north of Calcutta. There he channelises all his energies into the Pseudo-Sciences of Phrenology and Criminology, believing them to be search for truth regarding human disposition. In his frantic ventures of Phrenology, he reduces human beings to objects. He almost pounces with his callipers upon eight year old Alu the moment the boy steps into his house. But most of his predictions—be it regarding Bhudeb Roy's sixth son or Dantu's career—prove wrong. What Balaram fails to notice is the particular historical and political context of the birth of now-discredited Pseudo-Sciences like Phrenology and Criminology. Claire Chambers has pointed out in the same essay mentioned earlier that both Phrenology and Criminology, which were revered in the first half of the nineteenth century, were deeply implicated in racial and colonial projects. Both George Combe and Cesare Lombroso whom Balaram hero-worships were racists because they proclaimed that Europeans were far superior in everything to non-Europeans. For Lombroso, writes Chambers, "the white body is perceived as the norm and anything else a deviation" (Chambers, 50-51). As Balaram's phrenological ventures go awry, and his wife burns all his books, he goes into new ventures—the ventures of education and carbolic acid — in imitation of Pasteur.

Balaram's rabid veneration for Reason finds its ultimate exposition in his *Pasteur School of Reason*. He dreams to make the school "the perfect embodiment, the essence of Reason" (*The Circle*, 118). Balaram initially divides the school in two sections: the Department of Pure Reason and the Department of Practical Reason. He takes up the post of Headmaster or "as he preferred to put it, the Fount of Reason" (*The Circle*, 116). The school becomes a success and fetches good amount of money from the sales of clothes prepared by

the students. But Balaram is not satisfied with easy success, and he opens another section, the Department of the March of Reason. The purpose of this section, he declares, is to disinfect the entire village with carbolic acid. The school, built on Government land, has already incurred Bhudeb Roy's envy, and Balaram's carbolic acid campaign only intensifies his ire against Balaram and his ally Shombhu Debnath. Balaram's march of Reason soon turns into a march of personal animosity as Shombhu pours huge loads of carbolic acid upon Bhudeb from the top of a tree. Soon Shombhu's hut is burnt down; Balaram and Bhudeb become sworn enemies. Bhudeb tries to dissuade Balaram from his mad campaign of carbolic acid, but Balaram considers Bhudeb as "one of the obstacles which will litter the path of Reason" (*The Circle*, 128). As his enmity with Bhudeb Roy escalates and he frantically guards his house with huge storage of carbolic acid in order to foil Bhudeb Roy's anticipated attack, the latter comes and peacefully informs Balaram of the suspected abduction of his wife by Balaram's associate Shombhu Debnath, Balaram frantically attacks Bhudeb Roy and his companions with his squirt gun. In retaliation, Bhudeb Roy's goons bomb Balaram's house at night, resulting in the death of Balaram, Toru Debi, Maya and Rakhal. Alu survives because he happens not to be at the house at that moment.

The peculiarity of Balaram's disposition lies in the fact that he learns nothing from his experience and sticks to his childhood fancy that Science is universal and universally good for entire mankind. The ragging he faces at his dream city, the humiliation he is subjected to by his Science heroes and the ludicrous predictions he makes on the basis of his much loved truth-oriented subject do not discourage him from implementing Science in one way or other. Because of his too much adulation of Reason, he fails to see the darker side of Science. For example, in the evening of that day on which Balaram was humiliated at the airport, both Balaram and Gopal listen to Madame Curie's speech on the importance and utility of nuclear physics in coming days. Gopal reminds him of the trauma of nuclear bombing at Hiroshima

which, at this point of plot, occurred only three and half years ago, and which Balaram had to report with a feeling of unease. But Balaram, however, remains the same person.

Balaram's interpretation of his enmity with Bhudeb Roy is another example of how nationalist thought fails to understand the cunning of Reason. Balaram thinks that his alter ego Bhudeb Roy is against Reason. He equals Bhudeb's allergy to carbolic acid as the latter's aversion to Reason: "Bhudeb Roy lives in mortal fear of carbolic acid...He fears it as he fears everything that is true and clean and a child of Reason" (*The Circle*, 108). Ironically enough, Bhudeb, a science graduate, is never bothered about the universal values of Reason. He uses Reason in the forms of education, 'straight lines' and police administration for sheer accumulation of wealth and power. Balaram's nationalistic avidity for disinfecting the whole village is thwarted by Bhudeb not because the latter is against the march of Reason, but because it threatens his monopoly over the village. Partha Chatterjee's take on the limitation of the Reason-infatuated nationalism is spot on in case of Balaram. Never in his life, Balaram gains a clear understanding of the paradoxical potential of Reason in post-colonial milieu.

In Ghosh's portrayal, Balaram is an example of the complex colonial subjects in post-colonial times. At the level of individual temperament, he is a bizarre mockery of what a rational person ought to be. In the pursuit of rationality, he performs impulsive, irrational and absurd activities one after another. He is a mimic man who unwittingly embodies colonial epistemology which moulds his subjectivity and identity. We are reminded of Mignolo's diagram of 'the colonial matrix of power' one axis of which among the four is represented by knowledge and subjectivity. Balaram exemplifies how the legacy of colonial knowledge is internalised and upheld by the post-colonial subject. Interestingly, however, Balaram also brings out the failure of Western epistemology to completely mould the colonial subject. Thus, instead of being objective, unprejudiced, practical and rational, we find Balaram to be passionate, prejudiced, impractical, irrational and insane to a large extent. Even Shombhu

Debnath who has never read a book on Science requests Balaram to stop his madness. He finds "No reason" in Balaram's crazy activities: "There's no reason to go on like this" (*The Circle*, 153). But Balaram is never conscious of the disjunction that Reason causes in his life. We find the consciousness of this disjunction in certain other characters in the novel.

III

The other characters who are significantly embroiled in Reason in one way or other are Alu, Jyoti Das and Dr. Uma Verma. Each of them carries the legacy of different manifestations of Rason. Alu is a direct heir to Balaram's philosophy of Reason. Jyoti Das, an ASP of Police, is an embodiment of the alienation suffered by the colonised subjects because of the imposition of rationality. Mrs. Verma, an Indian microbiologist working in Algeria, represents the rupture engendered in the psyche of the colonised subject due to the internalisation/imposition of Western epistemology. All of them manifest an aporia in their subjectivity and identity. The aporia makes them split subjects who have to bear the brunt of the internalisation of Western epistemology.

Balaram's nephew Alu takes forward Balaram's legacy of Reason, albeit in a different avatar. His real name is Nachiketa Bose; the name has a special connotation which is both invoked and parodied in Ghosh's layered text. As per Upanishadic legends, Nachiketa is a child who, having obtained the knowledge of the secret of life and death from 'Yama, the Lord of death,' returns alive to earth from the world of death. Nachiketa was a seeker of truth and the metaphysical dimension of life. Ghosh's choice of the name implicitly predicts the role that Alu is to play in the novel. However, hardly anybody, even his uncle and aunt, utters the name Nachiketa; he is called Alu by everyone. In English, Alu means potato; he got the name because of unusual protuberances on his head. Orphaned at the age of eight, he is raised up by his uncle and aunt at Lalpukur. Balaram initiates Alu into the principle of

Reason, and after his death, Alu retrieves the legacy in a distant place and different context, with complex results.

When Alu comes to live with his uncle and aunt at Lalpukur, he is a withdrawn, emotionless, and reticent boy. His unusual bumpy head prompts Balaram to rush to the boy with his skull-measuring callipers right at the moment of his stepping into the house, and it only scares the already bereaved boy. Balaram, already baffled with the incomprehensibility of Alu's head, tells Gopal of Alu's lack of emotion. It is only when Gopal points out that the boy might be trying to overcome the grief of the demise of his parents, then Balaram realises the need to get close to the boy. That evening, he tries to enliven the boy by advising him not to ponder over past, and think of future instead. He tries to instil in the boy a desire to change the world, and in order to give him a model example of changing the world, reads a crucial passage from *Life of Pasteur* to him:

> He scanned the boy's face. Alu, he said, don't you want to change the world? The boy looked at him steadily, his eyes larger than ever, says nothing.
>
> How can one change the world, Balaram said, if one has no passion?
>
> The boy did not respond. Suddenly Balaram felt himself strangely touched by the boy's wide-eyed silence. He felt his throat constrict, and in embarrassment he reached for the copy of Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur* which always lay beside his chair, and began to read him the chapter about that turning point in history of the world—6 July 1885—when Louis Pasteur took his courage in his hands and at the risk of his reputation and his whole professional life (for he had never lacked for enemies) filled a Pravoz syringe and inoculated poor, hopeless ten-year-old Joseph Meister, only that day savaged by a rabid dog, with his still untested vaccine.

> When he stopped and put the book down he saw tears in Alu's eyes. (*The Circle*, 30-31)

This is the moment of Alu's initiation into the philosophy of Reason as an altruistic social mission that Balaram himself so earnestly believes. The first ostensible burst of emotion in Alu is indicative of the transformation of his worldview. *Life of Pasteur* becomes an object of spiritual significance, a kind of totem for Alu, as it is for Balaram. A few days later when Toru Debi burns all books of Balaram, Alu manages to snatch *Life of Pasteur* from the heap of burning books. When he gives Balaram the book at night, Balaram breaks into tears. The book becomes a talismanic object which links past with present and connects generations with the thread of Reason.

Having initiated Alu into the philosophy of universal Reason, Balaram introduces him to weaving. For this purpose, he apprentices the boy to Shombhu Debnath, a master weaver. According to Balaram, weaving is one of the concrete manifestations of universal Reason because it "has never permitted the division of reason" (*The Circle*, 59). A weaver is "the finest example of Mechanical man" (*The Circle*, 59) who creates and shapes his own destiny. But here again, irony creeps in through the third person narrator's voice which merges imperceptibly with that of Balaram. Weaving, a technological manifestation of Reason, is stained with bloody history in modern times, since the sixteenth century. The horrible history of England and other European countries murdering the weavers of non-European countries and forcing these countries to buy European clothes only attests to the fact that the "machine had driven men mad" (*The Circle*, 61). The paradox of weaving is, as the narrator tells us, that "it has no country, no continent", and it "makes the world mad and makes it human" at the same time (*The Circle*, 62).

The way Alu quickly masters intricate weaving skills and develops an intense passion for it shows that weaving becomes the means of giving a coherence to his otherwise shambolic life. Weaving, however, is not the only manifestation of Reason that Alu takes recourse to in order to give meaning to his life. Being framed as a wanted terrorist by the Indian bureaucracy, Alu manages to flee from Lalpukur to Calcutta to Mahe to al-Ghazira where he lives with a small community of diasporic Indian and Arab labourers. He is pursued all the way by Jyoti Das, the ASP of police. The desire to change the world on the principle of Reason, which was inculcated in him by Balaram, is resurrected in him after he miraculously survives the collapse of the Star, a massive new building in al-Ghazira. The fall of the Star is symbolic of the fall of capitalism in the Third World countries. Alu, however, remains in a little space created by two sewing machines under the rubble for a few days. At first, everyone of his adopted community thinks that he is dead; but when discovered alive under the mountain of dust and concrete, he is absolutely calm and unworried. Abu Fahl reports to the anxious community in the Ras that under the rubble Alu is "thinking about cleanliness and dirt and the Infinitely Small" (*The Circle*, 253). Pasteurian legacy is reactivated, but this time with a twist. The Infinitely Small Alu plans to fight against is not only the germ, but is also money which he calls the battleground of germ. This Alu is not the old Alu, but a new man, a disciple of Pasteur. When he is ultimately rescued from the rubble, "he seemed to have come out a new man altogether, if such a thing is possible" (*The Circle*, 296). Despite the apparent difference between Balaram's project and Alu's project, both are grounded on the same philosophy of Science as a universal social mission.

This new Alu initiates a crusade against money and germ. Money, he explains to his community, carries "contagion and filth, sucking people out and destroying them even in the safety of their own houses" (*The Circle*, 302). Moreover, it is money which makes men fight against each other and ultimately destroy each other. He narrates before his astonished

audience the biography of Louis Pasteur and concludes that despite all his breakthroughs, Pasteur was ultimately a defeated man because Pasteur had never detected the real enemy, money. Pasteur, Alu infers, had fought against germ but had failed to understand that the source of all germs is money. What Alu means is that capitalism drains the earnings of poor labourers and makes the rich richer. So the fight against germ should be complemented by the fight against money. As a self-certified heir to Pasteur, he declares to "wage war on money" (*The Circle*, 302). As for the practical plan for driving away money, it is Professor Samuel who pops up with an elaborate plan. It is a kind of communist system in which everybody's earning will be stored in a common pool, with entry into individual's file. Besides, the fight against germ starts with carbolic acid. All the familiar places in al-Ghazira suddenly seem to them to be infected with germs.

The fight against money and the fight against germ coalesce when Abu Fahl, a labourer and Adil the Blue, a labour contractor, get into an altercation. When Adil the Blue and his cousin are brought to Hajj Fahmy's courtyard for judgement after their failed attempt to crush Abu Fahl under their car, Hajj Fahmy absolutely astonishes everyone by decreeing that as punishment the two culprits would have to take a bath. And while all these things happen, Alu the 'Mechanical man' continues to weave incessantly at Hajj Fahmy's loom. After the two contractors have to bathe in utter humiliation, Abu Fahl and others decide to retrieve the two sewing machines from the debris of the Star in order to gift them to Alu. In the midst of fervid frenzy of people, only Zindi understands the sheer madness in all these things. Zindi pleads in vain — like Shombhu pleading to Balaram in the first section — to Hajj Fahmy to stop the venture. Zindi foresees dangers and seeks ways to escape. On the way to the Star in the evening, they were attacked by the vigilant authority with firing and tear gas, resulting in mayhem. Karthamma dies and all of them are injured. Alu's vision of a money-free and germ-free society ends in absolute fiasco as the entire community has to

leave al-Ghazira. Alu's enlightenment during his confinement under the rubble is an ironic inversion of the mythological narrative of Nachiketa. Both return from the clutch of death; but whereas Nachiketa learns the secret of life, Alu does not fully understand what he is doing: "He could no longer understand what he'd started" (*The Circle*, 340). The failure of Alu's scheme can be attributed to the mismatch between Reason and the Third World. At the level of individual, Alu is as impractical and impulsive as his guru Balaram was. What Ghosh tries to show is the dangerous outcome of the uncritical acceptance of Western modernity by the peoples of the Third World. I return to Alu a little later. As for now, let me focus on another character, Jyoti Das to understand how the imposition of Western rationality can have complex results on a non-European.

Jyoti Das, the Assistant Superintendent of Police, gets the charge to investigate Bhudeb Roy's accusation of Balaram as an extremist. He is, however, very reluctant to go deep into the case, and investigates the case with half-hearted willingness. Though he holds the prestigious post of a gazetted police officer, in reality Jyoti is a dreamer and artist who is always fascinated with birds. Born and brought up in a typical lower middle class Bengali family at Calcutta, he is expected by his father to excel in study and become a Class I administrative officer. For Jyoti's father, a middle class Bengali boy can only survive and shine in life by studying hard and driving away all sorts of fancy from life. We get a glimpse of the anxiety of Jyoti's father when on Jyoti's eleventh birthday he took the boy to Alipur Zoo where the boy was wonderstruck by looking at the migratory and other variety of birds:

> Looking at them in the flesh he was struck with wonder, and as he watched them gloried in the peace, the order, the serenity granted by a law on such a vast and immutable scale. He could have stayed there for hours, but soon his father's voice was behind him: Always daydreaming, worthless boy. Never

> works. He'll never pass his examinations. . . And he was led away by the collar of his birthday T-shirt. (*The Circle*, 39-40).

Himself a lower-rank revenue official, Jyoti's father's anxiety for his son shows how the Western form of education, another manifestation of Reason, has permeated the mentality of middle class Indians. The imperative to do well in the examination haunts every middle class Indian till today. The agony that Jyoti's father feels in the face of a little bit of chaos (he said little earlier, having seen a group of boys drinking rum inside the zoo: "Chaos; that's all that's left. Chaos, chaos.") indicates his deep reliance on rationality as an organising principle in man's life.

Jyoti partially fulfils his father's desire by cracking the Civil Service examination and becoming a gazetted police officer and later finding a post in the Union Secretariat. But deep down his heart he is a birder-cum-artist who loves to watch and paint birds. Observing birds and painting them are spiritually fulfilling for Jyoti. His service, another product of Reason in its bureaucratic avatar, however, demands him to be methodical, courageous, hard-working, inquisitive and brilliant in order to solve criminal cases. But Jyoti turns out to be something else. He cannot help thinking about birds all the time. He does chase Alu, the only survivor of the case; but he does so with extreme reluctance. He travels from Calcutta to Mahe to al-Ghazira to El Qued apparently to arrest absconding Alu; but actually he goes everywhere with the hope of seeing birds.

In al-Ghazira Jyoti strikes everyone he meets as a boyish and strange fellow who is not in his right mind. Having seen the judgement scene of the two contractors at Hajj Fahmy's courtyard, he runs away from the site in bewilderment. Zindi reports that he "was shocked: it was as though the world had suddenly started moving backwards" (*The Circle*, 341). While returning he, "like a child in search of a secret", plagues Zindi with questions on

birds (*The Circle*, 343). After that, Jyoti sleeps for thirty two hours. It indicates his exhaustion and bewilderment at the phenomena of the Reason-governed world. His police job makes him an alienated, bewildered man. His identity as a police officer makes him suppress his true calling to the world of art and birds. He turns out to be a liminal and existential figure. However, despite his reluctance to pursue Alu, Jyoti comes to El Qued where Zindi, Alu and Kulfi have fled after the fiasco at al-Ghazira. At El Qued, Alu and Kulfi pretend as husband and wife, with Zindi as their ayah for Boss (actually Karthamma's son) whom they pass as their son. They reside temporarily with the diasporic Indian doctor Mrs. Verma who happens to be arranging for the presentation of Tagore's dance play *Chitrangada* at that time. Mrs. Verma selects Kulfi to play the role of Chitrangada and Jyoti to play the role of Arjuna. Jyoti gets smitten with love for Kulfi whom he proposes during rehearsal. In excitement, Kulfi suffers a massive heart attack and dies. Jyoti finally meets his target Alu over the corpse of Kulfi. After the funeral of Kulfi, he decides to migrate, much like birds, to Germany to start a new life. As he accompanies Alu and Zindi to Tangier, he looks at the dolphins and birds, and found solace in nature's splendour. "It was very beautiful," the narrator says, "and he was at peace" (*The Circle*, 457). As he waves to Alu for the last time and looks at the Eastern horizon, he visualises "continents of defeat—defeat at home, defeat in the world—and he shut his eyes, for he had looked on it for too many years and he could not bear to look on it any longer" (*The Circle*, 457). This is the defeat he has to suffer because of the imposition of rationality upon him. His search for a new life is indicative of his rejection of the imposed identity, and it signals a journey towards the realisation of the potential of his artistic self.

How the imposition of Western rationality upon an individual can cause alienation is evidenced by another character, Dr. Uma Verma. We are introduced to her in the final section of the novel. She lives and works, with her doctor husband, at the small Algerian town El

Qued. Mrs. Verma, who hails from Dehradun in India, is a microbiologist. At El Qued, also work two other Indian medical professionals Dr. Maithili Sharan Mishra and Miss Krishnaswammy, a nurse. When Zindi, Alu and Kulfi fortuitously meet her, it turns out to be a lucky meet on both sides. Zindi, Alu and Kulfi with ill Boss are desperately in need of a shelter whereas Mrs. Verma is in need of an Indian woman who will play the role of Chitrangada. The urgency of Dr. Verma's search for a young Indian woman in Algeria is caused by the challenge she has accepted from Dr. Mishra to present Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada* on the occasion of the third anniversary of their stay at El Qued. The preparation for the performance brings to the fore Ghosh's critique of several aspects of Reason.

The debate on Reason starts with Mrs. Verma's objection to Dr. Mishra's claim to be a socialist. Actually, Mrs. Verma is the daughter of Balaram's college friend Hem Narain Mathur aka Dantu whose devotion to Reason found outlets in two forms—first, his high regard for Science and scientist like Pasteur and second, his selfless rural socialism. Mrs. Verma points out the difference between the selfless socialists and the elite socialists in India .Dr. Mishra's father Murali Charan Mishra was an elite socialist. The hypocrisy of elite socialists in India lies in the difference between their lecture on poverty and their luxurious lifestyle. While Murali Charan Mishra became rich and powerful on the pretext of curing poverty, Hem Narain Mathur lost everything and lived an obscure life as a school teacher at Dehradun. If socialism is one of the manifestations of Reason, then we see that it is distorted more often than not in India.

Though Hem Narain Mathur could not fulfil his dream of creating a rational society, he put all his hopes on his daughter. From her childhood, he has taught her the value and importance of Science. It is he who decided what she should study. The common point between her and Alu is that their lives are moulded by the same book *Life of Pasteur*. But there is a difference: whereas Alu is still in awe of the book, she is completely disillusioned

with it. Thus when Alu discovers *Life of Pasteur* which was gifted to her father by Balaram in 1932 with the inscription of "To remember Reason"(*The Circle*, 426) at her bookcase, he is emotionally driven to call the book "the only brother" whom he had lost and now finds. Mrs. Verma, disenchanted as she is with the burden of carrying "Pasteur's heritage" (*The Circle*, 427), informs Alu of the grim reality: "you can love a book but a book can't love you" (*The Circle*, 427). She reveals that it is because of *Life of Pasteur* that she is now a microbiologist. She has never realised her very own self. She admits that "I'm too much of my father's daughter" (*The Circle*, 427). But the fact is that she hates microbiology and eagerly wants to get rid of the book. Because of the forced imposition of microbiology upon her, she has been unhappy her entire life. For her human values are more important than dry rationality. Thus, after the death of Kulfi, she goes into a tense debate with Dr. Mishra in order to give a Hindu cremation to Kulfi. Dr. Mishra who claims himself to be very rational cites all sorts of Brahminical rules and rituals in order to thwart the cremation. It is the same Dr. Mishra who, however, made fun of Indian mythology little earlier when Mrs. Verma proposed to present a slice of Indian culture to their Algerian colleagues. Dr. Mishra's superstitious mind under the garb of a rationalist comes out when he objects to Mrs. Verma's using of carbolic acid instead of the holy water of the Ganga in order to clean the floor where she is to disembowel Kulfi's corpse. Mrs. Verma protests very logically by arguing that what is important is cleaning; whether that is done with Ganga-jal or with carbolic acid is immaterial in case of the dead. Dr. Mishra bursts out: "For a microbiologist...you're not very rational, Mrs Verma" (*The Circle*, 445). Mrs. Verma has her answer ready: "I hate microbiology" (*The Circle*, 445). She explains to Dr. Mishra that a microbiologist can only detect physical germs. But she wonders, after so many years of practice, whether all the germs are external to our minds, and whether the germs "are anything other than a bodily metaphor for human pain and unhappiness and perhaps joy as well" (*The Circle*, 446). Then she comes to her hard-earned

realisation which tyrannical and despotic Science has forbidden so long: "There's nothing wrong with your body—all you have to do to cure yourself is try to be a better human being" (*The Circle*, 446). This is exactly what she does. She takes all trouble to arrange a funeral for an almost unknown woman. She breaks away from the path of dry rationalism, and in doing so, she casts away the imposed identity as a microbiologist. This process is completed with her decision of giving a funeral to *Life of Pasteur*. As Alu returns her the book she does not want, she suggests to put the book on Kulfi's burning pyre and Alu "placed it reverently on the pyre" (*The Circle*, 449). This act of burning the book which caused havoc in her life and identity is symbolic of her rejection of the universal value of Reason. It can be said that the birth of her true self is accomplished at the cost of discarding her imposed self and identity.

IV

That *The Circle* is a stringent satire on the much-inflated Reason has been pointed out by several critics from various perspectives. In fact, critics have often focused on Ghosh's meticulous presentation of the discourse of Pasteurian science or the history of weaving or the abject conditions of the Third World workers in a capitalist, globalised world. Samrat Laskar finds a similarity between Charles Dickens' take on facts in *Hard Times* and Ghosh's take on Reason in *The Circle*. Being a postcolonial writer, Ghosh "investigates the nature of the epistemology of reason and castigates the Western philosophy that authenticates empirical truth, reason and scientific knowledge at the expense of imagination and irrationality" (Laskar, 104). Both Balaram and Alu behave in irrational and impulsive manner; they are governed by passion rather than by Reason. Anshuman A. Mondal observes that the way Reason is entangled with bloody history of weaving and colonial knowledge system makes it both as "liberating and oppressive; linear and straight forward, and circular

and convoluted; reasonable and unreasonable" (*Amitav Ghosh*, 8). In "Police and Postcolonial Rationality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" Yumna Siddiqi contends that the police administration, which is a legacy of the Enlightenment, acts as a tool of oppression in the post-colonial state by victimising soldiers of Reason like Balaram and Alu. In his brilliant essay "Inner Circles and the Voices of the Shuttle: Native Forms and Narrative Structure in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" Robbie B. H. Goh argues the novel brings out the aporias of Reason through the bodily deformities and the abject life of the natives. For them Reason seems "to hold out so much promise to transform and redeem third-world society, but which in the final analysis are distant and impracticable" (212-213). While all these readings offer nuanced analysis of the novel in their own way, they miss out one important question. The question is: how does the novel foreground the ironies and limits of Reason? Through abstract, generalised theorising or through human predicament? One should keep in mind that Ghosh is writing a novel, not political and cultural theories. I view the novel through the lens of subjectivity and identity in order to understand Ghosh's critique of Reason.

. To Ghosh, novel is the most complete form of human expression because of its flexibility to encompass all varieties of human experience. As a novelist, Ghosh's chief concern is, as already mentioned in the 'Introduction,' individual predicament through which he addresses larger ethical issues. And here comes the role of subjectivity and cultural identity. In fact, Ghosh offers his critique of colonial modernity through the subjectivity and identity of characters. Identity, according to Stuart Hall, is a matter of conscious and strategic positioning within the narratives of culture. And it is through the identity of certain characters Ghosh has shown how Western modernity is, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has postulated, both inevitable and inadequate in the Indian context. As for Balaram, he is totally immersed in Science. His subjective position is rather inflexible; he loves to see himself as a rationalist.

Alu blindly imitates his uncle's path, but without properly understanding where it would lead. They exemplify the legacy of epistemic colonisation in post-colonial times. Their desire to preach the 'Western Code' as 'truth without parenthesis' in the Third World context makes them mimic men. The epistemic violence they try to enforce in the Third World results in conflict, imbroglio and death. Jyoti Das and Mrs. Verma, on the other hand, reconfigure their identity in order to better realise the meaning of their life. They reject what Mignolo calls 'egopolitics of knowledge,' that is, the universal values of the 'Western Code.'

Jyoti's identity as an ASP and Mrs. Verma's identity as a microbiologist do not augur well for their selfhood. Each of them feels bottled up, circumscribed, and leads an unhappy life. Jyoti quits his job, and goes to Germany with the hope to realise his artistic potential. Mrs. Verma burns *Life of Pasteur*, and emerges as a champion of humanity. Mrs. Verma no longer remains too much of her father's daughter, and emerges as a person on her own right.

As both Jyoti and Mrs. Verma are disillusioned with Reason, what they do is, what Mignolo calls, 'epistemic delinking' which frees them from imposed identity. At the end of the novel, they emerge as new human beings, and they no longer have to fit themselves into any pre-conceived roles. Their position relating to identity is only contingent and provisional; such positioning is required, as Hall suggests, to undermine colonial imposition. Identity formation, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is often a dialogic process that involves conscious choice and self-reflection. Western epistemology in the form of Science may be projected as a universal and powerful tool for shaping individuals in distant territories, but there is no certainty that it will have the desired effect of producing mimic men. Let me quote here an excerpt from Ghosh's 2005 interview with Chitra Sankaran:

> CS: It's interesting how ultimately it is human predicaments that illustrate these ethical/moral issues and I think that's what seems to be at the center of

> your novel writing. In a sense it is through human predicaments that you come back to address these larger ethical issues. And I think that is particularly true in relation to scientific issues and individual predicament. In both *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Hungry Tide*, you have this connect between individuals and larger issues of science. Do you feel that in some way *The Calcutta Chromosome* led to *The Hungry Tide* even though you have *The Glass Palace* in between?
>
> AG: Yes; let's even go further back—in *The Circle of Reason* science plays a very large part. Yes, that's been a continuous thread in my work. Just one thing more I want to say about this whole issue of writing about marginalization and so on is that I'm not interested in victimhood even though I'm drawn to people who are on the margins of things. I'm interested in people who shape their own lives in some sense or who give up shaping their lives, or who find themselves defeated. (*History, Narrative and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*, 13-14)

If we look at the characters of *The Circle* in the light of the above statement, we can understand that Balaram and his protégé Alu are examples of psychological defeat on part of the subaltern. They are defeated because they are trapped in the circle of Reason. The word 'defeat' recurs throughout the novel, making it almost a motif. As Gopal and Balaram were listening to Madame Curie's speech on the glory of nuclear physics in ushering in a new stage of human prosperity, Gopal reminds Balaram of the nuclear bombing on Hiroshima, and Balaram has to digest "a little defeat" (*The Circle*, 19). Alu concludes that "Pasteur had died a defeated man" because he never realised that the real battleground of germ is money (*The Circle*, 301). As for Jyoti, he also sees defeat everywhere— "defeat at home, defeat in

the world" (*The Circle*, 457). Balaram's and Alu's identities as rationalist prove too much for them; their grotesque and irrational thinking and activities do them in.

But in the midst of all such defeats, there is a strong resistance by Mrs. Verma to the universalist claim of Reason. She breaks away from the circle of Reason. Jyoti also breaks away from the trap of Reason and goes to Europe in quest for a new identity. As for Mrs. Verma, she denounces her identity as a microbiologist. She is reborn, perhaps, as a new human being who is full of empathy and concern for fellow human beings. Jyoti and Mrs. Verma attempt, what Mignolo calls, "epistemic and subjective decolonization" (*The Darker Side*, xxviii). But we should keep in mind that Ghosh never criticises rationality/modernity in itself; he rather focuses on its incompatibility as a universal model. Decoloniality is only an option, not a universal model. The call of Reason in the time of nation building was an irresistible call that moved the patriotic intellectuals. We are reminded of Dipesh Chakrabarty's contention that modernity/Reason is "both indispensible and inadequate" for the Third World countries. It should be noted that the intent of Balaram, Alu and Dantu is to do the welfare of humanity; what is wrong with them is their blind method which is predicated upon the philosophy of universal Reason. The novel makes the reader aware that while Reason in itself is not a bad thing, its beneficial potential gets fizzled out and distorted when implemented universally, without paying attention to local exigencies.

The Circle exposes the limits of universal Reason through immediacy of the lived experience of people from the Third World. One may argue that the disjunction suffered by Balaram, Alu and the rest are because of the fact that they pursue a misleading option and hence are not in their usual selves which ultimately destroy them. When a man is not in his natural self, his personality suffers an unnaturalness. But we must remember that the misleading option is chosen by them because of their blind adherence to Reason. On the whole, the novel interrogates Reason-backed objective truth, and "invokes the vision of how

individual lives bear witness to subjective perceptions of "truth" that drive their lives along specific paths and change their destinies" (Sankaran, xv). This strategy is carried over in Ghosh's later novels also. *The Circle* is the first step of a long journey of 'epistemic disengagement' and 'border thinking' that Ghosh was to make throughout his literary career. On the whole *The Circle* provides a critique of Reason as a legacy of colonial modernity through the unique predicament of individual subjectivity and identity, but does not offer any opposing or alternative stance to colonial modernity. This issue has been dealt with in the next chapter which is on *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

Notes

1. Devy says this in the context of the current status of knowledge in India. *The Crisis Within* is Devy's reflection of the crisis in the fields of knowledge and education in post-colonial India. Given the legacy of colonial knowledge system, the current institutional forms of education in India face tremendous challenges from within. Devy addresses some of these in the book.