Chapter III
Transgressive Characters

Transgression is the nature of literary characters who feel confined by the norms and expectations of society and they try to break free of those confines in unusual or illicit ways. Because they rebel against the basic norms of society, characters of transgressive fiction may seem mentally ill, anti-social or nihilistic. The genre deals extensively with taboo subject matters such as drug, sexual activities, violence, incest, pedophilia and crime.

*The Circle of Reason* (1986) has received less than its due acclaim. Ghosh is writing for a largely non-Indian audience about Indian matters. He says, for instance, that it is difficult for anybody who has not been through the sort of debates that Indian socialism indulged in during the 1960s and 1970s to understand one of his main themes; that you cannot apply rational solutions to problems while ignoring the history of the people. Indian socialism, he says, has always been more international, less rooted in its own soil, than European socialism, which perhaps partly accounts for its evident failure to turn India into a socialist country.

The novel *The Circle of Reason* would seem to disclaim any magical content, though the contradiction in it cancels the rational in favour of the cyclical. His characters think they are walking a straight line, but they are going round, powered by hope, in that non-productive circle that life too often imposes on the poor.

The novel is divided into three parts: *Satwa*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. Ghosh translates the Sanskrit terms through the subtitles ‘Reason’, ‘Passion’ and ‘Death’. As philosophical, scriptural terms, *Satwa*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* are defined in the *Bhagavad*
*Gita* as the three ‘constituents’ of the ‘embodied soul’ the three primary aspects of earthly being that give the body its existence. The translation of the terms into the less absolute tripartite definitions as Goodness, Passion and Darkness makes them sound easier to grasp. In other words, they could be termed light and wisdom, emotion and confusion and bleakness and ignorance. The scope of arts and abstract philosophical questioning that Ghosh implacably opens up is potentially infinitely circular, and complexly intersexual. But while he might be read as inviting the reader to understand the novel as a commentary on or a re-writing of the lessons of Hindu philosophy, this picaresque, tangential epic is almost defined by its very resistance to refined, abstract propositions. Rather than re-considering and establishing a hierarchy of qualities, the narrative constantly debunks the apparent clarity of distinction between these three concepts. Each, as it is enacted through the small and large histories told within the text, appears to contain and devalue the other. As an extreme passion, reason circles into and comes itself to signify death, horror and destruction in this novel. This is starkest and most disturbing in the opening stories of the reason obsessed character, Balaram. But the point is more broadly made in considering the ‘curse’ and ‘salvation’.

Man at the loom is the finest example of Mechanical man, a creature who makes his own world as no other can with his mind. The machine is man’s curse and his salvation, and no machine has created man as much as the loom. It has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognized no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together with its bloody ironies from the beginning of human time. (*TCR 55*)
The Circle of Reason begins with the arrival of an orphan; Nachiketa Bose is immediately renamed by the village Lalpukur as Balaram and Tori-debi’s life, becoming Alu, meaning potato because of the extraordinarily lumpy shape of his head.

But, still, it was an extraordinary head-huge, several times too large for an eight year old and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps, Someone said: It’s like a rock covered with fungus.---- No, it’s not like a rock at all. It’s an alu, a potato, a huge, freshly dug, lumpy potato. (TCR 3)

The Circle of Reason begins with the arrival of orphan, Nachiketa Bose who is immediately renamed by the village, becoming Alu, meaning potato because of the extraordinarily lumpy shape of his head. In his review of the book, Anthony Burgess dismissively comments that: “A deformed protagonist is to be expected in some brands of magic realism” (Anthony Burgess 6).

But Alu is more than a cliché of the genre. At one level, Ghosh relishes the bumps and nobles of the boy’s head as part of his exaggerated focus on the intensely mere physicality of life. The book abounds with one eyed Arab strong men, tongue less Chinamen, weak-eyed visionary egg sellers; men who always frown because their mothers dreamt of barbed wire the night before they were born; the outrageously fat, the preposterously skinny, the emphatic physicality of the lost, the outcast, the unrecognized, people without visa who are nevertheless undeniably corporeal and unique.

If youth and bodily perfection are the norms, then most of the characters lack them. Their identities are determined by their deformities. Though they seem to be
occupying outlandish space they tend to affirm their identities through their subversive and transgressive behaviour.

The first section of *The Circle of Reason*, over a third of the book tells of the life of a village in West Bengal, near the border with what in the opening part of the text is East Pakistan, and in the course of the narrative distantly becomes Bangladesh. The creation of Bangladesh is signified by the slow swelling of the village as starving refugees trickle and then flow across the border, settle around the village, and then move on. While the descriptions of these people are stark, they are also strangely peripheral to the village community, to the relationships, intrigues and battle of will that give it life. On the first page and throughout this section, there is this great banyan tree under which people talk, rallies are held and rickshaws wait for custom, seem to be offered as a metaphor for the village. The following lines are illuminative:

How would a boy of eight, brought up in the clamour and excitement of Calcutta, like Lalpukur, she had wondered as the cycle rickshaw, honking with flurries of its rubber hooter, took her down the red dust lanes of the village, past the great vaulted and pillared banyan tree with the tea shop and Bolai-da’s unrepaired cycle nestling in the dark niches in its trunk, past the rickety shed of the pharmacy, where the young men of the village gathered in the evenings to read newspaper and play cards and drink toddy; (TCR 6)

This encourages a reading of the community as being equally old, organic and self contained, as timeless and generationally moving around the tree in similar patterns, arguing politics, gossiping, and chasing children. It is disconcerting, and then to discover later that the village is not even a generation old but was created post 1947, after the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. The people of the village
are Bengalis, but from East of the border, now another nation. This history, almost casually told, does not so much falsify this idea of village, as deconstruct the distinction between indigenous and migrant people, imploding the terms of native and non-native. This leads Ghosh to ever-expanding stories of the migrant roots and re-routing of all people; rather it concentrates him into ever stranger stories of forced journeys, illegal border crossings and permanently impermanent settlements.

But at another level, Alu’s head gains a complex metaphysical meaning. Balaram, Alu’s uncle can hardly believe his luck when the boy comes to live with him. In his pursuit of reason, he has become a passionate phrenologist. In Alu’s head he perceives a sort time of study. Balaram’s obsession with this discredited branch of science seems to bear out his friend Gopal’s accusation that:

It is real to be cut to size with tape? What is heard is rhetoric. How can rhetoric be real or unreal? Rhetoric is language flexing its muscles, you wouldn’t understand: you’ve spent too many years reading novels about drawing rooms in a language whose history has destroyed its knowledge of its own body. The truth is your mind is nothing but a dumping ground for the west. (TCR 53)

Balaram’s attraction to a science that apparently reasons out the relationship between the inner life and external phenomenon is amazing. It is the omniscient narrator who comments that the head of Bhudeb Roy, the most powerful man in the village, is swelling over the areas of the skull Balaram has identified as signifying vanity and greed. And it is the omniscient narrator who indicates, undeniable that Balaram’s careful measurement and calculations of Alu’s skull and the proportions of a loom exactly correspond with the boy’s phenomenal talent as a weaver. Lending this pseudo
science the reason of mathematics, the narrative resists any easy distinction between Western reason and Eastern mystic tradition.

While being apprenticed to Balaram’s sensuous, instinctive, the forest dwelling tree climbing, long haired, dhoti-clad traditional weaver, Sombhu Debnath discovers his almost supernatural propensity for working the loom and understanding the importance of cloth. Belying a distinction between man at the loom as mechanical man and the loom as a traditional craft, Ghosh points up the narrative’s larger disruption of moral and historical distinctions between modernity and tradition, West and East.

Within the novel, weaving is more than a vocation and more than a metaphor for storytelling. Approving Balaram’s decision to apprentice Alu to a weaver, the narrator states that ‘weaving is reason’. By this he means that the machines of weaving are the oldest and most fundamental manifestation of the reasoning mind. But he also means that cloth is reason, it explains histories, the making and breaking of empires, the movements of people, why people are where they are and how they are, if the novel is about any one thing, it is about cloth, and more particularly, the language of cloth and cloth as a language. The narrator explains:

Everywhere it went people had trouble thinking of it. Only the oldest of the Indo European languages could think of it as a thing itself and even then the thought was so difficult that across continents people hardly dared differ. In Sanskrit it was called Karpasia, in Parsian Kirpas. In Greek it was Carbasos, and in Latin Carbasus. They gave it in Hebrew Kirps. ---But even the English were handed down their word, like so much else that raised them to civilization, by the Arabs, from their Kutun --- But the Arabs took their own word from the Akkadian
Kitinu. And there they had lost the battle already for that word came from Kitu, in the same language, which meant nothing but dreary flax. (TCR 56-57)

To understand the world, Ghosh suggests it is not just necessary to understand cotton, but to understand the polylinguistic history of cotton. Further, it is necessary to understand the migrant language of cloth in terms of both exhilaration of terms and in terms of the ultimate poverty and inadequacy of the language, the incommensurability of words with the inexhaustible miracle of cloth. When Shombhu sits down to explain the parts of the machine to Alu: “He opens his mouth, he would speak, but lo! The loom has knotted his tongue. So many words, words beaten together in the churning which created world” (TCR 73).

When he does speak, he insists that Alu memorizes each part of the loom in three languages. The words, once found, suggest both the necessity of more than one language to the proper understanding of the concept, and the desperate inadequacy of any language to the complex ways in which the production of cotton and cloth have made the world. The first two languages on which Shombhu insists are district languages of Bangladesh, now the languages of the diasporic village of Lalpukur. Moving from these local, ancestral, now diasporic languages to the more overtly global resonance of English, Shombhu elides the languages in between and words loaded with a more explicit sense of national belonging. He indicates that to strive for an understanding of cloth, and thereby, in the logic of the text, of the largest and most intense knowledge of history and people, it is most important to translate directly between the smaller local and the larger global language. The plot of the first section of the text, primarily the story of Balaram’s madness for reason, is attested by the close telling of Alu’s education as a weaver of language and cotton. This disjunctive mode of
storytelling grows in significance of language and cotton as the novel progresses, and is more fully and deliberately pursued in the second part of the novel. But the first part deals with the story of Balaram. He is a rationalist and is influenced by the life of Louise Pasteur. He is idealistic to the extent of being inhuman. He has no involvement with people. He treats others simply as objects of observation and change. He takes his whims to extreme and becomes self-destructive. In fact, Balaram meets his own mettle in Bhuded Roy, he is equally cynical. He is a congressman. Alu, the protagonist, is a nephew of Balaram. He is the only one to survive in the family.

Balaram’s other great passion is the life and work of Louis Pasteur. This first inspires him to establish the ‘Pasteur School of Reason’ a poignantly hopeful venture that encompasses school of ‘Pure’ and Practical’ reason and brings together, in an albeit tentative harmony, Sombhu, Balaram and the desultory village in a project that, for a while, succeeds. But the project is ruined when Balaram, again inspired by Pasteur becomes obsessed with ridding the village of germs. To this end, he stockpiles great vats of carbolic acid. Alerted by Bhuded Roy to this strange behavior, the authorities become convinced Balaram and his family are political extremists. They surround his house and fire a warning flare that explodes the acid killing everyone inside the house, Alu’s aunt and uncle, and the girl he hopes to marry. Alu, on his way back from the forest when the explosion occurs, manages to escape to Calcutta. The police, convinced he is a political insurgent, chase him across and down the country and almost lose track of him when he catches a boat that takes him to a mythical trading port and oil town on the Arab Peninsula, and into the more fully polylinguistic and precarious world of illegal migrant labourers. The migrant labourers were a separate category of people who
willingly sold themselves into slavery. Though they belonged to colonial times their progeny survive well into post colonial times feeling landless and hopeless.

The second part of the text tells of the relationship between these migrants, the people of the Soug and multinational oil companies. The narrative again avoids any simple distinction between modern and traditional worlds. The sense of historical placement is even more deliberately observed than in the portrayal of the village in the first part of the novel. The lives of the migrants on the outskirts of the town and the people of the Soug could be set in almost any time, emphasizing the centuries of Indian Ocean trade sustaining the area. It is almost a surprise when the narrative mentions an oil company helicopter flying overhead, on a high-rise building. However, the establishment and dramatic fortunes of the modern ‘oil town’ are also portrayed in continuity with, as contained by and interpretable within the longer history of the place. The sense of economic disjuncture between the wealth generated by the oil wells and the poverty of the illegal migrant community is not so much grounded in the everyday details and depravations of their lives as the mode of storytelling privileged details and depravations of their lives as the mode of story-telling privileged by Ghosh. But this also generates a sense of historical circling and juncture that invites parallels and comparisons rather than a sense of rupture. The narrative moves through a representation of oral storytelling which lends a mythic dimension to the whole life of the place, exceeding the regularization temporality of the ‘traditional’ realist novel form. The story of the arrival of the first British resident, the consequent shift and intrigues between the various figures of power leading up to multinational corporate dominance, is almost placidly narrated: So things went on. The oil town prospered and grew, and the time came when they wanted more space.
The ensuing struggle over a piece of land is described as “like to old desert feuds.” And the whole great historical summary is framed and intersected by the story of an egg seller. But this quality of fable and mythical temporality is fully when the narrative moves directly into the voice of the oral storyteller, Zindi the matriarch of the illegal migrant community.

Balaram’s enthusiasm for Reason can certainly be read as satire on those diasporic Indian intellectuals who enthusiastically embrace the theories of the West, and it is surely significant that his greatest heroes are French. Balaram has made his mind “a dumping ground for the West”. But Ghosh’s novel deconstructs any simple opposition between tradition and modernity, or discrete oriental and occidental cultures. In each of his subsequent texts, weaving is a synecdoche of that “intricate network of difference” in which all cultures are enmeshed with their neighbours. When Balaram decides to make the young Alu a weaver, he tells him a history of the technology of weaving that evokes cultural instability and borrowing across borders. Balaram develops the idea that culture is a process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders.

Yet Ghosh’s understanding of these routes is also resistant to the framework of postmodern inter-cultural studies in which James Clifford attempts to place it. Clifford’s border crossing runs 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 determinants. Ghosh by contrast, understands that the routes of international trade are determined by economic forces. They tell a history of imperial exploitation. Balaram continues his lecture on the history of the loom by placing it in the context of British imperial trade. If Balaram’s interest in Reason is part of the influx of foreign ideas into the village of Lalpukar, that
village is not the symbol of an “Indian tradition” that can be placed in simple opposition to the west. Lalpukur was settled by refugees from East Pakistan after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. The village, apparently a symbol of traditional India is itself the product of a diaspora. The people of Lalpukur were:

... vomited out of their native soil years ago in carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away, they had no anger left.... Long before the world had sniffed genocide in Bangladesh, Lalpukur began to swell. It grew and grew. First, it was brothers with burnt backs and balls cut off at the roots. Then it was cousins and cousins of cousins. Then it did not matter; borders dissolved under the weight of millions of people in panic stricken flight from an army of animals. (TCR 59-60)

When Balaram reduces the village of Lalpukur to rubble in his efforts to apply European theories to Indian life, Alu joins a tide of diasporic Indians drawn to the rich oil economies of the Middle East.

Part two of The Circle of Reason is set in Al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf. There 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 collapse of this building can be read as an allegory about the effect of postmodernity on the traditional societies of the Middle East. But again, Ghosh’s writing is too highly nuanced for such facile binary oppositions. The collapsed building, called the star, is contrasted with the traditional market place:

The momentary darkening of Al-Ghazira’s skies after the collapse passed unnoticed in the Souq ash-sharji, for even during the day the gloom in the old bazaars and honeycomb of passage ways was a live thing, coiling through the
tunnels, observing trace of the world outside…. Nor did any but the most alert in the Souq feel the soil of Al-Ghazira tremble when the star fell, for its thick mud walls reached deep into the earth, and they reduced the shock to a barely perceptible tremor. (TCR193-194)

But the Souq does not represent a discrete culture rooted in one nation. Rather, it is part of a network of trade routes, confirming Balaram’s argument that weaving produces not one world but many. Alu has begun weaving again at the loom of his Egyptian neighbor, Hajj Fahmy, who abandoned his traditional craft for the more profitable construction business. As a part of his revival of weaving, Alu must now learn Arabic as he had earlier learned English. His landlady, an Egyptian brothel owner named 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 Al-Ghazira after a marriage of which his parents disapproved. His movement evokes the flow of the Indian Ocean trade: Indian merchants along the coast to pull them northwards like a bucket from a well. First they went to Mozambique, then Dares Salaam, then Zanzibar, Djibouti, Prim and Aden.

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 small then, an intimate little place, half market town perched on the edge of the great hungry desert beyond, half pearling port fattening on the lustrous jeevan pearls in its bay. It was a merchant’s paradise, right in the centre of the world, conceived and nourished by the flow of centuries of trade Persians, Iraqis, Zanzibari Arab, Omen and Indians fattened upon it and grew rich. (TCR 221)
Like the village of Lalpukur, the souq of Al-Ghazira does not represent a stable authentic culture, but a network of trade, centuries old that unfurls like cloth through a vast, borderless region. The novel abounds in weird happenings. These, in turn, spark off a series of stories as told and retold by the characters with unusual relish. The narrator’s own description acquires ritualistic connotations in tune with his characters’ propensity to mix fact with fantasy. Six months after Alu reaches Al-Ghazira, he finds himself buried in the collapse of an immense building called an-Najma, the star. The weird happening is described in a prose that is incantatory, deliberately attempted to invoke the impossibility of the happening without losing the immediacy of its experience.

People said later that the fall shook the whole of Al-Ghazira like an emptying waves 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. (TCR 193)

The survival of Alu despite the might of the inanimate and bricks is indicative of the victory of creative mind over ruthless mechanisms. The far of Middle East country, Al-Ghazira, is one such mechanism. The cut throat business interests of the place were already hinted at when Alu lay huddled in a heap in the lap of Zindi abroad ‘Mariamma’ and observes the lights of Al-Ghazira in the distance.

The central event of the second part of the novel is the collapse of a newly constructed building in which Alu is working as a painter. It seems impossible that he could have survived, and yet he lives for days without food or water, and without wanting food or water, unharmed but trapped beneath a slab of concrete, symbolically
held at bay by two old fashioned swing machines. Between the story of the collapse of the building and the story of his rescue and its dramatic consequences, Zindi takes over the narrative, speaking and re-telling the loss of Alu as the culmination of a series of unlucky events. Tobacco is pressed into an earthen cup, the pipe is lit and handed around, and Zindi begins to speak. She constructs her people her people her diverse family of illegal migrants as a series of recent happenings as though they are tales from the “One Thousand and One Nights.” The story of Mast Ram, who has death on his hands and kills any plant he so much as waters; the story of Kulfi, who is sacked from her job as a cook; and of the professor, who is falsely accused of attacking a woman. Trivial stories run on from awful stories and into comic stories, but the gathering and re-gathering of the tales is what gives the people a sense of themselves. The narrator explains:

That was Zindi’s power: She could bring together empty air and give it a body just by talking of it. They could never tired of listening to her speak, in her welter of languages, though they knew every world, just as well as they knew lines of songs. And when sometimes she chose a different word or a new phrase it was like the pressure of a potter’s thumb on clay-changing the thing itself and their knowledge of it. (TCR 213)

The more particular significance of Zindi’s story telling, as it is placed within the novel form, can be drawn out with reference to Benedict Anderson’s reading of traditional genre. In Ghosh’s novel, it is not just the focus on smaller village and community structures, or the recuperation of surreptitious migrant lives, but the intrusion of a mythic form of telling that displaces a homogenizing nation grounded on consciousness. Further, this narrative mode connects contemporary perspectives to an
older notion of cosmopolitanism, a trajectory between India, the Middle East and, in the final section of the novel, North Africa, that is displaced by contemporary postcolonial notions of the commonwealth and overwhelmed by recent conceptions of globalization dominating postcolonial theory.

Alu also waits at death’s door when in Al-Ghazira he is buried alive when a building collapses. Without food and water, for days together, he does one thing and that is thinking. He knows the truth to be present in scientific reasoning. He wants to apply the scientific approach in removing the ills of present day society. When he finally comes out, Alu declares that money is the enemy of mankind which is the battleground which silently prepares every man and every woman for their defeat. By turning one against the other money helps them destroy themselves.

Alu has a revelation while he is trapped in the building, what Burgess might have pointed up as another cliché of the magical real genre. When he returns he tells a mesmerized crowd at Louis Pasteur the need for purity and of his ultimate, simple realization that money is dirty. “He talks over the noise of a shuttling loom: Arabic with Hindi, Hindi swallowing Bengali, English doing dame; tongues unraveled and woven together, nonsense, you say, tongues unraveled are nothing but nonsense – but there again you have a mystery, for everyone understood him, perfectly, like their mother’s lullabies” (TCR 279).

The mystical moment has been prompted by Alu’s meditation on the scientific work of Pasteur, and is delivered from his seat as ‘mechanical man’. Once again the text waylays the temptation to read the mythic narrative in opposition to the forces of technology and modernity signified by the oil town. Further, this moment of magical reason quickly resolves into the reality of administration and the potential for
corruption. As with Balaram’s reification of Pasteur, a too passionate reasoning once again pushes the narrative towards death. The people are inspired by Alu and decide to rid the community of money, pool their wages, and buy what they need as a collective. But the resulting community is not offered as an ideal, as sinister elite and insidious hierarchy begins to emerge. However, before it can become entrenched, the authorities hear of this socialist experiment in the outlying community. On the evening the migrants decide to make a pilgrimage to the site of the collapsed building the police launch a brutal attack and once again Alu is forced to flee.

The third part of the novel is set in a small Algerian town, where Alu by strange chance meets Mrs. Verma, the microbiologist daughter of the man who was his uncle Balaram’s best friend at university. The section begins with the elaborate story of Mrs. Verma’s desperate, make shift attempts to cast and stage a production of Rabindranath Tagore’s Chitrangada and ends with her equally desperate attempts to enact the correct rituals and provide a proper funeral for Kulfi, who was one of Alu’s travelling companions. When Kulfi who is acting the role of Chitrangada in Tagore’s play against Jyoti Das as Arjun, she collapses and dies. Ghosh makes a mockery of the Hindu death rituals. It is carbolic acid that is considered “Pure” as Ganga Jal and put in Kulfi’s mouth. Throughout the novel Ghosh makes fun of the so-called scientific attitude, rationalism, Hindu philosophy and rituals. The narrative revels in detailing the resourcefulness, creativity and willing hybridity of the migrant, wanting to make herself and her culture understood in diasporic context. Using carbolic acid instead of holy water for the funeral ritual, Mrs. Verma seems to bring the narrative full circle to echo Balaram’s fervent belief in this scientific purification. But she more pragmatically and less passionately reasons:
Carbolic acid has become holy water. Mrs. Verma dropped her bucket, went up to his chair, and stood over him, arms folded. What does it matter? she cried. What does it matter whether it’s Ganga Jal or carbolic acid? It’s just a question of cleaning the place, is not it? People thought something was clean once, now they think something else is clean. What difference does it make to the dead, to Dr. Mishra? (TCR 411).

Ghosh is of course pointing out the blind faith of millions of Indians in Ganga Jal even though the water of the life giving river is so badly polluted. Mrs. Verma’s refusal to revere the science she practices, and Alu’s second, quieter, painful revelation, is signified by their decision to place biography of Pasteur on the funeral pyre. In this gesture, it is not Pasteur, but the mythologization of reason that is being symbolically destroyed. Where reason has prompted death, death now, finally, circularly, prompts a greater reason. The narrative indicates that Alu has attained some philosophically satisfying balance between the elements of life; Satwa, Rajas, Tamas. The text ends not with this gesture, but with the enormous Zindi and potato headed Alu waiting for a ship to take them ‘home’ but which home is not declared. This ambivalence does not suggest that, Ghosh is claiming any and all locations for his characters and his fictional field of play, entailing a smooth sense of global belonging. The final image is not the migrant as an encompassing metaphor, but the migrant as furtive, precarious and irreducibly odd. The novel does not slip into cynicism. The way it looks at its stories ensures that the urge to mould a better life remains undefeated. The style of The Circle of Reason, the location of its ‘home’ also gives it hope.

This hope is important for The Circle of Reason leads us into a universe which is spectacularly destructive. Even a suicide burns down fifty houses. And Ghosh never lets
us find comfort in categorizing these events as literary metaphors. The metaphor then is not a matter of presentation; it articulates the urgency which the vulnerability of human understanding and life generate in the novel.

*The Circle of Reason* is a remarkable achievement, though not without faults. There are divagations, episodic disquisitions on, for instance, the history of Al Ghazira, that hold up the narrative. Not that the narrative was really intended to take us anywhere. The Indian narrative has been alive for a long time, though not with sharp eyes and ears for the riches of postmodernism. The novel is merely a highly contemporary construct, it looks ahead. Finally, it is the intelligence, manifested in a brilliant handling of language. Ghosh’s plot, characterization, and symbolism would alone make this novel worth reading, but it is his power of language and the characters’ desperate, audacious and authentic measures to establish their identities make it great.

*Countdown* (1999) a travelogue of 106 pages with thirteen unmarked chapters is expose writing on the nuclear test in India as well as in Pakistan. It is a spontaneously written book. The occasion of writing it is India’s nuclear explosion test on 11th May 1998, followed promptly by the Pakistani test. The test was great joy for the political leaders and the public. They organized festivities handed out celebratory sweetmeats on streets. Some of the leaders are said to have proposed to the government to construct a monument at Pokharan a ‘Shrine of Strength’ that could be visited by pilgrims. Ghosh visited Pokharan in Rajasthan, the site of test, and Siachen glacier at India-Pakistan border and then finally on 28th May 1998 Pakistan which had tested nuclear devices of its own, in response to Pokhara tests: “This had sobering effects. The rupee had fallen to a historic low, the stock market index plummeted, and prices had soared. The government’s grasp on power was none too secure” (*Countdown* 6).
He talks to many people and forms his impressions on nuclear testing; People of Pokharan are full of grief and sorrow when they recounted their horrendous and horrifying experiences they had during nuclear testing. Ghosh feels that reasons behind this nuclear testing are not related to the security of either nation. It is indeed sad to note that our region is dominated by ‘stunt’ politics, which seldom cares for the peace and prosperity of people. The book grows into a mild satire on this petty politics. The book also focuses on Pakistan’s poor social, political, economical and religious conditions.

The author went to Pokharan three months after the tests. The book opens with an apocalyptic vision of the Pokharan site. Ghosh openly satirizes the celebration held to celebrate the great day. They even talked of sending dust from Pokharan to different parts of India as sacred soil. Even the Prime Minister is not left unscathed by Ghosh. ‘On 15 May, four days after the test … a celebration was organized on the crater left by the blasts. The Prime Minister was photographed standing on the crater’s ruin, throwing flowers into the pit. It was as though this were one of the crowning achievements of his life’. (6) But people in and around Pokharan are not happy for obvious reasons.

Manohar Joshi, one of the first journalists to know about the tests, says, ‘In the year after 1974 there was so much illness here that people didn’t have money to buy pills. We had never heard of cancer before in this area. But people began to get cancer after test. There were strange skin diseases. People used to scratch themselves all the time’. Many other people of Pokharan tell Ghosh about the birth of deformed children, growth of tumors on cows and birth of blind and deformed calves. But people don’t protest against nuclear tests. On 11th May 1998, a squad of soldiers had driven up all the villagers to move out of their houses to open ground. They were made to sit under the tree and waited, it was very hot. The temperature touched 48 degree centigrade. There
was tremendous shaking in the ground and a booming noise. They saw cloud of dust and black and white smoke shooting skywards. There were cracks in the walls of their homes.

The travelogue is about state players and statecraft. Being a nuclear armed nation is to be treated as a military power. India though it claims its weapons are not first strike weapons but a technology demonstrator and deterrent weapons has violated test ban treaties. India and Pakistan are post colonial nations created by the colonial powers mainly to divide and rule. But this petty seeking of identities as a nuclear power is common to both. Pakistan is a nuclear power and Islamic state. India, on the other hand, is a nuclear power and secular state. The national identities unlike the personal identities are part of the self-determination exercise.

It is so tragic to learn how politicians, be it in 1974 or 1998, for their selfish interests, play with the lives of people. As King Lear says, ‘What flies to wanton boys, are we to gods. They kill us for their sport.’ How it suits the visionless leadership of India. As one parliamentarian tells Ghosh the explosions were done to save the government from exploding from within; to quiet voices of dissent from within the coalition government. Still, many sleep in this country without food. Floods and famines are regular features. There is no comprehensive plan to deter these annual natural calamities. All that we are doing is adding to them by nuclear testing. For one single battle tank, one hundred schools could be opened in rural areas. And yet our annual defence budget is well above thirty five thousands crores of rupees. This mind-boggling expenditure had been done for defending the country. The mastermind behind these nuclear policies was K.Subrahmanyam, a civilian affairs expert. He tells the author:
‘Nuclear weapons are the currency of global power. Nuclear weapons are not military weapons’. Their logic is that of international politics. The international system of security has been progressively brought under a global order that provides for the hegemony of the five nuclear weapon powers. India wants to be a player and not an object of this global nuclear order. (*Countdown* 13)

Ghosh proves that these tricks are nothing but post-colonialism of the perverted order. The fifty years of unfulfilled promises, the frustration of not being able to realize potential, the growing corruption—all these find a temporary atonement in such exercise. We can take a cricket match as a fine analogy. Defeat Pakistan and all the ills of this country vanish into a momentary euphoria, but nuclear testing is no cricket match. It is a very costly and more dangerous play to build our lost self-respect and nationalistic mood. As Chandan Mitra, the historian with an Oxford doctorate, in his article entitled “Explosion of Self Esteem”, published after the test of 11 May says, “The bomb is the global currency of self esteem. Two hundred years of colonization India has lost national cohesion. With loss of self-esteem, the bomb has become a symbol of self-esteem. It is the global currency with which India wants to be a player, a manipulator of the international order.” Dr. G. Padmanabhan, the Director of Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore says: “The recent nuclear test explosion has created a tremendous euphoria in India. India has many problems but we are tired of being depicted in the West as having negative qualities. Given this treatment, one clutches satany “victory” that makes one feel like an entity to be counted” (*Countdown* 18). During interaction with the Defence Minister of India, Ghosh said:

Are you really completely comfortable with recent nuclear test? He said: I have been opposed to the bomb test from 19th of July 1996. Lok Sabha was debating
the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and had various meetings on this. Various campaigns against the nuclear test in different universities were arranged. But I said that if today the five nations which have nuclear weapons tell us how to behave and what weapon we should have, then we should keep all our option open. . . . Some day we will sink and this is not anything to do with China or with Pakistan. (Countdown 29)

Dr. Durrsameen Ahmed, a Lahore psychologist with many friends in India says:

“I see Pakistan as a male child trying to kill itself from its material matrix. India is the devouring mother trying to consume its own child. It’s a mutual obsession between mother and son and psychology is full of it. If they don’t let go they will destroy each other. It would see that the possibility was there from the start with Kashmir as a serpent in paradise of independence. Nuclear war is not just likely. I would say there is certain inevitability to it. Frankly I am terrified: terror is an understatement.” (Countdown 63)

M.V.Ramanna, a research student in the ‘Security Studies Programme’ at MIT, had drafted a research paper on the internet. The paper analyses the possible effects of a nuclear strike on Bombay and New Delhi. The nuclear weapons that India and Pakistan currently possess are probably not greatly different in destructive potential, from those that were dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1947. According to Ramanna’s calculation, the actual temperature would be well short of the theoretical limit of a hundred million degree, it would reach only tens of millions of degree. The fireball of 300,000 degree would be enough to kill every living thing with several hundred feet of the explosion point.
Dr. Usha Srivastava, a member of a group called International Physicians for the prevention of Nuclear War, says the population of Delhi doubled over the last few decades. The total number of hospital beds in the city had increased slightly. It is estimated that only six to seven thousand beds are available in the government hospitals. These hospitals are already crowded with the patients. The doctors treat several patients in the course of an hour. In India there is only one hospital ward that specializes in burn injuries, and it can treat about two hundred patients at a time. In the event of a nuclear explosion in Delhi, Dr. Srivastava said: “The ones who will be alive will be jealous of the dead ones” (Countdown 102). The point is if nuclear explosion takes place in India or Pakistan, there will be no food, water and medical care.

But according to Ghosh, India’s nuclear programme is like minting false coins to purchase “world-wide influences.” The message is clear that we can become influential only by sorting out our real problems like population, poverty, unemployment and corruption and not by these cheap (or not so cheap) stunts. Ghosh uses the discussion to show the wrong direction of our decolonization. For him, it only symbolizes a mindset of the still not mentally decolonized people of India. The bomb is a false symbol of re-arrangement of global power, a political insurgency or any kind of millenary movement.

Countdown is a kind of shock for readers of Ghosh. He has always been an author, disagreeing with the British and the Western world in its treatment of India. His writings always depicted double standards shamelessly followed by the controlling powers of the world. But here he takes an introspective look. He is viewing Indians and their construction of identity rather ruthlessly. Self-criticism can always lead to healthier aptitudes and better practices. The book succeeds in showing the mess in which we have placed our country. It boldly points out the glaring leadership crisis in
India. We have politicians, but we do not have leaders. This book deals with the author’s visit to Siachen with the Defence Minister of India. The author reminds the minister of his earlier involvement with anti-nuclear writings and peace-marches. But in the typical fashion of a politician, the minister says that although a bomb is morally unacceptable to him, yet India should keep all the options open and so on. The author feels that the minister is only lip-serving. Ghosh cannot conceal his severe disappointment when he says that one day we will sink, not because of Pakistan or China but because of our own putting up with apathetic leadership. What is implied is that we do not care for our country. It is worth pointing out here that these comments do not come from an Asian American standing on a high pedestal but from someone among us. Ghosh’s sincerity cannot be doubted.

Ghosh describes the condition of soldiers deployed in very difficult places like Siachen Glacier, Leh, Ladakh and Suronk. Nature is indeed cruel at these places. With rising hostilities on the border these soldiers face the double threat of natural calamities on one hand and bullets on the other. The cost of maintaining these places is again shocking. But what is even more shocking is that the soldiers of the countries are not very hostile or bitter in their words and approach to each other. Although the term ‘Dushman’ (enemy) is often used, the Indian soldiers always spoke of their Pakistani counterparts with detachment and respect. Ghosh did not hear any verbal abuse. It only shows that soldiers do not want wars. But one army officer horrified Ghosh with his plan for winning the supposed war at Siachen Glacier, “A nuclear explosion, inside the glacier, a mile deep. The whole thing would melt and the resulting flood would carry Pakistan away and also put an end to the glacier. We can work wonders” (Countdown 43).
When Ghosh crosses the border and meets people in Pakistan, he finds starker belligerence there. In his interview the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, very readily expresses the possibility of a nuclear war. Ghosh says: “In India I met very few people including anti-nuclear activists, who believe that a nuclear war might actually occur in the sub-continent. In Pakistan the opposite was true. Almost everyone I met thought that nuclear war almost certainly lay ahead, somewhere down the road” *(Countdown 62).*

Qazi Hussain Ahmed even goes on justifying his stance by saying that no nation can have monopoly over scientific knowledge and technology. He says that with ever-increasing hatred between the two nations and with a history of wars who can deny the possibility of a nuclear war. He says that a nation would do anything to spare itself the shame of losing a war. The revulsion at such irresponsible comments is very clear. Ghosh discusses the nature of real life characters who support a nuclear armageddon unabashedly and comes to the conclusion that there is some moral vacuum and transgressive of all established human values.

Any sensitive human being would be horrified at the extent of indifference regarding human welfare among people of this sub-continent. People talk of nuclear weapons and wars as though they are talking about fairy tales. Leaders go for nuclear testing to get the votes. Ghosh cites the opinions of scientists like Raja Ramanna on the impact of a nuclear holocaust. It is indeed terrifying to imagine the destruction that such an explosion will cause in densely populated cities like Mumbai, Karachi, Delhi and Lahore. Ghosh also meets liberal activists in Pakistan like Asma Jahangir. She tells Ghosh about the hostility that she received from her own countrymen when she defended the human rights of religious minorities in Pakistan. She was held like a
demon engaged in blasphemy against the holy prophet. She also feels that the two countries are engaged in an unnecessary and imaginary race. She rightly feels that the policies of the two countries are irrational and ad hoc. There is lot of false propaganda. She almost sounds desperate in her hope, “I think once you break the barriers of disinformation, people’s own instincts are what we have to depend on. I feel hopeful” (Countdown 81).

For Ghosh, as for any thinking Indian, India-Pakistan relations have always been intriguing. He wanted to have a firsthand experience of the people’s expression. He says:

‘I wanted to hear them for myself. What I heard instead was for the most part a strange mixture of psychologizing, grandiose fantasy and cynicism, allied with the deliberate conjuring up of illusory threats and imaginary fears. The truth is that India’s nuclear program is status driven, not threat driven....... In Pakistan’s case the motivation behind the nuclear program...... is parity with India. That the leaders of these two countries should be willing to run the risk of nuclear accidents, war and economic breakdown in order to indulge these confused ambitions is itself a sign that some essential element in the social compare has broken down: that there is no longer any commensurability between the desire of the ruler and the well being of the ruled. The pursuit of nuclear weapons in sub-continent is the moral equivalent of civil war: the target the rulers have in mind for these weapons are, in the end, none other than their own people’.

(Countdown 92)

Countdown is a deeply psychologically revealing analysis of the attitudes that leads to extreme animosity, abhorrence and suspicion between these two neighbouring
countries. The politicians want to avert every future crisis by building an atmosphere of war and hatred for the neighbouring nations. Had it not been for the sophisticated and soft use of humorous language by Ghosh, this book could have been a literal lashing for everyone in India and Pakistan. Ghosh punctures the false ego. Our thinking is that we tried everything to improve the conditions but all in vain, so this war (nuclear or culture) with the neighbour is our last chance. We are actually getting desperate in our attitudes.

It is to be noted that *Countdown* is not simply a travelogue of lines and statement but also a fine piece of artistic beauty. However profound an idea may be, it has no significance in the realm of art and literature, unless it is woven into the fabric of aestheticism. And this is what *Countdown* has. It has some fresh and vivid images and symbols, words and phrases which cannot help without captivating a genuine reader’s attention. Arundhati Roy has dealt with the same theme in her book. (*End of Imagination*, D.C.Book, Kottayam, Kerala, p.12-13)

In *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), Ghosh is eager to shake off this sadness and bitter wisdom, looks in the direction of magic, conspiracy and silence to overturn the logic of Europe’s conquest of the East. He raises the question whether the conquered races were to draw a circle of silence around themselves impregnable to the rationalism and science of the west. He further asks whether they would succeed in resisting and at times even overcoming the conquistador, to have the last laugh. It is a dangerous but a tempting line of argument and Ghosh abandons his characteristic narrative style to sample these magically derived conclusions.

The two worlds of science and counter-science, European rationality and Indian myths are brought together against the backdrop of Calcutta’s streets, markets and
monuments. The narrator discovers a forgotten monument in Calcutta, built in the memory of one Sir Ronald Ross, awarded the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the Malaria parasite. The marble arch of the monument is inscribed with Ross’s versification in self-celebration:

This day relenting God

Hath placed within my hand

A wondrous thing; And God

Be praised. At his command

Seeking his secret deeds

With tears and toiling breath

I find thy cunning seed

O million murdering Death (TCC 35)

This is provocation enough for a rebuttal from L. Murugan, the self-appointed biographer of Ronald Ross, who gleefully parodies this high sounding moral sentential with bitter humour to expose how these scientific achievements barely touched the lives of the millions living at the edge of death.

Half stunned I look around

And see a land of death –

Dead bones that walk the ground

And dead bones underneath;

A race of wretches caught,
Between the palms of need

And rubbed to utter naught,

The chaff of human seed. (TCC 35)

So much for disinterested service of science for the benefit of mankind! Besides as Murugan explains, the sudden interest of all European countries in finding a cure for malaria was not to save human lives as much as to ensure unrestricted expansion of virgin territories.

“The mid-nineteenth century was when the scientific community began to wake up to malaria. Remember this was the century when old Mother Europe was settling all the Last Unknowns: Africa, Asia, Australia, the America’s even uncolonized parts herself.” (TCC 47)

A part of the novel then fits in conveniently with the Third World counter narrative to the Raj enterprise, but Ghosh goes ahead to give a complicated twist to the story and constructs a secret history of medical research. Sir Ronald Ross it appears had been manipulated all along to make the necessary deductions, while the actual guiding spirit operating behind the scene was a low-born scavenger woman called Mangala hand-picked and trained as an assistant by Ross’s predecessor Dr. Cunningham to help him in his laboratory.

What follows is a dark and disturbing chronicle of how Mangala, as the presiding deity and her accomplice Laakhan – modeled on the mythic Lakshman, loyal second-in-command to Rama, manage to outwit, unseat and annihilate those who could stand in the way of Ronald Ross inheriting the mantle of prized laboratory of Dr. Cunningham. This includes their benefactor Cunningham, a host of other scientists,
missionaries or curious individuals who accidentally stumbled upon their stealthy designs. It appears that Ghosh is working at alternatives or suggesting that both are equally manipulative.

Ghosh makes an elaborate case for those forgotten underlings who do the spade work for all those grand discoveries, which are then credited to their superior masters. The author goes into intricate details of medical history to make a credible case for the illiterate Mangala accomplishing the impossible. This is not farfetched as it seems at first glance. The author is in fact relying on current trends in the field of social medicine as more and more scientists, and social workers are coming around to the view that scientific investigations, especially those related to social medicine, health, hygiene and control of epidemics can be conducted with more economy and efficiency by those who are born and brought up indigenously rather than by those experimenting in remote, sanitized laboratories with little knowledge of the nitty-gritty of actual conditions. In Murugan’s words:

“We are talking about a microscopy which was still an artisanal kind of skill at that time. Real talent could take you a long way in it……. Unlike Ross she didn’t need to read a zoological study to see that there was a difference between Culex and Anapheles, she’d have seen it like you or I can see the difference between a dachshund and a doberman.” (TCC 203)

Ghosh however does not limit his talents for writing a mystery novel with political overtones. The linear pattern is intersected at many points with counter patterns which completely overthrow the earlier assumptions. Instead of forwarding an alternative theory of science, which has a place for the subalterns, the author goes ahead to argue against all scientific conceptualization. Theory itself becomes the main
stumbling block to knowledge, “She was not carrying a shit-load of theory in her head, and she didn’t have to write papers or construct proofs” (TCC 203).

This is a world of mysteries rather than rationality, where Mangala’s real talents become those of magician rather than of an artisan. The counter-science may have extraordinary powers to overturn science but their motives like that of their counterparts are self-seeking rather than humane. Ghosh is subtly working out the complicity of the two different kinds of quests with similar motives, a search for power, self-aggrandizement and ironically, for permanence in this uncertain world. The grisly scenes where Mangala decapitates pigeons shivering with artificially induced malaria as a last-ditch effort to cure or at least mitigate the effect of syphilitic paresis tells only half the story. The other half concerns itself with the diabolic secret aspirations for a kind of immortality acquired through a technology of interpersonal transference of intelligence through the chosen people.

The female extraordinary, we are told, has stumbled upon the unique combination of genetic chromosomes and special intelligence which produce the rare Calcutta Chromosome. The unique chromosome makes it possible for information to be transmitted chromosomatically from one body to another thereby ensuring the preservation and continuity of their lineage from the pre-Christian era into the future. Ghosh’s accomplishments in the technique of writing can be seen in the way he marshals arguments and data to make this bizarre theory sound almost believable. The narrative is densely packed with information painstakingly gleaned from the study of Computer Science and Microbiology to make the implausible sound convincing enough, at least to sustain our interest in the story. The medical history helps to underscore the thematic relevance of the novel. Microbiology and Cybernetics are areas in science, all
set to overhaul the face of the twenty-first century. The intelligence of Master-
Computers and inventions in Genetic Engineering has accomplished more amazing
things than Mangala’s primitive rites. In 1927, we are informed, Julius-Von-Wagner the
Austrian psychologist and scientist was awarded the Nobel Prize for his discovery made
along the same line as Mangala’s intuitive insights: “In fact, until antibiotics, the
Wagner-Jauregg process was pretty much a standard treatment:

    Every major VD hospital had its little incubating room where it grew a flock of
anopheles. Think about it: hospital cultivating disease! But on the other hand,
what could be more natural than fighting fire with fire? This is the only instance
known to medicine of using one disease to fight another” (TCC 205)

Whether this tongue-in-check account is a fact or humorous exaggeration, is
beside the point. It serves the purpose of redefining attitudes to practices and rituals
which are normally frowned upon as regressive primitivism and blurs the boundary
lines between science and magic. Mangala and Julius-Von-Wagner become unlikely
partners in their scheme for the manipulation of malarial fever for inducing a state of
dementia which could stage miracles. The delirium, which is a form of dementia opens
the road to discoveries which plump the unconscious, is a twin-edged weapon. It can
lead to cure or for perpetuation of obsessions of a dangerous kind. The Mangala’s creed
uses it to transpose thoughts and intelligence of one human being into another, by
bending the walls of the mind through the fever. Any resemblance of this to modern
techniques of controlling the brain is intentional to the author’s design of pulling out the
dividing line between the conscious and unconscious, sane and insane, known and
unknown depths of the human mind.
The strategy to draw a number of parallels, which converge and countermand each other, creating the aura of ambivalence and indeterminacy, becomes the preamble for investigating the world as mystery. The line of argument in this essay is to establish how this description of the world as enigma follows from an ontological position, adopted for the first time, which brings the author dangerously close to mysticism and its first principles, philosophic idealism. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that time and space are so deliberately jumbled in the novel that “discontinuity itself becomes meaningless.” She adds, “The constant cuts and displacement contribute to the fear and suspension, to the feeling of inexorability, so integral to the thriller, the constant shift in point of view and time sequence erase the boundaries between the hunter and the hunted and make them equally part of the same mystery, the same conspiracy, the same quest; the constant juxtaposition of different times, place, characters and kinds of pursuit extend the scope of each from the specific and particular to the universal” (Meenakshi Mukherjee 163).

Human reason and its accessories, science, theory, even language itself become obstacles, to knowing as epistemology changes the truth in the very act of apprehending it. The counter science acolytes have a cutting edge over others as they begin with an intuitive grasp that reality cannot be known. Murugan explains to Antar, the Egyptian born, New York based computer scientist slated to be the next in-line Laakhan:

May be this other team started with the idea that knowledge is self-contradictory; maybe they believed that to know something is to change it, therefore, in knowing something, you’ve already changed what you think you know so that you don’t really know at all, you know only its history. May be
they thought that knowledge couldn’t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge. (TCC 88)

The desire to escape tyranny of knowledge and yearning to experience the truth beyond knowledge – through intuition, spiritualist séances, or medically engineered dementia, found in full measure in this mystery tale is evidence of a definite incline towards mysticism. The post-Aristotelian conception, conceives the world as an emanation from the one with whom the soul is capable of being reunited in trance or ecstasy. Buttressed with layerings of ancient regimes, Ghosh repeats the same line of thought to the last comma, dot and smudge of ink: “For them the only way to escape the tyranny of knowledge is to turn it on itself. But for that to work they have to create a single perfect moment of discovery when the person who discovers is also that which is discovered” (TCC 252).

One explanation for this surprising tilt could be that the anthropologist in the writer scans the movement of civilization through the centuries and comes up with a series of negations. In spite of material advance, and dazzling possibilities afforded by science, technology, the author seems to say, mankind has not really added to the sum of wisdom, self-knowledge and still remains floundering in the dark of mental and moral ignorance, While the best bits of humour and ironic insights are reserved to express his disenchantment with the bourgeois social order, the author does not endorse any other alternative. The practitioners of magic are an equally disappointing lot. They are just as self-seeking and ruthless as their civilized counterparts and their motives are even more confusing. Mangala achieves a certain amount of success when she works through the British scientist Ronald Ross, for the success of his enterprise. On her own,
she achieves little, which makes us wonder what this entire bustle about detecting, selecting and perpetuating the chromosomatic lineage.

Urmila is also the name of the mythic Lakshman’s much neglected wife. She is a typical middle class Bengalee, sacrificing herself for her traditional male-dominated household, till she rebels and takes upon herself the aspect of the vengeful goddess Kali. The suspense surrounding her “Avtar” and the possibilities of developing her into a full-fledged character are willfully negated as the narrative comes to an abrupt halt on the eve of her reincarnation. It is never known how she used her new found powers, if she had used them at all. Murugan, the companion who helped to instigate her revolt and assisted the preparations for her transmogrification had pleaded with Urmila to save him from impending madness, minutes before his disappearance: “Don’t forget me, ‘he begged her, ‘If you have it in your power to change the script, write me in. Don’t leave me behind. Please’” (TCC 253). But Urmila as deity was either helpless, or worse, had punished Murugan for daring to investigate and illumine the enigmas of the dark world. It is Murugan’s sudden departure which leads Antar to reconstruct his story on his computer and ultimately discover him in a mental asylum. The computer and its fancy gadgetry have the wizardry to transpose Murugan’s grotesque visage across the continent, into another world, but cannot find an answer why the man should have ended the way he did – naked, covered with his excrement, with maggots in his hair and permanently hand-cuffed. Moreover, it is a wonder how a mad man in this helpless condition have the power to control Antar’s movements, unless he had acquired magical powers himself. It is also baffling whether Murugan warns Antar about his impending fate or merely indicating the powerlessness of the powerful.
The selection of the Egyptian Antar, belonging to the new generation of scientific technically trained immigrants, working for a faceless company in New York, as the next Laakahan incarnate, carries the tussle of the parallel worlds into the heart of western civilizations. It is Antar’s living conditions, more than the sights and smells of Calcutta streets which set the tone of the novel. His lonely life with only a computer for company and the isolation of all his companions (mainly from the Middle East, and central Asia ) who shuffle out a dreary existence, living at the fringe of the glittering metropolis, in a world apart, which constitutes the lasting impression in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

When Amitav Ghosh turns to the thriller for the first time in the *The Calcutta Chromosome*, then he is not merely trying his hand at something new, he is making a social and philosophical statement through his choice of form. The thriller captures more swiftly and accurately the chaos and the violence of everyday life than any other form of fiction, and relates them more clearly to the inner realities of human existence through its ubiquitous pursuit-motif and its archetypal and symbolic. Where the detective-story, with which it has so much in common, is an intellectual puzzle to be solved by the dispassionate detective, who stands outside the action, the appeal of the thriller is not cerebral but instinctive and elemental, and its characters, whether hunter or hunted, have their very existence at stake at every moment. Indeed, everyone and everything in the thriller must be interlinked; no-one can stand apart and remains an observer, but has to become part of the quest in a world in which there are more things than are dreamed of in your philosophy. Ghosh’s choice of the thriller pattern for his novel becomes especially interesting when it is seen as an ironic take-off on the way in which stories of medical and scientific discoveries and inventions are popularized in
children’s books, science-fiction tales, Reader’s Digest and the like as whodunits and chases. Where these celebrate cerebration and dissemination, science is knowledge, The Calcutta Chromosome puts forward the paradox that life finds sustenance through ‘counter-science,’ through secrecy and silence and rejection of rationality.

_The Calcutta Chromosome_; sometimes, seems to be deliberately parodying its conventions and assumptions. The novel’s action triggered off accidentally – or so it seems on the surface – and extends into the past, encircles the present and reaches out into the future, until the underlying conspiracy behind each mystery, each incident is revealed and the matter resolved each in its own fashion, novels mingle fact and fiction, hammering their narrative intensity out of journalist materials and documentary data and setting their action in a wide arena that encompasses East and West, carefully and realistically etching out the background, with local colour and colloquial dialogue to establish immediate credibility.

The novel begins early twenty-first century, when Antar, an Egyptian computer programmer and systems analyst in New York, suddenly finds the ID card of an old colleague flashed on his computer screen. As he recalls the name of its owner, he is aroused by something more than ordinary curiosity, and begins his search for L. Murugan, who, he finds he had noted himself in a file, had suddenly disappeared from Calcutta on 21 August 1995, one day after he had reached the city, which was, coincidentally, perhaps, but appropriately, called World Mosquito Day. Murugan was a man obsessed with the early history of malaria research, and especially with the career of Ronald Ross, who had won the Nobel Prize for his discovery in India of the life-cycle of the malaria parasite. Murugan’s own conviction was that there was some “other mind, some person or persons who had guided Ross towards his discoveries and away
from other avenues of thought” (TCC 31). After all, records show that Ross had never been academically inclined or research-oriented, and had started on his quest for the malaria vector only after Dr. Partrick Manson had urged him to test his ideas about how the world’s oldest and most widespread disease is transmitted. All Ross’s discoveries were in fact serendipitous and were always made, by a strange coincidence, only when Lutchman, a helpful ‘dhooley-bearer’, was present. The inevitable conclusion, believed Murugan, was that Ross “thinks he’s doing experiments on the malaria parasite. And all the time it’s he who is the experiment” (TCC 67) conducted by poor illiterate natives of colonized country – a reversal of conventional wisdom about scientific thought and progress and an ironic glance at the popular Western images of Oriental inscrutability and menace in Fu Manchu and his ilk. It is also interesting to note the subversive demolition of science, scientific jargon and scientific argument (and the tongue-in-cheek humour) when Murugan earnestly attempts to explain the relationship between science and counter-science by an analogy with matter and anti-matter-and rooms and ante-rooms.

Murugan’s brash ways and his single-minded pursuit of his subversive hypothesis had alienated him from the scientific community and have caused concern among his friends and colleagues. But he had managed to persuade his employers to let him go to Calcutta, the place of his own birth and childhood as well as of Ross’s discovery, in order to pursue the truth. The quests that belong to different items and places and which are motivated so differently are thus juxtaposed from the beginning itself, Antar’s for Murugan, Murugan’s for the truth behind Ross’s research, which too was just as much a quest as Antar’s and Murugan’s quests. Indeed, all the characters in the novel, unalike as they are, are entangled through their individual quests and
connected in other devious and subterranean ways with one another and with the one
greater quest of all life, for immortality: hence the device of the story-within-a-story and
the quest-within-a-quest. The most striking characteristic of these inextricably
interlinked characters is, paradoxically, their alienation from their immediate
surroundings; for any quest to succeed, it seems that the hunter must be free from the
bondage of conventional social relationships and must survive poverty, disease,
exploitation, marginalization, anything and everything that might weigh down the
human spirit. Thus, Antar is a Coptic Christian from Egypt in New York, orphaned
early and a childless widower, working alone from home; Murugan is obviously a South
Indian Hindu born and brought up in Calcutta. He has the common colonial habit of
anglicizing Indian names by calling himself Morgan; he is a divorcee and another lonely
researcher with Life Watch. There is also a satiric echo in his slangy speech of the
brash Indian of the English spoken by Quick-Gun-Murugan of popular television.
Murugan seems to outwit the American in his breezy speech-patterns, so that the
Empire strikes back again through him.

Urmila Roy and Sonali Das may be Bengali Hindus in Calcutta, one a reporter
searching for the meaning of Phulboni’s “Laakhan’s stories” and the other an actress
and writer, but Urmila is an outsider even at home, used and exploited there, and
Sonali’s parentage and lifestyle are anything but conventional; the revelation of the
identity of her father at the end of the novel, thriller fashion, makes her own
participation in the conspiracy inevitable. Phulboni is a Bengali Muslim born in Orissa,
and a writer, as such; there is considerable irony in making him a devotee of the
mistress of silence. There is, moreover, no cultural divide on the basis of witness, for
example, Kazi Nazrul Islam’s Shyama Sangeeet religion alone among Bengalis, but
Westerners prefer to believe in stereotypes; the character of Phulboni becomes thus an attack on colonial attitudes.

Then there are the foreigners, such as Mrs. Aratounian, an Armenian Christian, erstwhile owner of a nursery shop and later of the guest house near Ross’s house in Calcutta, in which Murugan puts up: historical figures such as Ross, Grigson and Cunningham, Englishmen engaged in their own kinds of quests, and the American Farley, who wants to find out more about Cunningham’s research and meets such a mysterious end at Renupur station, where Phulboni manages to survive a similar experience; and the Finnish spiritualist Madame Liisa Salminen of Madras, whom C.C. Dunn and Dr. Cunningham visit and with whom he shares an apparently supernatural experience. Salminen had, moreover, been the inspiring spirit behind the Polish Countess Pongracz’s pioneering archaeological work in Asia and Egypt, where she had met and similarly influenced the young Antar, and her study of the teachings of Valentinus, the ancient Alexandrian philosopher, for whom the Abyss and the Silence were the greatest deities. The foreigners embody the continuing interest of the West in the spiritual quest of the East; the colonized world asserts its superiority over its colonizers in what is their greatest pride and professed weapon, matters of the intellect.

The links between these apparently disparate people are carefully made, so that by the end of the novel the vastness, the all-inclusiveness of the conspiracy is established and becomes a sign of the reality of its existence, and the fantastic, as Christie had remarked in Passenger to Frankfurt, is no impossibility. As in the typical thriller, clues and hints abound, embedded in the text, every detail, however incidental and peripheral it might seem at first, being significant, so that everyone and everything seems caught up in one monstrous design, and even the colonial experience becomes
part of the pattern, and the hunter and the hunted become one. In the silence and the secrecy of the search for immortality there is no baying of the Hounds of Heaven; every step forward leads the characters back into the past and then to the future, further and further into the abyss of mystery and incomprehension, until they realize that they have been enmeshed in the great web long before they knew it.

Thus, for example, Antar and Murugan are both expatriates in New York, working at different kinds of research for the same organization; their countries were both once colonized by the same imperialist power and their home now is another, and the greatest, imperialist power. While Antar has had malaria, Murugan has had syphilis, which used to be cured by the introduction of the malaria parasite into the system, which is the object of Ross’s search and the subject of Murugan’s own. If Antar hunts for Murugan, Murugan too hunts Antar; as it turns out the lost ID card that turned up on Antar’s computer screen was no accident but a carefully planned operation that brings Antar, too, into the web of conspiracy. This is the pattern that repeats itself in every quest. The connection between each is revealed in an exchange between Antar and Murugan in a New York restaurant, for what they say here recurs in many guises throughout the novel:

‘Tell me Ant,’ Murugan said, fixing his piercing gaze upon Antar’s face. ‘Tell me: do you think it’s natural to want to turn the page, to be curious about what happened next?’ ‘Well,’ said Antar, uncomfortably. ‘I’m not sure if I know what you mean’ ‘Let me put it like this then,’ said Murugan. ‘Do you think that everything that can be known should be known? ‘Of course’, said Antar. ‘I don’t see why not.’ ‘All right,’ said Murugan… ‘I’ll turn a few pages for you: but remember, it was you who asked. It’s you funeral. (TCC 50)
The reader finds the aptness of the superficial remark at the end striking and especially in a novel that challenges conventional Western notions about knowledge death, immortality and reincarnation.

It also strikes at popular Western notions about literary creativity, beginning with its subversive attack on the logo centrism derided also by twentieth century deconstructionists. If secrecy is the ‘first principle of a functioning counter science,’ communication, or putting ideas into language, is, as Murugan explains, establishing ‘a claim to know – which is the first thing that a counter science would dispute.

“Knowledge in the conventional, Western sense is impossible; for to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you’ve already changed what you think you know so you don’t really know it at all: you only know its history” (TCC 88).

Phulboni, a great writer himself, quite emphatically rejects the common belief that words can communicate experience or truth or help to discover the meaning of life when he suggests what “the word is to this silence what the shadow is to the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life’’ (TCC 24). That is why he had always wondered: “Does a story come to be in the words that conjure out of my mind or does it live already, somewhere, enshrined in mud and clay – in an image, that is, in the crafted mimicry of life?” (TCC 189). He had once written a fictional tale about a drowning woman being saved by a small polished grey stone with a small white mark on it that made it look an eye; and many years later, to his astonishment, he had discovered a similar image being worshipped in a small shrine and was also told a true story about a drowning woman identical to the one he had thought he had only imagined so long ago. Phulboni’s views, born of experience, add a new insight into the old controversy.
Behind all, the characters and all the varieties of quest, is the elusive unseen presence, whom Phulboni acknowledges as his Muse and his spiritual guide and who is imaged in clay as Mangala-bibi the goddess and worshipped in secret by only those who are part of her immortality achieved not through death and entry into the afterlife but through the transference of *The Calcutta Chromosome* through the “fever, delirium and discovery” transmitted by the malaria parasite. Mangala is the woman who works in Cunningham’s laboratory, whom Farley antagonizes; but then Farley unaccountably disappears. She adopts different forms and personae as she crosses over from one body to another through the years; she is Mrs. Aratounian in Murugan’s Calcutta and she becomes Urmila, though the latter does not realize that she has been chosen to receive her. Murugan discovering the secret the day he, too, disappears; and she becomes Tara in New York, helping Antar to cross over as well. Murugan might now live in a shelter run by the Department of Alternative Inner States, the twenty first century Newspeak equivalent of an asylum, but he seems to know what he is saying and doing and his condition questions the meaning and nature of madness in western terms and its relation to knowledge, truth and expression.

The novel examines paradoxical relationship between language and reality and on western notions of scholarship as exemplified in Grigson’s linguistic research. Like Mangala, he adopts different personae through the ages appearing even in Phulboni’s fiction, and he continues her hunting in various ways. He guides Ross to his discoveries, he frightens away Grigson, who might have posed a threat to Mangala-bibi’s experiments, he manages to dispose of Farley, he is with Phulboni at Renupur station from where Farley had disappeared, he is Sonali’s servant and Urmila’s fishmonger, and appears in Antar’s life in New York as well. It leaves the reader confused and eggs
him on to figure out the protagonist of the novel. Is it Antar, or Murugan, or Urmila, or Laakhan, or Mangala? The two-part division of the novel suggests that its action takes place over two days, might indicate that it is Murugan, or, because it begins and ends with him, Antar; but just as the content of the two parts spill over into one another and include more than one day and one centre of consciousness. Indeed, the common western notions of protagonist, of character development, and of good and evil have disappeared here, so that *The Calcutta Chromosome* suggests the superficiality of ideas as it projects the validity of traditional Indian literary norms, summed up by R.K. Narayan in ‘The World of the Storyteller’ as follows:

Everything is interrelated. Stories, scriptures, ethics, philosophy grammar, astrology, astronomy, semantics, mysticism, and moral codes – each forms part and parcel of a total life and is indispensable for the attainment of a four-square understanding of existence. The characters in the epics are prototypes and moulds in which humanity is cast, and remain valid for all times. Consequently, the story is ‘part of human history rather than fiction, and ‘the curtain never comes down finally’ in any narrative. (R.K. Narayan 147)

The quest is not for a drug that will induce universal benevolence but for the renewal of life itself. There can, accordingly, be no comforting rounding off, but rather only a step further towards the realms of the non-rational and the ineffable realms that are accessible especially to the poor, the marginalized, the colonized, and the survivor. There are no simplistic statements about human nature; there is, instead, the belief in the infinite possibility of the transcendence of human limitations and human mortality. That is why the conspiracy never ends; the cult of silence and secrecy spreads to territories governed by the word and reason. Western knowledge and science had once conquered
the East, but inevitably the Empire must strike back. Through its subversive quest, *The Calcutta Chromosome* celebrates the eternal, celebrates the triumph of the spirit over all that bogs it down in the mire.

Transgression is part of human nature and the characters, real or fictional, embrace this transgressive spirit with intense passion. The established norms are nothing but commonly agreed upon principles to guide human life. When a human being violates these imperatives they do it with a purpose, good or evil. Ghosh repeatedly demonstrates that his characters are purpose-driven. However, he finds fault with real life characters like the politicians and scientists of India and Pakistan. Transgression becomes a way of life with his fictional characters as they are guided by whims, fancies, idiosyncracies or even sheer idiocy as the text shows.