

Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*—Dismantling the idea of purity

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The Circle of Reason (1986) by Amitav Ghosh charts the geographical and ideological journey of a young weaver, Alu, who is brought up in a small Bengal village. After being falsely accused of terrorist activity, he flees westwards to Calcutta, Goa, the fictional Gulf state of Al-Ghazira and finally to Algeria. Alu is clearly the main protagonist in the novel, although for large sections of the narrative he remains more a kind of silent centre, through which the various discursive threads in the narrative are woven together. Through the intermingling of these differing threads the novel also constitutes a generic mixture, containing features of the picaresque novel, magic realism, the novel of Ideas, the detective novel and Hindu epic.

As can be inferred from the title, the concept of reason as conceived in Western modernity is the central theme running through all three parts of the novel. Reason is linked in the narrative with the idea of the purity of the poles in the Western binary constructions. The text brings forth several settings in which hybridised versions of reason are sketched. The first part features Alu with his uncle and foster father, Balaram, in the village of Lalpukur. Balaram, who is the teacher in the village school, is devoted to a trans- or supranational idea of reason and science. He is a devoted practitioner of phrenology, which he sees as a way of combining the outside and inside, body and soul, of people. Balaram is also inspired by the work of Louis Pasteur, and launches a campaign towards germs and superstition in the village to win the inhabitants over to his idiosyncratic vision of the purity of reason and sciences. In the second part, Alu continues the thematic of preaching reason by ending his characteristic silence and forming a mock-socialist group which aims to get rid of both germs and the personal ownership of money among the motley crowd of the inhabitants of the Souq, an ancient multicultural trading area in Al-Ghazira. In the third part, the original inspiration for purity and reason in the novel, Balaram's copy of *Life of Pasteur*, is

cremated with the body of one of the characters in a scene that calls for the adaptation of ancient rituals to the demands of the practical present.

The narrative can be read as a political treatise which attempts to undermine the Western-originated ideology of binaries. In a binary construction each pole is ideally the opposite of the other, not containing elements that are evident in the other side of the binary in question. However, in the novel the purity of the two poles in binary constructions (such as science vs. religion, body vs. soul, East vs. West, ideal vs. practical etc.) is dismantled. As a consequence, new connections transcending the barriers between the different poles within the binaries are formed. The novel also seems to aim at the alleviating of philosophical and theoretical binarisms. It makes use of “the lexicons of both liberal humanism and poststructuralism” (Dixon 1996: 16), transcending the border between these two approaches that have traditionally been realized as opposite. At the same time the text appears to be reaching towards “a syncretism that is an anti-humanist, postmodern recognition of difference and is also *at the same time* a humanist secular ideal” (Mondal 2003: 30). This, in the end, seems to lead to the dismantling of the binary of ethics vs. politics, or universality vs. difference. Ethics and poststructuralist/postcolonialist emphasis on difference become interconnected through the realization that the mere poststructuralist deconstruction of Western (as well as other) discourses does not actually lead anywhere. The outcome of deconstruction has to be given a new form, which, I will claim, happens by way of ethically informed connections and representations in the novel.

In what follows, I will examine the dismantling of binaries in the novel through the theme of purity, first on the plot level and then on the level of narrative strategy. The narrative technique of the novel is symbolized through the concept of weaving, which is strongly thematized in the narration. I shall end by introducing aspects of the theoretical discussion on the relationship between the politics of difference and the ethics of connections to find out how the novel situates itself in relation to this debate.

Dissolving the purity of binaries

In the novel the transcending of the lines between traditional and modern ways of life, between scientific and religious worldviews and between

natural sciences and humanism is effected through the gradual dismissal of the concept of purity. The idea of purity is closely linked with the idea of pure origin and pure distinct essences, which lie behind the typically Western rationalist ideology of binary constructions. Purity also refers to universalized discourses like that of Western sciences, or of Orientalism. The concept of purity implies that there must exist entities that are separate and distinct from one another, each possessing certain characteristics the opposites of which are to be found in the other entities. By this means the entities are conceived as 'pure': they are free of the traits apparent in the other entities. This is basically how binary constructions are formed. And the narrative aims at the deconstruction of these binaries, as well as the universalized discourses built on them.

The theme of purity runs through all three parts of the novel. In the first part, "Reason," there is a quest for purity on a scientific and practical level, as Balaram disinfects the village of Lalpukur with carbolic acid to destroy the germs brought in by recent refugees. The concept of purity is also deconstructed through the hilarious student organization called the Rationalists, who blend ideas from the Hindu religion with Western natural science ("the Brahma is nothing but the Atom" (47)) and launch a campaign against dirty underwear. There is also the suspicious 'science' of phrenology, which defies the purity of the mainstream natural sciences in its capacity to treat both the inside and outside, the mind and the body of human beings.

Ideological purity is also sought in the mock socialist uprising of the second part, "Passion," where money, and consequently private ownership, is declared impure. The third part, "Death," describes the merging, or transcending, of all the thematic binaries of the narrative: tradition vs. modernity, East vs. West and religion vs. science. Purity is here negotiated through the modified version of Tagore's play, *Chitrangada*, and the clash between ancient rules and rituals on the one hand and the necessities of the practical present on the other (carbolic acid is used as holy water in Kulfi's burial). The tension, then, is not merely between science and religion as systems of thought, but there is also the contrast between science and religion as collections of rules and rituals to be read from books and the adaptation of them to the often surprising needs of the immediate practical present. There arises the need to modify and unite elements of religion and science, make them impure

in a sense, to adapt them to the actual needs of human beings in their particular circumstances.

The third part also contains the revelation that life would be impossible without germs (i.e. 'impurity'). This revelation comes from the same book that has triggered all the preceding quests for purity in the novel, René Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur*. This book can be seen as the offspring of Western rationalism and reason, which in the novel are symbolized by the concept of purity. Consequently, this reason has now come full circle: it has destroyed itself in deconstructing one of the premises of Western modernity that gave birth to it. The notion of purity behind the idea of binary constructions has been declared insufficient, implying that the poles of binary constructions are not distinct but rather interconnected: they cannot exist without one another.

One of the binaries that dissolve in the third part of the novel is that of the mind versus the body. In a sense, this issue has been approached already in the first part, where Balaram complains that "what's wrong with all those scientists and their sciences is that there is no connection between the outside and the inside, between what people think and how they are" (17). He justifies his interest in phrenology by saying that "in this science the inside and the outside, the mind and the body, are *one*" (17).¹ According to phrenology, the shape of a person's head indicates the nature of his or her character. In other words, by examining the body, one can examine the mind. This comment on the perhaps artificial separation of various branches of science, whether natural (body) or human (mind), into distinct, 'pure', islands is taken further in the last part of the novel, where Mrs Verma, who is a microbiologist, contemplates the origin of the microbes she examines in her work. She first draws a parallel between a microbiologist and a car mechanic, comparing bacteria with rust and "grime or dust somewhere in the machinery" (412). She then equates the body with a machine and states that "at least

¹ What we have here is a person who readily adopts the ideologies and methods of both the "arch-representative of mainstream science, Pasteur, [the finder of the germ] and those 'scientists' who are now widely considered to be discredited, such as the phrenologist George Combe" (Chambers 43). So, in general, although carbolic acid does disinfect things, the discourse that produced it, the ideology and rationalism of Western science, is anything but pure, covering both the areas "of what might be conveniently termed science and pseudo-science" (Chambers 2003, 37).

the surgeon sees the whole machine, even though it's all shrouded and chloroformed, face covered and weeping mothers hidden away, every trace of its humanity blanketed" (412). This sentence, bringing together natural science to do with body (surgeon, machine, chloroform) and human sentiments to do with mind (weeping mothers, blanketed humanity) anticipates the next step in Mrs Verma's reflections:

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

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

She concludes by observing that the "tyranny of your despotic science" forbids the doctor in a general practice from telling some of the people who come there to complain about their bodily pains that "there's nothing wrong with your body—all you have to do to cure yourself is try to be a better human being" (413). In this way, the problematic of mind-body relations broadens into the problematic relationship between natural sciences and humanist ethics.² Of course, this "tyranny" of the science is once again the result of the idea of purity, of distinct sciences that construct the world according to certain premises and that therefore cannot see anything these premises will not allow them to see.

The argument in the third part between Dr Mishra and Mrs Verma is seemingly on whether to cremate the body of Kulfi or not, but this too is framed by the issue of purity. Dr Mishra's arguments are that the officials will not allow for cremation, and, more importantly, that the situation does not meet the requirements the old scriptures set for proper cremation. The victim is not suitable and they lack the necessary accessories for cremation. To prove that they cannot go along with the burial in the first place, Dr Mishra chooses to stand for the purity and

² Alu's boils and withered thumbs seem to be another instance of the connection between the mind and the body in the novel. The withered thumbs and the fact that they heal simultaneously with the disappearance of the various dichotomies towards the end of the narrative indicate that there is a connection between the body and the mind, and that if this connection is broken, both will become 'withered'.

persistence of the precepts of the Hindu religion: he wants the cremation to follow the rules set by ancient religious doctrines of the “scriptural times” (407). The comic tone of the novel, well-meaning and full of positive energy embodied by the character of Balaram in the first part, takes on a dark and cynical nature with Dr Mishra’s ironical comments in the third part. Mrs Verma is ready to modify the ritual to allow for restrictions caused by the situation: ordinary wood is used instead of sandal wood, carbolic acid is used as holy water and butter for ghee. The use of carbolic acid nicely brings together the cleaning ‘rituals’ of ancient religion (holy water) and modern science (carbolic acid). When Dr Mishra complains that there are certain rules that have to be followed Mrs Verma answers: “All you ever talk about is rules. That’s how you and your kind have destroyed everything—science, religion, socialism—with your rules and your orthodoxies. That’s the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human” (409). Consequently, this modified version of ancient Hindu burial takes place, in spite of Dr Mishra’s arguments.

The narrative clearly avoids taking sides in questions that have to do with the East-West divide (or with any divide, for that matter): the Hindu religion is here seen quite as pure, distinct and rule-bound as Western science. When Dr Mishra exclaims that the whole cremation is a shameful travesty, Mrs Verma justifies her action by saying that the times are like that: “Nothing’s whole any more. If we wait for everything to be right again, we’ll wait for ever while the world falls apart. The only hope is to make do with what we’ve got” (417). Kulfi has to have a funeral, and for this reason Mrs Verma and others have to abandon rules and purity and allow for the fact that they are Indian migrants living on the edge of the Algerian Sahara in Africa. In the modern migrant world of strange and sudden connections and situations, wholeness and purity have to be abandoned. That is why *Life of Pasteur* is burned along with Kulfi’s body: both Alu and Mrs Verma have understood that in the modern world its message concerning the defence of mankind against the germs, the Infinitesimally small, the impure, and by an obvious analogy the subaltern and the other, is no longer valid. On the contrary, the various purities, whether we think of them as nations and people (both in the East and West), or as modes of knowledge in forms of various sciences and religions, have to open up to new influences and start to interact with each other.

Against this background it comes as no surprise that the links between the tripartite narrative structure of the novel and its thematic contents introduced above can be constructed in various ways that supplement one another. As D.A. Shankar has observed, the tripartite structure is reminiscent of Indian philosophy and the three qualities that make individuals what they are: *Tamas*, *Rajas* and *Satwik*. These form the order of the soul's upward evolution (Shankar 1994, 583). This implies that it is possible to see the narrative as a kind of picaresque *Bildungsroman*, where Alu moves through different stages as his journey continues. In the novel, however, the order of the stages is reversed: *Satwa*: Reason; *Rajas*: Passion; and *Tamas*: Death. Obviously, it is possible to interpret the novel through both sequences. If we follow the first one, the original order from the philosophical tradition, and look at the first part of the novel under the thematics of death, we notice that the death of Balaram and others in the explosion in Lalpukur actually starts Alu's journey, both physically and mentally. Death, in other words is the end, but also the beginning. And if we examine the last part under 'Reason', we can conclude that the revelation following the dissolving of the concepts of purity, distinct essences and binary constructions in general in a sense brings reason with it, although this reason is very different from, indeed almost the opposite of, the one based on the ideology of Western modernity.

If we follow the order stated in the novel, it is easy to see that the obsession of Balaram and other educated middle-class Indians with Western originated science and rationality fits in quite well with the title 'Reason' of the first part. And 'Death' as the title of the last part refers both to the death of Kulfi and the death of the idea of purity as the goal of, and basis for, human endeavours. Yet another way of looking at the structure of the novel is to see the title of the first part, 'Reason', as a symbol for the educated Westernized middle-class Indian babus who form part of the set of characters and who are totally absorbed in the achievements of Western natural science (Balaram) and literature (Gopal). The title of the second part, 'Passion' would then foreground the uneducated illiterate lower classes of the Souq with their interests in daily survival and story-telling. 'Death' in the third part would then indicate the death of all the distinctions implied by the above definitions and divisions, as all the social classes of the novel are brought together. But again, such an organization results in contradictions, because there

seems to be more passion in Balaram's undertakings in the first part than there is in the doings of the residents of the Souq, who certainly possess more practical wisdom than Balaram. And the death in the last part also simultaneously signifies birth, a new beginning, as both Das and Alu and Zindi embark on their journeys to Europe and India after the dismantling of the modernist binaries through the symbolic combining of purity and impurity and the burning of the *Life of Pasteur*. In the end, it seems, the thematic emphases indicated by the titles of the three parts of the novel are spread across the whole narrative in a manner which suggests the dismantling of the idea of distinct, pure essences. And this is effected through a process of narrative weaving that produces a colourful cloth intertwining various narrative threads.

Narrative weaving

The symbol of interaction and intertwining in the novel is weaving: the making of new worlds by connecting places, languages and discourses. As Balaram says in the novel, "Man at the loom is [...] a creature who makes his own world like no other can, with his mind." But although each weaver creates his/her own world, weaving "has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. [...] It has never permitted the division of reason." (55) According to Balaram, "Weaving *is* Reason, which makes the world mad and makes it human." (58) In other words, reason is action, whereby people can produce their own discursive truth by interconnecting, or weaving, various discursive threads into their own personal texture, instead of following e.g. the universalized discursive totality of scientific reason.

The novel is, then, a celebration of stories and narration. It is also replete with metaphors, the most prominent being that of weaving. Ghosh connects weaving with narration. The weaver uses the loom to create a beautiful cloth out of different threads. In a similar fashion, the writer uses words and narration to produce narratives that connect different times, places and ideologies. When Alu is learning to become a weaver, his teacher, Shombu Debnath, will not give him access to the loom before he knows what it is: "The machine, like man, is captive to language" (73). Alu has to learn the names of the different parts of the loom in several languages: "So many names, so many words, words beaten together in the churning that created the world: Tangail words,

stewed with Noakhali words, salted with Naboganj words, boiled up with English” (73). Why so many words? They serve no mechanical purpose and do not seem to provide any help in the practical process of weaving. Words are important “because the weaver, in making cloth, makes words, too, and trespassing on the territory of the poets gives names to things the eye can’t see. That is why the loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world’s armies of pen-wielders.” And although the machinery has changed through time, those changes have been only mechanical; “the essence of cloth—locking yarns together by crossing them—has not changed since prehistory.” (74)

The analogy to writing or narrating a story is obvious. The devices, writing machines and presses, even languages, have changed, but the essence of story-telling has not; we are still ‘spinning a yarn,’ to use a metaphor derived from the realm of weaving. Weaving and narration are also both actions. Consequently, in the novel *Alu*, who has been alarmingly silent and passive after his arrival in Lalpukur, gradually becomes more active and talkative after the beginning of the weaving lessons. In a sense, he is transformed from being a passive recipient of (mainly Western-originated) book learning into an active producer with a ‘voice’ of his own. One can notice here the presence of subaltern agency, which Ghosh is always careful to secure for the characters of his novels.

In the first part of the novel, Ghosh also draws on the history of weaving to create a counter-narrative to the Western history of scientific and technical development, expansion and industrialization by staging the loom as the agent of every new step in the grand narrative of modernization. He ends his account as follows:

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

Who knows what new horrors lie in store?

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

And so weaving, too, is hope; a living belief that having once *made the world one and blessed it with its diversity* it must do so again. Weaving is hope because it has no country, no continent. (57-8) (emphasis added)

This idea of diversity in one is central to Ghosh’s writing. His stories concern the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of his characters. They also represent an attempt to avoid appropriation of voice by

devolving narratorial responsibility to people of different social classes and cultures. Ghosh's narrators are often from the middle or upper-middle class of Indian society, the privileged group that has had a Western education and is fluent in English (like Ghosh himself). Describing the lower classes from this position in a language they often do not know at all can be seen as an act of appropriation that makes them part of the privileged discourse both linguistically and ideologically. To avoid appropriation of this kind, Ghosh tries to give these people agency and their own point of view by locating them as the narrators of their own stories.

Avoiding appropriation through oral stories

The sensitivity of Ghosh towards problems of appropriation comes through in his narrative technique. For instance, in *The Circle of Reason*, in the first part, which mainly describes the village and Balaram, there is an omniscient narrator. Ghosh, or his narrator, clearly presupposes a common discourse with Balaram, who has a university education and who is much higher on the social ladder than the illiterate villagers. But the second part of the novel, which concentrates on the lower classes, has parts of it narrated as oral stories by the characters in the novel. These include Zindi's story about the calamities that have fallen on her house (201-12), Abu Fahl's story of the trip to the ruins of The Star to rescue Alu (229-34), Hajj Fahmy's story of the coming of the oilmen (245-64) and Jeevanbhai Patel's story telling of Alu's return (274-84). The narrator of the novel recedes into the background, as these representatives of the lower social strata are given a voice of their own. Each of these stories is related in a different manner. Zindi's tale runs like a ghost story with its ominous magic incidents, Hajj Fahmy's story resembles a morality or an educational story with every part of it constituting a lesson of some kind. The stories by Abu Fahl and Patel are narrated in the first person, while those by Zindi and Hajj Fahmy, although set out as oral stories narrated by them personally, do not contain first-person pronouns. As John Thieme observes, the magic-realist, or supernatural, features and events in the novel are largely due to gossip, or "oral folk imagination" (Thieme 255). There is nothing genuinely supernatural in the novel; although many of its events appear to be highly improbable (for instance, Alu being rescued by two old

sewing machines in the collapse of The Star) there is nothing that is strictly speaking impossible.

Thus, the novel contains stories told by the characters, which are in a sense juxtaposed to the reality described by the narrator. This is neatly exemplified when Alu is buried alive in the collapse of the huge shopping centre, The Star. We are given three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, explanations of the collapse. First, Abu Fahl states that it happened because the contractors mixed too much sand into the cement. Second, in her story Zindi sees it as yet another incident in the chain of calamities that has befallen her house. Finally, Hajj Fahmy constructs a long story describing the coming of the oilmen and the Western capital which had been used to build The Star. His theory is that the building collapsed because nobody wants it; it was only a whim of capital.³

In *The Circle of Reason*, narration creates the world, makes it 'real', even corporeal. Consequently, by changing the narrative, the narrator changes the world:

They had lived through everything Zindi spoke of [...]; yet it was only in her telling that it took shape; changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing, a block of time that was not hours or minutes or days, but something corporeal [...]. That was Zindi's power: she could bring together empty air and give it a body just by talking

³ This layered narration has points of convergence, as well as of divergence, with one of the strategies for many-sited ethnography introduced by George E. Marcus:

In the framework of modernity, the character of the stories people tell as myth in their everyday situations is not as important to fieldworkers tracking processes and associations within the world system as is their own situated sense of social landscapes. Reading for the plot and then testing this against the reality of ethnographic investigation that constructs its sites to a compelling narrative is an interesting, virtually untried mode of constructing multi-sited research. (1998: 93)

This citation brings forth one of the major differences between ethnography as a science and Ghosh's works of fiction. Unlike an ethnographer, Ghosh is both the creator and the 'researcher' of his fictional worlds, worlds in which stories are an important part of the "social landscape." By giving room to stories emanating from various social circumstances, he actually situates his narrator in that landscape. Whereas Ghosh's narrator examines the social background and practices in the novels as straightforward objects of description, the characters become subjects through their stories narrated via distinctive discourses.

of it. [...] And when sometimes she chose a different word or a new phrase it was like a potter's thumb on clay—changing the thing itself and their knowledge of it.
(212-23)

The Circle of Reason concentrates on the importance of narration and the power of language to signify and to create alternative realities. As already stated, the symbol of weaving is used to create a counter-narrative to the Western history of scientific development, expansion and industrialization by staging the loom as the agent of every new step in the grand narrative of modernization. But Balaram's statement that weaving has "made the world one and blessed it with its diversity" (57-58) also hints at an ethical narrative strategy: the creation of connections with the other while retaining its alterity. This happens by presenting characters in a relationship with each other while giving them voice and agency without appropriating them into any one discourse.

Ethical "turmoil of languages"

As I have already implied, Ghosh does acknowledge that the world is a narrative and discursive social construction where knowledge is produced discursively by those versed in the hegemonic language/discourse. But in addition to this awareness of discourse as power and knowledge, he attempts to construct instances of communication which transcend the claim to knowledge requiring a specific language. This happens in the novel when Alu speaks to a crowd of people in a "turmoil of languages:"

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

Alu's mixture of languages does not promote any particular ideology or claim to power in the way a specific language or discourse would. In other words, it does not 'know' and therefore does not provide a definitive answer. This linguistic mixture constitutes only a question, to which everyone can have their own response. Therefore, it speaks to

everyone, irrespective of class or language, without treating them as a homogeneous group. This kind of scene transcending the divisions created by different languages can be seen as indicative of a longing for a world before the separation of languages. But, before all, it may also be conceived as the sketching of a dimension of reality where the differences among people (or peoples) can be communicable without losing the distinctive features of these people.

This attempt at communication which would enable everyone engaged in it to have their own answer to Alu's linguistic mixture of a question veers close to the theories of the ethical by Emmanuel Levinas (1969). In his view, knowledge is discursive and appropriates as well as changes the target of knowing.⁴ But here there is no 'pure' language or discourse that would be understandable, or knowledgeable to any one person in this motley crowd. In other words, as already mentioned, it is discourse without will or capacity to create knowledge. It is discourse retaining the alterity and independence of the person/s it is directed to. Remarkably, the crowd answers Alu through silence. Alu's blending of languages is, then, an equivalent of silence as an act or a voice: it does not attempt to 'know', or define anything through any linguistically recognisable discourse. This way, the communicative relationship maintains both the diversity of the group and its wholeness and secures the agency and independence of each of its participants. Alu's speech represents the ethically important approaching and searching of the other in the form of a question. As the other, or the one observed, cannot strictly speaking be known (this would bring him/her within the realm of discourse, or knowledge production strategy, of the observer), the

⁴ At the centre of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is the criticism of the ontological assumptions of Western philosophy. In his view, the other is appropriated by the same, or the self, through the basic idea of the self as the producer of meaning to the world. In Levinas's view, the other escapes the cognitive powers of the knowing subject. In other words, the other exists outside the ontology of traditional Western philosophy, which conceives of all being as objects that can be internalized by consciousness or grasped through an adequate representation. Consequently, the other, as well as that which is ethical, cannot strictly speaking be described in discourse, but are transcendental. The self can only 'know' things by projecting on them through language what it already contains in itself. Knowledge, then, is equal to linguistic appropriation of the object of knowing.

question in its function of approaching the other is of much more importance than the answer. What is more, the observer and the observed are in contact simultaneously. They are both active participants in this communicative act, in which no one is reduced to the position of a passive target of scrutiny without an agency or voice (be that the 'voice' of silence or an indecipherable mixture of languages). The principle of Alu's communication has not changed fundamentally: it has just taken on another kind of strategy and moved from silence into a web of discourses. In practice, both seem to have the same kind of communicative power.

This kind of construction of an extra-discursive epistemology escaping the power-politics of language constitutes a fictional counterpart to what the ethnographer, George E. Marcus, describes as an ethical, rather than power-related, approach to cultural phenomena. He maintains that this kind of approach, though cognizant of discourse as power, "is not built explicitly around the trope of power, but rather of ethics, that is, the complex moral relationship of the observer to the observed" (75). Further, Marcus's move away from "structural appropriations of discourse formations" to exposing "the quality of voices by means of meta-linguistic categories (such as narrative, trope, etc)" (66) resembles Ghosh's foregrounding of oral stories that are told by his characters. Although Ghosh represents the world as socially constructed and creates discursive realities to examine the movements of power, he is also trying to find a way of escaping the realm of discourse controlled by the hegemonic Western mode of knowledge production and its ways of narrating the world. So far, the only possible way for him to totally circumvent this powerful and deeply rooted 'way of knowing' would seem to be to hint at transcendent realities that cannot be accessed through a certain language and discourse, as is the case with Alu's linguistic mixture.

Traditionally, ethics has been seen as directing the personal choices of the individual, and moral as a code superimposed on him/her by the society. Levinas, among others, regards ethical norms as the primary guidelines for action in society. In a just society there has to be an ethically conceived basis for relationships between people. This basis could not, in itself, dictate any rules or ways of action for the society, but it should nonetheless be the starting point for the moral and the political order. The general emphasis on interpersonality in theories of the ethical

has resulted in criticism from quarters more aware of the political dimension of society. The binary structure ultimately in question here is the age-old personal vs. political, (or ethics vs. morality). The terms “ethics” and “politics” have perhaps too easily been seen as rivals and used against each other. It is my contention that Ghosh is searching for narrative strategies that would create balance between the two.

The most important and prominent theme in the writing by Ghosh is the transcendence of culturally constructed differences, lines and borders for the good of common humanity and interaction. These differences may be conceived spatially, temporally or culturally, and they may be related to class, race or ethnicity, but the on-going mission of Ghosh seems to be to indicate their constructedness and to bring to our awareness other possibilities of constructing the world based on connections. This requires both poststructuralist and postcolonialist deconstruction of discursive realities and an ethical approach for creating new connections with the other (be that a discourse or another human being) without appropriating it by silencing its own voice and eclipsing its difference. In order to clarify what this might mean both in theory and in practice, I shall end by briefly examining the budding of these themes in *The Circle of Reason*. I shall do this by reference to the Subaltern Studies group and the change in theoretical emphasis that Gayatri Spivak introduced in the group’s work.

Poststructuralist difference & ethical relationships

The Subaltern Studies group was formed in the 1980s to formulate a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia. The narrative strategy of the group, inspired by the writings of Antonio Gramsci, was explicated in the writings of the founder of the group, Ranajit Guha. Although the group is, in a sense, politically left-wing, they are critical of the traditional Marxist narrative of Indian history, in which semi-feudal India was colonized by the British, became politicized, and then earned its independence. In particular, they are critical of the focus in this narrative on the political consciousness of elites, who supposedly inspired the masses to resistance and rebellion against the British. Instead, they focus on subalterns as agents of political and social change. They display a particular interest in the discourses and rhetoric of emerging political and

social movements, thereby directing the focus away from visible actions like demonstrations and uprisings.

Amitav Ghosh has a PhD in social anthropology. He is also an old friend with many of the scholars affiliated with the group and has published in their series, *The Subaltern Studies*. Therefore, it might be relevant to examine his writing in the context of the group. In the late 1980s, Gayatri Spivak published an essay that contained both positive and negative critique of the group's undertakings. In her view, the collective produced studies that were too politicized and lacking in theoretical acumen. As a devoted deconstructionist, she wanted to emphasize the poststructuralist vein which she saw as lying dormant within the politically charged writings of the group. R. Radhakrishnan sums up Spivak's politics as follows:

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

(2003: 115-116)

Spivak's strategy is, quite obviously, in line with the principles of Derridean deconstruction. Each of the three 'contradictory' pairs above is an example of the coming together of ethics and politics. The message seems to be that we need this kind of ambivalent approach to secure the subaltern its voice, agency and subject-position in the jungle of hegemonic discourses, and to be able to find a way of representing it in connection with others without denying it these qualities. Consequently, deconstruction is here put to work in order to create new connections. After criticizing Foucauldian discursivity for forgetting the actual world and the Subaltern Studies group's overt emphasis on politics for concentrating on the world too much, Spivak in a way connects these approaches: "poststructuralism is lacking in macro-political density, whereas an exclusively politically oriented subalternity fails to address itself symptomatically" (Radhakrishnan 2003: 157).

In Spivak's view, the group has encountered one of these failures of addressing itself in its search for the subaltern consciousness, agent or subject, which seems to be conceived as already there, ready and just waiting to be found and made active and conscious. Spivak states that the

subject cannot be there, just waiting to be found “in a positive and pure state” (Spivak 1988: 198). This would make it similar to the traditional essentialist self-determining subject. In line with Derridean deconstruction, she proposes that the idea of a subaltern subject is actually a kind of subject-effect, an effected subject, caused by crossing discursive strands, the knots and configurations of which form an effect of an operating subject. She then goes on:

Reading the work of subaltern studies against the grain, I would suggest that elements in their text would warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and “situate” the effect of a subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.

(Spivak 1988: 205)

In *The Circle of Reason*, the subjectivity of Balaram, for instance, is presented as the meeting point of Western scientific discourse and local influences. At this level, Balaram can be realized as a poststructuralist discursively constructed subject who is only a knot in a universe of discourses. But as he is situated in the specific historical circumstances in the novel he becomes much more corporeal: the poststructuralist subject-effect is strategically situated in a certain socio-political context, which in a sense essentializes it. The use of strategic essentialism, then, implies that we need to use certain aspects of the hegemonic discourse we are in fact deconstructing just to make sense of the surrounding social and political situation. This is an ambivalent approach: with the notion of strategic essentialism we are trying to have it both ways, as it were: “neither the pure contingency of nothing but strategy without the comfort of identity effect; nor a naïve essentialism that believes in itself” (Radhakrisnan 2003: 161).

The narrative strategy of Ghosh seems to be ambivalent in the same manner as Spivak’s theoretical strategy introduced above. The narration of the novel certainly comes through as a part of the subaltern solidarity, while simultaneously reading this subalternity against the grain: the ‘subaltern’ realities in the novel are presented quite as constructed as are those of Western modernity. Both are discursive constructions that change through mutual influences. The novel also engages in hegemonic representational practices in the interest of political scrupulosity *and* undertakes a radical and indeterminate deconstruction of representation

as such. Alu's strange communication with the crowd surely provides an instance of the deconstruction of representation as such by transcending the idea of discourses based on a certain language and by staging silence as a form of communication in the encounter with the other.

As with Spivak's model, ethics is doubled in the narration of the novel: it is both transcendent and situationally specific. While the level of transcendent ethical communication appears at the level of content, as it were, the situational fraught ethics is apparent in the narrative strategy, which allows several historically and politically located discourses and subjects to surface and create connections without losing their heterogeneous nature. Deconstruction works both ways between the hegemonic scientific discourse of modernity and the subaltern activity and discourse. The idea of purity, of pure essentialist binaries, becomes gradually deconstructed, as becomes the idea of the purity of subaltern rituals and cultures. The narrative weaving of these two strands creates an ethical-political whole where deconstruction appears as an ethical practice used strategically to create connections. In a similar vein, the narrative both marks out the historical terrain of subalternity for all to see *and* realizes subalternity as the allegorical vanishing point of representation as such. As Radhakrishnan explains:

there is no pure way back to the indigenous or the precolonial except through double consciousness. We have all been touched by the West. The important question is not about ontological purity, but about strategies of using the West against itself in conjunction with finding one's own "voice." [...] Spivak's position is that "we are both where we are and what we think," and if in a sense, as a result of colonialism, "where we think" is the West as well, it is quixotic to deny it. The way out is bricolage, transactional readings based on bilateralism, and multiple non-totalizable interruptions. (2003: 157-158)

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

There seems to be a general agreement that this first novel by Ghosh is, although a virtuoso achievement as a whole, derivative in comparison with his later, more assuredly original, novels. In particular, comparisons have been made with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), which caused a considerable change in the narrative style of the Indian novel in English during the 1980s (see e.g. Paranjape 1990: 220) and to *One Hundred years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Márquez (see Thieme 2004: 254-5). It seems obvious that there is a relationship with Rushdie, especially as far as the frequency and nature of metaphors is concerned (compare, for instance, the characterizations of Alu's head and Salem's nose). And the strange events bordering on the impossible especially in the second part of the novel are reminiscent of magic realism à la Marquez, as Thieme (2004: 254-5) explains. Although for this reason, it may be fair to conclude that Ghosh has not yet found his own voice with his first novel, I would agree with Thieme (2004: 256) and say that he has, however, already found the themes he will be voicing in his later novels. It would seem that the significance of an ethically tinged representation based on the relationships and connections between people lies in what Marcus calls "the possibility of changing the terms in which we think objectively and conventionally about power" (1998: 75). In addition to the awareness of multiple histories, agencies and voices highlighted in the novel, this change in the way in which we think about the world may constitute a major step in the process towards more authentic multicultural representation.

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