

# Post Colonial Consciousness in Amitav Ghosh's "The Calcutta Chromosome"

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*Abstract-*The history of Indo-English literature is rather a chequered one. One of the outcomes of colonial rule is the introduction of the genre 'Novel' which is not found in indigenous Indian literature, the emphasis is rather being on poetry and drama. . The novels reflect as many facets, variety of life styles, beliefs, values and practices as possible and indeed it is a rich crop of literary outcome. As one critic pointed out "In Every Man there is a story waiting to be told" , the explosion of literary works in drama, poetry and novel reflects the rich cultural repertoire of Indian tradition. The first generation of writers were caught in the problems of the authenticity and legitimacy of their works as there was trenchant criticism against their writing in the language of the colonized instead of using their mother tongue as a medium for creative expression. The struggle for independence resulted in a volcanic output of literature addressing both political issues and social evils and Indo-English literature followed suit except for employing a language alien to Indian soil and confined only to the educated, elitist part of society. In post-independent India the educated people realized the value of English language as the language to communicate with at least a major part of western countries and slowly English language had been accepted as a necessary evil or the gift of Goddess Saraswathi as Rajaji called it. The impact of colonialism is rather far reaching and devastating as it not only dismantled earlier

socio-economic structures but forced new awareness and ideas into the lives of people. The present study aims at presenting the historical consciousness in the novels of Ghosh as to how he was able to blend both history and fiction to produce a whole some and satisfying experience of seeing the past and present through the prism of literature.

**Key words:** colonialism, post colonial consciousness, transmission, chromosome, transcendence, genetics, conventional.

## Introduction

### The Calcutta Chromosome

The novel, 'The Calcutta Chromosome', is not merely a science fiction exploring the mysterious ways of the supposed influences in the fact-finding journey in the course of novel; Murugan wants to disprove the theory that Ross discovered malarial parasites. Ultimately he comes to the conclusion that it is not Ross but Mangala, an assistant in Ross's laboratory who had used malarial parasites to cure Syphilis. She had done it with the help of a man called Latchman. So Mangala's secret investigation regarding the Syphilistic pattern, in Cunngham's laboratory and the observations how certain chromosomes were found in the non generating issue, the brain and could be transmitted through malarial are as Murugan calls them "The Calcutta Chromosome".

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In the course of the novel Murugan explains to Urmila that Mangala stumbled on something that neither she nor Ronnie Ross nor any scientist of that time would have had a name for. It could be called a chromosome by analogy but Calcutta chromosome cannot be found by normal methods as it is not present in every cell. It is too deeply encrypted and the techniques used in laboratories cannot isolate it. It is not transmitted from generation to generation by sexual reproduction. It develops out of a process of combination and not in particular to every individual. So that only Murugan says that it could be found only by a person like Mangala. At the same time, as these biological correlates are not transmitted by sexual reproduction. It doesn't mean that they cannot be transferred between individuals by other methods. Mangala started at the deep end, by stumbling upon the process of transmission, rather than the chromosome, itself. She didn't know what a chromosome was, but it was malaria that led her to it. As the malarial bug has the capacity to cut and paste its DNA, it is very hard to develop to malarial vaccine. So that only Mangala began to use malarial parasite to cure syphilis. It is named as Calcutta Chromosome by Murugan.

The novel's sub-title "A Novel of Fevers, Delirium, and Discovery" applied to refer to the mystical aspect of the novel which presents a principle of science and counter-science. In the novel, Murugan says:

You know all about matter and anti-matter, right? And rooms and ante-rooms and Christ and anti-Christ and son on? Now let's say there was something like science and counter-science?

In explicating his hypothesis of the 'Calcutta Chromosome' a Chromosomal means of transmitting information, Murugan utters a Heisenberg-like uncertainty principle that seems to govern the writing without clearly

articulating any particular alternative to genetics, culture, colonialism, Noble scientists, and their relationship to the disease that continues to kill two or three million people every year.

Likewise, the fever, delirium and discovery are added to historical facts about malaria and the scientist Ronald Ross and his findings on malarial fever. "The Calcutta Chromosome" takes up the issue of the malarial fever and colours it with mysticism and mystery and supernatural and superstition. With this Ghosh emphasizes secrecy, mystery and self-contradictory knowledge and confronts what he calls conventional science with the ingenious knowledge and method of counter science. By the very term 'Chromosome' Ghosh means, the search for the ultimate transcendence, of nature and of immortality. With this he explains the failure of the body and migration there from. That is what he calls Calcutta chromosome. In it, Ghosh has picked up the topical issue of the recurrence of the malarial fever, and in the feverish delusion he has presented a secondary world in space and time.

#### **Important Questions with Answers**

1. Comment on the theme of the novel, 'The Calcutta Chromosome'

Amitav Ghosh's the Calcutta Chromosome is an interesting and alluring novel. It has multiple stories embedded in the main story. It is considered a medical thriller, science fantasy, science fiction, occult writing, tantric writing, a Victorian ghost story, and a scientific quest. The whole novel is based on three searches;

1. Antar's search for an unknown I.D. card holder, later named L.Murugan.

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2. The Second search related to Murugan's obsession in finding the missing links in the history of malarial research.
3. The third is related to Urmila Roy, who in the end of the novel identifies herself with Mangala, a woman who has a belief that syphilis can be cured by certain malaria bugs.

The fantastic world of the novel presents a process of various thematic and technical experimentations and innovations. In this novel, Ghosh practices structural 'synaesthesia'. The novel has primarily the theme of search for immortality. The team of search for immortality moves through a list of female characters Mangala, Mrs. Aratounian, Urmila, Tara and soon. Similarly the male characters, Antar, Murugan, and Laakhan or Lakshman desire to attain immortality by performing something to the satisfaction of their own. Antar decides to dig the grave of Murugan which has been mysteriously closed under suspicions. Murugan wants to unearth the findings of Ross, especially related to malarial disease and his relation with Mangala and soon. Laakhan also wants to expose his identity by killing phulboni and tries to achieve immortality by killing the station master and thereby making phulboni to write Laakhan stories.

The story of the novel weaves around the past, present, and the future. When the novel begins, the theme of immortality and identity are given important. Antar, an Egyptian computer programmer and system analyst in New York, decides to find the identity of an I.D. card holder, Murugan. Further, he discovers that Murugan has suddenly disappeared on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1995, better known as 'the world Mosquito Day', from Calcutta. Murugan is deeply interested

in malarial research, particularly he wants to expose the stand of Ronald Ross in relation to the malarial research. Later with the search, he proves that even before Ross the lady Mangala had been using malarial infection to cure Syphilis with the help of an assistant called Luchman or Laakhan, Mangala and Luchman/Laakhan/laxman/Lachan/Lokhon were carrying out the experiment through an indigenous method. Their efforts prove one of the strong thematic points of the novel that, "if matter and science" were the stronghold of the accidental world 'anti-matter' and 'counter science' were controlled by the 'oriental'. Further, Mangala and Luchman also carry the theme of immortality. The spirits of Mangala and Laakhan are reincarnated in Mrs. Aratounian and roman Halder respectively. Further, the strategic weapon 'discourse of silence' is also used by Ghosh in the case of Managala who under the cult of secrecy controls Ross, Grigson, Cunningham, and all male investigators of malarial parasite. She uses the potent weapon of silence to conquer all who come in her way. She in fact tries to find a cure for Syphilis parasite through counter science or faith. In her attempt, the novel highlights the theme of the rustic infiltration into the world of Science/knowledge to control the ultimate transcendence of nature, and proves the theory of 'migration of soul(s)'. 'Transmigration of the soul is based on the assumption of transmigration of personality'- a chromosomal effect on the body and soul. This theme highlights the Indian theme of "Katchakra" (the wheel of time) as Murugan and later Antar, the two computer experts, are chosen to be the subsequent Laakhans to the succeeding Mangala that is Urmila and Tara. In the whole novel, Ghosh employs 'Magic realism' to highlight the impossibility of the happening without losing the immediacy of

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its existence. In fact, Amitav Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome* has rearranged the simplistic equation of life, death and immortality to prove that 'word manipulated' artistically can establish theories that are true and yet stronger than fiction.

Ghosh's novel 'The Calcutta Chromosome' also exemplifies the theme of science versus counter-science. In fact, Ghosh emphasizes secrecy, mystery, and self-contradictory knowledge and confronts when he calls conventional science with the ingenious knowledge and method of uneducated Indians. In the course of the novel Murugan's movements, ideas, beliefs, supposition, and inference reveal that it is not Ross but it is Mangala even before Ross who made researches on Malaria. The effort also involves "a high degree of fictional faking and the novelist tries to create a sense of spiritualism, belief in birth and rebirth and transposing and transcendence".

The novel is also based on the theme of disappearance and discovery. In fact, the whole novel is based on this theme in which Murugan, once disappeared on the World Mosquito Day, in 1995 discovers that it is not Ross who had discovered the malarial parasite but it is Mangala who had found it before Ross with the help of an assistant Lakhan. Even at the end, Ava shows Murugan, Urmila and Sonali rushing to the station Sealdah, where they are told Phulboni and Mrs. Aratounian have gone. This is the place from which Murugan has been recorded as missing, since August 1995 and is not heard of till his ID card appears on Ava's screen. Sealdah is the station from where Mangala and Laakhan were hired. It is the place which has caused most of the characters to disappear. What the novelist is talking about is a technology

for interpersonal transference – the Calcutta chromosome.

Thus against all the incidents, experiments, and technical terms of the new technology, the novel presents these themes. The themes presented in the novel are the clues that are left to the imagination of the reader to find probably solution.

### **Conclusion**

The Colonial experience as articulated is still to be understood at the deeper, fundamental level as it not only broke open the self isolated security of India but also exposed unwillingly to the world outside its border and one has to come to proper terms in harmonizing the past and the present as Mita Bose comments; "The burden of India's colonial past appears to weigh heavily on a migrant postcolonial generation, and Ghosh seems to be constantly in search of that elusive epiphanic moment in which individuals may come to terms with their histories, thereby releasing themselves from the metaphoric and metaphysical – burden of their condition. A 'glimpse' of final redemptive mystery is all that Ghosh can, in all honesty, give us: but it is perhaps the most precious footnote that fiction can offer our fractured, fractious history.... Those dilemmas of diaspora that are engendered in the margins of history are foregrounded in Ghosh to attain preeminence in fiction."<sup>6</sup>

The real nature and attempt of the writer is given a clear understanding in the comment of Neelam Srivastava who talks of new forms of hybrid culture emerging from colonial experience.

"Ghosh, in his writing, is at pains to foreground the cultural syncretism of the Indian subcontinent in strategic opposition to the historicism of nationalistic discourse.

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Ghosh's quest for an alternative history and anthropology has led him to emphasize the importance of the narrative."<sup>7</sup>

The artistic achievement of Ghosh and his capacity to blend both political history with the demands of art and verisimilitude is appropriately remarked by Mita Bose.

"Ghosh's aesthetics is a fictional embracing of historical/ political subtexts, and an intellectual exploration of both the major as well as the marginalized, contexts of modern history: nationalism/internationalism, migrancy, memory/nostalgia, violence, communalism. He is constantly looking for ways in which he can render history into fiction."<sup>8</sup>

The spirit of exploration and new ways of perceiving reality and understanding the way of the contemporary life is structured can be the basic reason and thrust for the writer. "Amitav Ghosh's novels claim a unique position in the post colonial literature that explores and celebrates the hybridity of post colonial nationality and migration."

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