



Exploring Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* from a Postmodernist Perspective

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (TCC) written in 1996, makes a unique experiment combining various themes and techniques. He amalgamates here literature, science, philosophy, history, psychology and sociology. The result is a complex, fascinating and highly imaginative story of quest and discovery that weaves past, present and future into an intricate texture. Although, it reads like a science-fiction with multiple characters and swift turns in the plot, in order to render an entertaining tale into a serious one, Ghosh brings in arguments and ideas which are forever knocking and undermining the rational view of science and the universe. At the same time, there are Postmodernist elements that provide a fresh dimension to the plot. Hence, the present paper attempts to make a critical analysis of the novel through the prism of Postmodernism.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Postmodernism, science-fiction, Rational, *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

The novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* has two major strands of story-line; the first narrates the life-story of Antar, an Egyptian computer clerk working on his super-intelligent machine Ava in the early twenty-first century to locate the whereabouts of Indian-born American scientist L.Murugan who had mysteriously disappeared in Calcutta in August 1995; the second revolves around Ronald Ross' discovery of the malarial parasite in 1902. The novel has two sections: "August 20, Mosquito Day" and "The Day After". The novel however is no mere thriller, for a fuller reading reveals that it is the work of a social anthropologist than that of a detective novelist. His treatment of history in this novel is unique. He succeeds in evoking the places and times with touching details. Antar's New York exists in an apocalyptic twilight; Ross' Secunderabad and Cunningham's Calcutta are colonial. Ghosh appears to be in full control of the intellectual topography and geographical locale.

Postmodernism is named as a mood or a state of mind rather than a movement and this has been generated by the collapse of the Cartesian certitudes which assumed a conscious thinking and autonomous subject. The Cartesian subject functioned as a fulcrum of perceiving, deciphering and ordering the objective structures of reality and the whole business of making sense of the universe. This exercise came to be labeled as a humanistic enterprise, which in turn, resulted in a stable, organically progressive, chronological and transcendent history with fixed categories and totalizing statements - unambiguous and unchallengeable. However, in this changed mental state (Postmodernism) "the autonomous subject has been dispersed into a range of plural, polymorphous subject positions inscribed within language [...] Instead of certainty of progress associated with 'the Enlightenment Project,' (of which Marxism is a part), there is now an awareness of contingency and ambivalence" (Sarup130). Thus dissolution of the autonomous subject has been responsible for "epistemological skepticism" which in turn points to the instability and insubstantiality of history.

Notwithstanding the critical remark made by Brinda Bose that the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* "is a medical thriller" (120) and all the elements such as, "mystery, science, thriller, science fiction, the history of tropical medicine are all combined by Ghosh into an extremely absorbing novel" (qtd. in Wong and Hasan 95), one can witness some major postmodern tenets at work in it as well. The most important postmodern feature operating in the text is the questioning attitude towards the obvious historical fixities. The following poem written by Sir Ronald Ross finds mention in the novel:

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 seeds,
 O million-murdering Death. (TCC 37)

Ghosh begins to build the edifice of the novel on research conducted with commitment and passion by a major character, Murugan, into the medical history of Malaria. The area of examination progressively narrows into "the early history of Malaria research," and later into further specialized subject, "the research career of British poet, novelist, and scientist, Ronald Ross." Murugan's discovery of certain systematic discrepancies in Ronald Ross' account of "Plasmodium B" led him to researching the subject more deeply and preparing an article, "An Alternative Interpretation of Late 19th Century Malaria Research: Is there a Secret History?" The hostile response from journals to which he sent the article, the rejection of his proposal to the History of Science Society embody the entrenched antipathy of the forces of the establishment towards the "Other Mind", or the "Other Voice", Murugan's theory claimed that 'some person or persons had systematically interfered with Ronald Ross' experiments to push Malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from other, turning Ronald Ross into a goaded and manipulated agent rather than his being a successful

scientist who “discovered the manner in which Malaria is Conveyed by mosquitoes”, as inscribed on the medallion, and the portrait of Ross, located in the arch, built into the Presidency General Hospital, near the site of Ross’ old laboratory in Calcutta.

Upset and frustrated Murugan decides to come to Calcutta for a first-hand inquiry into the details at the cost of his job and career. Ghosh projects through Murugan’s anger and frustration the postmodernist “rage against humanism and the Enlightenment legacy” which permitted a unipolar perception. Murugan’s efforts also allegorize the skeptical, questioning mental attitude which needs to be adopted by the self-satisfied, smug, but manipulated masses who consume unconsciously all that has the aura of truth about it. In this sense, Murugan, besides being a character in the novel becomes a symbol of the postmodern cynicism about the binary opposition of truth or falsehood. Murugan is eventually proved right in his research findings about the "Malaria maze," validates of looking at things by looking through them.

It is significant that the person on whom is bestowed the Nobel Prize for medicine "doesn't know a goddam thing about mosquitoes: he's never even heard the word anopheles" (TCC 66). Ross succeeds, because "they" want him to, and it is "they" who first dry up Malaria patients for Ross and then give him Abdul Kadir and later Lutchman to steer him along the right track. It is, in fact, Lutchman, who besides being his patient and retainer also becomes Ross' guide, planting useful ideas in his head, Ross, instead of doing experiments on the Malaria parasite, becomes "the experiment on the Malaria parasite."

It is significant that as against the research conducted by the trained scientists like D.D.Cunningham, Elijah Monroe Farley and later Dr.Ronald Ross, we have the team of Mangala and Kutchman, carrying on their own enquiry into the various strains of Malaria, of course with a different and higher purpose of eventually isolating and developing what Murugan calls "The Calcutta Chromosome." It is a unique type of chromosome that would enable the transposition of certain personality traits. If developed, it could enable migration from one body to another with a fresh start, without earlier blemishes. We have, thus, counter-science posited against science and the novelist seems to prioritize the counter-science which includes in its fold areas and phenomena, considered invalid by the proponents of science, but which are difficult to wish away just because the processes of conventional science cannot verify, codify and generalize such phenomena. Postmodernism's distrust of the meta-narrative, or grand-narrative and the concept of "progressing liberation of humanity through science," are apparent in the text. The novel, in favoring the continent, as against the meta-narrative in the form of historical discourse, effectively critiques the "universal knowledge and foundationalism"(Sarup 132).

The subversion of history could be achieved through the forces of anti-rationality and contingency. The micro-events hold sway in the narrative and Postmodernism believes that society functions better in terms of micro-events. Jean Francois Lyotard, the precursor of Postmodernism, 'turns towards Kantian sublime as a

means of devaluing cognitive truth-claims and elevates the notion of unrepresentable to absolute pride of place in the ethical realm" (Sarup 150). One finds in the novel the intuitive approach in solving the scientific riddles, and getting out of the scientific cul-de-sacs. Mangala and Lutchman embody the validity of intuitions in the realm of practical science and Ghosh is unequivocal in demonstrating the value of intuitiveness in a world dominated by reason and rationality, which get de-constructed in the novel. It is the "dark-drives" which propel actions and not reason and rationality, which if anything, become blinds to cover and camouflage the "real." Murugan functions as another deconstructive force in the book. He discounts the foolproof quality associated with science generally and becomes instrumental in bringing to light the "submerged aspects" and the "forgotten actors" in the drama of Malaria research.

An important tendency of Postmodernism is its reduction of experience to "a series of pure and unrelated presents." The past loses its pastness and is made to fuse in the present becoming some aspect of the present. The dissolution of the temporal boundaries may also include foreshortening of the future. The tale of *The Calcutta Chromosome* begins in the 21st century in New York, when technology has taken over private and professional realms and the experiential reality has taken the form of "images" on the screen. Antar, an Egyptian, working for the International Water Council, stumbles on the Murugan's ID card on his computer, AVA/le and succeeds in establishing contact with him. Murugan tells him about the whole affair. Jean Baudrillard calls this reality as hyper-reality in which in the characteristic Postmodern style we witness disappearance of distinction between illusion and reality. Antar sees on the Sim Vis. System (Simultaneous Visualisation Headgear) Murugan "standing in the lobby of a large auditorium and two women were running up the stairs" (TCC 256). There Sonali and Urmila were with Murugan. But they appear to be Tara and Maria. But they are living in New York. Tara was living in the same building as Antar. But then how come Tara and Maria are wearing saris? The merging of illusion and reality is best described in the closing lines of the novel:

He [Antar] felt a cool soft touch upon his shoulder and his hand flew up to take off the Sim Vis Headgear. But now there was a restraining hand upon his wrist, and a voice in his ear. Tara's voice, whispering: "Keep watching: we're here; we're all with you." (TCC 256)

And,

There were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people were in the room with him they were saying; "We're with you; you're not alone; we'll help you across." (TCC 256)

Ghosh doesn't want Murugan's truth, which in turn will become Antar's truth, become final, transcendent, negating the possibilities of being further questioned, investigated into by others, who might come up with "their" truths. The novelist is in tune with the Postmodernist temper stressing the tentativeness of truth, as Postmodernism reduces all truth-claims to the level of theories and discounts the possibility of a single

claimant. Thus, the seeming ambiguities and contradictions in the novel resolve themselves into a comprehensible, compact work, if the novel is approached through Postmodernism.

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