

Amitav Ghosh's subaltern ideology in the Calcutta chromosome

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh merges science and subaltern history in "The Calcutta Chromosome." It is appealing to study how Ghosh has balanced Victorian history and contemporary history, and how he touches Jamesian view that 'a novel is history'. Further, Ghosh also pictures the character of L.Murugan and connect subaltern knowledge of combination of science and religion ideologies. The Calcutta Chromosome is known as his famous "postcolonial" work of science fiction. This novel contains the idea of "alternative" history which is about "subaltern" people and of course a history of Ronald Ross, the famous physician and Nobel Prize winner for his discovery about malaria transmission. The novel is mostly centered on the "subaltern" people, their silence and their history. The present article is an attempt to examine how the course of history and science is used creatively by Ghosh to provide a significant inter-text to the story.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali Indian is mostly known for his award winning English novels The Glass Palace, The Shadow Lines, Sea of Poppies, In An Antique Land, and The Hungry Tide. Among his work '*The Calcutta Chromosome*' is a lovely piece of work and loved by many readers. It has science, religion, legend, nihilism, transcendental beliefs, Indianans superstitions, logic, rationality and what not. In the hot cauldron of his intelligence, Ghosh has baked a mixed dish for the lovers of story readers. The Calcutta Chromosome is also one of his less known but still very important novels and award winning works of science fiction. He was born to a Bengali family in Kolkata, India and he is very interested in Indian history. Ghosh is well known for his interest in the Indian colonial history and the contribution of the English language in the postcolonial world. In The Calcutta Chromosome he submits towards an "alternative" history that makes me interested to work on this book. Ghosh's writing style is very much inspired by the other Bengali Indian writers such as Rabindranath Tagore or Phanishwar Nath Renu. His childhood was spent in Calcutta and his representation of the geographical picture of Calcutta in the novel The Calcutta Chromosome is also influenced by his personal experiences. The Calcutta Chromosome is known as his famous "postcolonial" work of science fiction. This novel contains the idea of "alternative"

history which is about “subaltern” people and of course a history of Ronald Ross, the famous physician and Nobel Prize winner for his discovery about malaria transmission. The novel is mostly centered on the “subaltern” people, their silence and their history

It is a brilliant effort to rewrite the story of Ronald Ross's discovery of the life cycle of malaria mosquito and how it causes the disease to human beings. This novel is very much available in the archives of medical history. Ross is not new to Indians. Almost every student of Indian schools has gone through a lesson on Ronald Ross, his discovery and his winning the Nobel Prize for it. This British bacteriologist is more close to people of Calcutta as he did his path breaking research in this city only. His memorial arch at the entrance of the Post Graduate Hospital is as a part and parcel of Calcutta.

L.Murugan lively character

The novel opens with the story of Antar, who is employed at the Life Watch organization. Antar narrates an encounter with L. Murugan, an employee of Life Watch who had disappeared in Calcutta. The plot is quite complex and its timelines are purposely mixed up. Antar embarks on a journey to track Murugan's disappearance in Calcutta many years back. Murugan had insisted on a transfer to Calcutta because of his fascination with the life of Sir Ronald Ross. The novelist clearly states through the novel that the New York of Antar and the Calcutta of Murugan are separated by many years but seem to overlap in time. However, the Calcutta during Ross and the Calcutta that Murugan visits are separated well in time. Antar researches into old and lost documents and phone messages and figures out that Murugan had systematically unearthed a secretive scientific and mystical movement that could grant perpetual life. In simple terms, the process is as follows: the disciples of this movement can transfer their chromosomes into another, and gradually become that person or possess that person. In the novel, the mysteries of the Malaria parasite were not discovered by Ronald Ross. It was a group of underground practitioners of a different, mystical “science,” who are pictured as natives of India, who contributed to the fame of Ross and guided him to the conclusions. These Indians provided Ross with clues in the belief that the moment Ross presented his discovery, the parasite's nature would change. At this juncture, there would be an emergence of a new variant of Malaria and the group's research using the chromosome-transfer technique would advance even further.

Ronaldross and L.Murugan scientific ideas

Ross finds out the noxious female mosquito on 20th August 1897. Except for this fact, Ghosh has totally deviated from the known accounts of this event. The author has divided the novel into two parts, first one is August, 20: Mosquito Day and secondly, The Day After. L. Murugan is a science freak. He is obsessed with the idea of finding all the facts (known or less known) about the malaria story. On World Mosquito Day 20th Aug., 1995, he arrives in Calcutta. He is in search of the enigmatic Calcutta

Chromosome. This Calcutta Chromosome, as we shall observe afterward in detail, is a freak chromosome. It is unusual because it cannot be isolated and detected by standard techniques. Unlike our regular chromosomes, it is not present in every cell. It is not even symmetrically paired. It does not run from one generation to the other. Ghosh fantasizes that this chromosome develops out of a process of recombination, which is unique to every individual. It is found only in the non-regenerating tissue, the brain. It can be transmitted through malaria. It is this stray DNA carrier that Murugan calls 'The Calcutta Chromosome'-a unique biological expression of human tracts that is neither inherited from the immediate gene-pool, nor transmitted into it. But as Murugan arrives at Calcutta, the very next day he mysteriously disappears. At the heart of the narrative lie the events of these days. All other strands of narrative are connected to this main event. The medical history of malaria, Ross's progress in his research, experiences of Antar, Murugan's former colleague at New York and some scattered incidents at Calcutta are woven into a fictional fabric.

The novel is also about colonization and its impact on society. The Calcutta Chromosome mentions the past, which can be said as its unique feature. There is a good deal of argument about the events of history as they are recorded. Ghosh questions the biased historiography. We can say that Indian born American scientist L. Murugan, who is intellectually Marginalized, is the voice of rationality. Murugan is sure that there is a conspiracy behind the malaria research. He tries to unravel the mystery that has been haunting him for over a century. It is shown simultaneously how Ross is on the verge of the final breakthrough and how Ross is literally dragged to this point by forces beyond his knowledge.

Standing line of the story

In one strand of the story-line we have Antar, an Egyptian computer clerk. Antar works day and night all alone on his super intelligent computer named Ava. He is working in the early part of the 21st century. He tries to relocate the adventures of an India born American scientist L. Murugan. Antar tries to find out the reason behind the incomprehensible fact that Murugan disappeared in Calcutta in 1995. The second level of the story-line is historically true and it revolves around the British Scientist Ronald Ross, who discovered the manner in which Malaria is conveyed by the mosquito in 1902. The third level describes the super human powers of Mangala and Laakhan. At this level Ross's result is reduced to a mere, subordinate activity which, is controlled by more potent power of Mangala and Laakhan. The story begins in a New York apartment where Antar is working. In fact Antar works for the International Water Council, a global organization that explores and examines the depletion of the world's water supplies. One fine morning the computer Ava jeeringly makes an Identification Card with a small mettle chain attached to it. The card is badly damaged, symbolizing for us the bruised ego of the card owner. When Antar gives the necessary commands, Ava with its astounding resourcefulness, recreates the card. It becomes clear that the card had originated in Calcutta. It also creates a holographic projection of the man to whom the card once belonged. Antar comes to know that the man was L. Murugan, who had worked for a non-profit

organization that served as a global public health consultancy and epidemiological data bank. Actually Antar had also worked there once. Murugan has thin and discolored hairs. His eyes are bright black. He has a moon like face. His snout is that of a fighter, and he has an aggressively jutting chin. Overall Murugan makes for a combative, obstinate and unstoppable man. Murugan happens to be the most entertaining character of the novel as well. He claims to be the only expert on the Ronald Ross story in the world. The great love of his life is uncovering the medical history of Malaria. We can easily see that Ghosh wants to give recognition to the less known, less fortunate people. The world worships success. Many times the deserving go unnoticed. Murugan's only crime is that he has dared to disagree. He doubts the set beliefs.

Murugan gets convinced that there was a conspiracy behind malaria research. He leaves for Calcutta in search of all missing links, which could enlighten him and the world about the century old puzzle. His friends and well wishers try to dissuade him but Murugan is determined. He arrives at Calcutta on 20th August 1995 and the very next day vanishes. With use of cinematic techniques, on one hand, Ross is shown making the final breakthrough and on the other hand Murugan is trying to prove his hypothesis that Ross had been factually led by the snout to the discovery by forces beyond his comprehension. The fuelling agencies of the novel are Antar's curiosity and Murugan's skepticism. Howsoever imaginative it may sound; Ghosh seems to believe in marginality or alternative reality. In Calcutta city Murugan spots all the missing connections as well as the conspirators. The plotters are the well-established populace of the society-writers, journalists, film stars and businessmen. Smoothly floating through past, present and future Murugan weaves the narrative into a coherent whole. The conspiracy seems to be eternal. It is the conspiracy of a mediocre society against those who deserve, and are original and genuine. The plotters try to mystify Murugan and ambush him into the experiment. By the end of the story even Antar is dragged into their fold. This team of people has its own aims. They desire a journey to the unknown. Their quest is for immortality. Ghosh believes that the purpose of science is not only to reveal but also to create. Awareness is the key. Whatever is known is knowledge. At the other end of the scientific knowledge lies the unknown, unarticulated truth. That truth may be unknown but the point is that it is very much there. Keeping all the mess in scientific research in mind, Ghosh creates a group of bright researchers whose ultimate aim is to keep their research a secret. They try to conceal their inventions. The source of their strength is silence.

L.Murugan's Research

Mangala, a sweeper woman had achieved remarkable success in this field. Mangala herself suffered from syphilis, which Dr. Cunningham had found at Sealdah station and trained her as a laboratory assistant. Murugan believes that Mangala was a genius. She had a strong intuition. She was going in the right direction in malaria research due to her instinctive understanding. Murugan also conjectures that Mangala was using a deviation of Wagner process. She had possibly noticed that Malaria works on paresis through a different

route, the brain. Like syphilis, Malaria can cause irreparable damage to the brain, it can even cause hallucination. Perhaps that is why primitive people thought of Malaria as spirit possession.

Murugan has exhausted many years on his extensive research. His evidences specify that Ross's discovery was only a small part of the overall project of Mangala to attain immortality through the Calcutta Chromosome. By 1897 Mangala had run into a dead end. She tried again and again to stabilize and catch the chromosome in the process of transmission. But she failed. She required more information on the Malaria bug. That is why she required Ross's help, 'She actually considered that the link between the bug and the human mind was so close that once its life-cycle had been shaped out, it would impulsively mutate in directions that would take her work to the next step'. But to know something is to create it. Breaking the law of silence she planted crucial clues in Ross's head and took the research in the right direction. Ross was just a tool. Murugan also believes that Mangala and Laakhan did succeed in transplantation of the Calcutta chromosome. In fact Laakhan himself is a living example of interpersonal transference of the Calcutta Chromosome. This malicious personality with a distorted hand is 'all over the map, changing names, switching identities'

Research work of L.Murugan

Murugan writes articles about his research on Ross's discovery, and he names one of them as "An Alternative Interpretation of Late Nineteenth-Century Malaria Research: Is There a Secret History?" According to Murugan these people already have invented that Malaria is caused by mosquito bites and the cure for this as well. Mangala and her team are looking for something more than this invention, and Murugan names it "Calcutta Chromosome" which will help them to get the ultimate pleasure of immortality. Murugan describes the "Calcutta Chromosome" and says it's not symmetrically paired. And the reason why it's not paired is because it doesn't split, into eggs and sperm. And guess why that is? I'll tell you: it's because this is a chromosome that is not transmitted from generation to generation by sexual reproduction. It develops out of a process of recombination and is particular to every individual. Murugan, through this speech, introduces the uniqueness of the chromosome. According to him this Calcutta Chromosome is very special and non-transmitted one. As he names this special chromosome followed by Calcutta, it points towards the uniqueness of the city Calcutta itself as well. According to Murugan, Murugan himself and Mangala both have syphilis and Mangala has already invented the cure for this disease. Interestingly, Murugan's description introduces a subaltern woman, Mangala, as an intellectual person who knows more than the contemporary Western scientists. According to Ranajit Guha's argument the subaltern's participation in the nationalist movement is not included in the elitist historiography; interestingly Ghosh picks up Guha's argument and adds a new thought into it about the subaltern's participation in the scientific discovery and about subaltern intelligence. Ghosh, through his novel, argues that the story of the subaltern's

intelligence and their participation in the scientific research in colonial India is not included in the biased elitist history

Introduction of Counter science by L.Murugan

Murugan introduces the term counter-science as something anti to Western science. However, this counter-science is the subaltern's own kind of science. It is interesting that, rather than calling it superstition or rituals, Murugan calls it counter-science to make its connection with science. This word counter is used to criticize the historical interpretation of the subaltern and their lives. Ross and Mangala both do experiments on human and animal lives. However, Ross's experiments are considered as scientific, Mangala's as counter-science though she uses some scientific equipment while doing experimentations. We see Mangala using a scientific instrument such as a "scalpel" while doing experiments on the pigeons. According to Murugan, that is the way through which Mangala invented the cure for syphilis. Moreover, she is found to be sacrificing Laakhan and the pigeon's lives in different phases of the novel. Experimenting on lives is not very unusual in scientific research. Though the ways of experimentation are a bit different Mangala does all these experiments to come up with a successful result towards her invention. At the end of the novel we see the result of her experiments which come out with Murugan's holographic picture on Ava's screen. I argue that their experiment to find immortality, finds out the "posthuman" as a result. She sacrifices Laakhan's body to make him able to change his physical identity and because of this he appears as different persons with no fixed identity as Laakhan, Lucky, and Romen Halder. Through the quest to invent immortality Mangala also challenges the idea of fixed identity and comes up with a new thought of changing identity. The burnt ID card of Murugan is also a symbol of his lost identity and he appears as a posthuman figure with a new kind of identity.

Subaltern knowledge of combination of science and religion

The term counter-science refers to the combination of science and religion. The experiments the subaltern people do are based on their religious and spiritual beliefs. Moreover, we get to see that the name Mangala belongs to the Hindu goddess Kali. According to Tammy Laser Kali, in Hinduism, is the goddess of time, doomsday, and death or the black goddess. Kali's iconography, faction and folklore normally associate her with death, sexuality, violence, and paradoxically in some later traditions, with motherly love. She says that in India goddess Kali is often considered as "geographically and culturally marginal". Interestingly, Mangala appears as women and the other members of her cult, including Laakhan, are seen to be worshipping her. Here we see Mangala appears as a goddess figure. Murugan states that it is Doctor Farley who first suspects Mangala and her team including Laakhan; when he follows them he comes to see something very strange. Murugan describes the scene as, "First the assistant went up to the women, Mangala, still regally ensconced on her divan, and touched his forehead to her feet". The same scene repeats in front of Antar when he sees from his kitchen window that Lucky also touches his forehead to Tara's feet

in a way of worshipping her. In this scene Tara appears as Mangala and Lucky as Laakhan. Tara is Antar's neighbor and Lucky is Tara's friend. Interestingly, in the novel, Mangala also deals with death like the Hindu goddess Kali and switches her identity from body to body. Kali also changes her avatar and the goddess Durga is her other avatar. While visiting Kalighat Murugan and Urmila come to know the belief of the local people about the goddess Kali who is also called the Mangala-bibi; they congregate girls who state that, "Today is the last day of the puja of Mangala-bibi. Baba says that tonight Mangala-bibi is going to enter a new body. The body she's chosen, of course, no one knows whose it is". Here we again come to see the sign of secrecy that is very common for the subaltern woman Mangala as well.

Murugan discovery of Calcutta chromosome

According to Murugan it happens through an interpersonal transmission of a unique chromosome and he names it "Calcutta chromosome." It is also vital to give attention to the title of the novel which introduces a scientific term, "chromosome," which is connected to an Indian state "Calcutta." Through Murugan's description the readers can visualize Calcutta and come to see the prominent differences between the colonial Calcutta and the new city Calcutta after liberation. It is very interesting that all the events happen in Calcutta are very mysterious and it seems just like Ava, Calcutta is also playing a role like a human being in the novel. It seems Calcutta is also connected to Ava and both of them want all the characters to focus on the subaltern people who become central to the novel. The geography of Calcutta is very visual in the novel. The descriptions of Rabindra Sadan, the edge of Lower Circular Road, Harish Mukherjee Road, P.G. hospital, Kalighat, Gariahat, Chowringhee and many more places in

Calcutta is so obvious and real that we come to visualize them. Such representation proposes an open ended way to rethink Calcutta as a mysterious city. All the time Calcutta seems to be very active in the novel and reacting as well. It is Calcutta itself that wants Murugan to meet Urmila and search for the subaltern mystery with the help of Urmila. The way he meets Urmila and Sonali is mysterious and I argue that it is totally well planned by the city of Calcutta. Murugan gets into the Rabindra Sadan auditorium where the award giving ceremony of Phulboni is going on just because a heavy rain comes; here he meets Sonali and Urmila. It seems it is preplanned by Calcutta and the rain comes because Calcutta wants it to. During the colonial period Calcutta was the capital of India and most of the important actions such as Ross's scientific discovery took place in Calcutta. Calcutta itself seems to be manipulating all the characters and it wants Murugan to come to here and do research on the untold histories. Calcutta wants to reveal the untold subaltern history through Murugan's voice. I have already discussed that Calcutta itself plays a role like a human character in the novel and helps the subaltern to save their secrets; moreover, Murugan mentions Calcutta as a female figure through allegory. Murugan calls Urmila "Miss Calcutta" as she disagrees to tell him her name, and he says, "So what shall I call you, then, since I'm going to be granted the honour of an introduction? Miss Calcutta? Or perhaps even just Calcutta, or would that be too intimate". It is very

important to remember that Calcutta is very crucial in the book because it is connected to the scientific term chromosome and it is a female figure. I argue that Ghosh does it to establish a connection between women and science.

Conclusion

Ghosh deconstructs the western aura. He tries to show that the western sense of confidence and patronage is misplaced. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* Ghosh tries to shatter the false notion that the colonial rule was responsible for the destiny of the colonized. The narrative, which covers over a hundred years, contains both fact and fiction mixed in a judicious way. The cinematic devices of flash forward and flashback are used to move forward and backward in time. The reader is taken on a journey into time, and at the same time to different countries like America, Egypt, England, and India.

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