



# Unravelling Realities: Postmodern Disruptions and Magical Realism in *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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## Abstract

This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* through the dual lenses of postmodern theory and magical realism, arguing that the novel offers a profound interrogation of epistemological authority, historical narrative, and scientific rationality. By weaving together fragmented timelines, unreliable narrators, and genre-blending storytelling, Ghosh constructs a narrative that resists linear logic and challenges traditional claims to truth. The infusion of magical realism, manifested through spiritual possession, the transmission of silent knowledge, and uncanny coincidences, serves as a narrative strategy to subvert the dominance of Western scientific discourse and recover marginalized knowledge systems. By destabilizing the boundaries between the real and the surreal, the empirical and the mystical, the novel operates not only as a postmodern text but also as a radical reimagining of history from a subaltern perspective. This paper contends that Ghosh's novel invites readers to reconsider the very frameworks through which knowledge, truth, and identity are constructed.

## Keywords

Magical realism, Fragmented narrative, Myth and reality, Mysticism and the supernatural

## Introduction

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is a novel that resists conventional categorization, blending elements of science fiction, historical mystery, and speculative fiction into a narrative that defies traditional literary structures. This genre blending mirrors Fredric Jameson's concept of postmodernism, where boundaries between high and low culture, and between different narrative forms, collapse. Set in both colonial and postcolonial Calcutta as well as a futuristic New York, the novel blurs boundaries of time and space to challenge dominant narratives of knowledge, history, and identity. At its core, the novel interrogates the very idea of what constitutes 'truth,' posing critical questions about the intersection of science, myth, and the power structures that dictate what is considered legitimate knowledge.

Ghosh's fragmented, non-linear, and self-reflexive narrative in the novel mirrors Linda Hutcheon's postmodern ideas, where traditional, linear storytelling is subverted, embracing skepticism towards grand narratives and universal truths. The novel employs a disjointed structure, with alternating timelines and perspectives that mirrors the disorientation of its characters as they grapple with fragmented histories, shifting identities, and elusive truths. This form of storytelling, characteristic of postmodern works, refuses to provide neat resolutions or stable interpretations. Instead, it invites the reader to participate in the process of deconstructing history and knowledge, thereby calling into question not only the validity of historical records but also the means by which history is written and understood.

The story begins in the twenty-first century with Antar, an Egyptian computer expert in New York, who accidentally comes across a corrupted identity card on his computer. He concludes that the person connected to the card is L. Murugan, a colleague and researcher at Life Watch, where Antar works. Murugan is known

for his extensive research on the medical history of malaria. Ghosh introduces the central themes of the novel by weaving together magical realism and spirituality. He blends mysticism with the concept of the "secret belief of silence," adding depth to the narrative.

Central to the novel is Ghosh's use of magical realism, a narrative mode that integrates elements of the supernatural into an otherwise realistic world. However, unlike traditional forms of magical realism that often set the magical and the real on equal footing, his work uses magical realism as a form of critique. The presence of the mystical, the uncanny, and the inexplicable in the novel disrupts the certainty of scientific rationalism, which has historically been used as a tool of colonial control. Through the supernatural, Ghosh brings forward subaltern voices and marginalized knowledge systems that are often suppressed in favor of Western empirical science, echoing Chakrabarty's call to decenter European frameworks and recognize the legitimacy of non-Western perspectives in shaping global histories. The novel, in this sense, functions as a critique of epistemic colonialism; the process by which knowledge produced in the West is seen as the standard, while other forms of knowing are rendered illegitimate or invisible.

Mangala's quest for 'immortality' through chromosomal transfer reflects René González's concept of the mystical merging with daily life, as Ghosh weaves mystical aspects into the realm of scientific exploration. Mangala herself symbolizes the archetypal mother, embodying the power of goddesses like Kali or Durga, with their immense regenerative abilities. After conducting numerous experiments, Mangala reached an impasse in her research by 1897 and urgently sought someone to continue her work. It was during this time that she encountered Ronald Ross, the scientist credited with discovering the malaria parasite. Despite her unsuccessful efforts, Mangala concluded that the current strains of malaria wouldn't lead to any breakthroughs in the right direction. She deliberately planted the necessary clues and ideas in Ross's mind and guided his experiments in a way that would make him unknowingly follow her intentions.

The novel explores the themes of migration and immortality. The followers of a cult believe that the soul is eternal, and death is merely a change of clothes. Characters like Mangala and Lutchman hold fast to this belief in the extension of life. Much like a suspense thriller, the novel introduces a series of mysterious elements, such as a lantern, a rail siding, a ghost station master, a ghost train, and a figure whose face is shrouded in darkness. Laakhan hears a chilling, inhuman shriek that cuts through the stormy night, unveiling the novel's magical elements. Additionally, the stories told by Phulboni, known as *The Laakhan Stories*, focus on the power of silence and feature Laakhan, a character who shifts identities from a postman to a village schoolmaster, among others. These complex stories reinforce the notion of the soul's personal transmission.

Ghosh provides detailed insight into the religious ceremonies carried out by the secret faction for the migration of the soul. He employs the technique of fantastical realism to surprise the reader with mystical and supernatural elements woven into the narrative. Sonali, who works for a magazine in Calcutta, becomes a witness to a ceremony on Robinson Street, during which Laakhan's spirit is transferred into the body of Romen Haldar. The entire ceremony is conducted by Mangala Bibi, who takes on the guise of Mrs. Aratounian. Through this, the

ovel challenges the belief in the grand narrative that human freedom can only be achieved through science, offering an alternative view that opens up possibilities beyond the scientific realm.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is not merely a novel about the intersection of science and magic but an exploration of the ways in which knowledge itself is constructed, transmitted, and contested. By integrating postmodern elements of fragmented narratives and unreliable histories, alongside the transformative power of magical realism, Ghosh critiques the idea of a singular, authoritative truth. The novel invites readers to reconsider what we know, how we know it, and whose knowledge is privileged in the construction of history and identity.

## Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* disrupts conventional narratives through its postmodern structure and use of magical realism, challenging dominant frameworks of science, history, and epistemology. The novel's fragmented timeline, unreliable characters, and supernatural elements invite readers to question the authority of Western knowledge systems while giving voice to marginalized, often mystical, forms of understanding. By blending the real and the surreal, he not only deconstructs historical and scientific grand

narratives but also reimagines how we construct truth. Ultimately, *The Calcutta Chromosome* exemplifies a radical rethinking of knowledge, history, and reality through a postmodern lens.

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