



The Post-Colonial Characteristics in Amitav Ghosh's Calcutta Chromosome

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonialism explores the frameworks of power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized. The chief objective of postcolonialism involves not just the colonial experience but the generation of understanding that is non-dominating and non-compelling in an environment profoundly marked by the politics, the considerations, the standpoints, and the tactics of power.

Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali Indian author, is largely recognized for his acclaimed novels. The Calcutta Chromosome is one of his significant novels and award-winning works of science fiction. Ghosh is renowned for his fascination with Indian colonial history and the part of the English language in the postcolonial world. In The Calcutta Chromosome he indicates towards an “alternative” history which makes me keen to work on this book. His youth was spent in Calcutta and his portrayal of the geographical image of Calcutta in the novel. The Calcutta Chromosome is also influenced by his personal experiences. The Calcutta Chromosome is known as his celebrated “postcolonial” work of science fiction.

This novel contains the concept of alternative history, which is about subaltern people, and, of course, a history of Ronald Ross, the well known doctor and Nobel Prize laureate for his discovery about malaria transmission. The novel is mainly centered on the “subaltern” people, their silence, and their history.

Keywords: *Postcolonial, Subaltern, Science Fiction, Post Human.*

I. Introduction

Since the early seventeenth century, the Indian subcontinent was among the most significant British colonies. Though India gained independence in 1947, the repercussions of colonialism remain very apparent in this nation. As per numerous postcolonial academics, their colonizers decide colonized peoples' history. The colonized cannot shake the impacts of their colonizers. The colonial construction of the “I” and the “other,” the “colonizer” and the “colonized,” the “oppressor” and the “oppressed,” the ruler, the indigenous bourgeoisie, the working or middle class, the lower class and



most importantly the “subaltern” became the subjects of postcolonial studies. Moniker 'post' and 'colonialism' of post-colonialism are perplexing for a nation like India.

Bill Ashcroft *et al.* in their book *The Empire Writes Back* points out,

"More than three quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism."

(Ashcroft, 1978)

The countries like India have had their lives already shaped when colonialism arrived. India has a rich culture and history. Even when the East India Company presented its charter in the court of the Moghul king Akbar, India was a great civilization whereas England was inhaling the initial whiff of the Renaissance.

Post colonialism does not keep us ever reminding of our object position as colonial subjects but also rubbing it into our consciousness. English is the medium through which post colonialism as well as colonialism expresses itself; it is also the medium of project globalization. Post colonialism in postcolonial countries comes up in fiction, and not in poetry or drama. Novel is an instrument of colonialism; it must also be that of post colonialism: the malady itself must provide its cure.

II. Background of The Study

Post colonialism in Indian fiction in English can be considered in various ways. The postcolonial novel has specific post-structural strategies as well as thematic. We have novels primarily rendering the engagement with colonial experience, novels dealing with women as colonial subjects, novels dealing with marginality, especially the subalterns, and novels dealing with either the abrogation or appropriation of the language of the metropolitan center.

Indian English novel has been obsessed more with cultural interaction between the East and the West than with the discursive powers and strategies, which led to the depletion of Indian knowledge and culture. There are women writers in English in India allegedly brought about by post-coloniality.

All such novels, which write the woman and her body, may be categorized as feministic, and as feminism has links with post colonialism, the novels can be termed postcolonial. Post colonialism becomes mere verbiage if it does not lead to decolonization; decolonization is reifying itself only in bits and pieces. If colonization is undesirable, decolonization is desirable and the best way to do it is to decolonize the mind. As most post-colonialists agree, it is difficult to recover the precolonial past; it is better to structure our present syncretically by building between our cultural heritage and non-compelling knowledge's and discourses of others, especially of the West. What is happening in India is that our mind is still in bondage. It is language that constructs the world. Our knowledge of the world comes through the language.



III. Rational of The Study

Even today, we have English in our midst, not as the site of colonialism but as a transnational language. *Harish Trivedi* squabble that

"Instead of India conquering English, English has certainly conquered India all over again."

(Trivedi, 2019)

We have not appropriated English as post-colonialists claim, but we have abrogated our rich languages and not saved them from being appropriated by English and believe that Indian English is exclusively our own. Though the use of English has greatly increased in India, it is still the language of the center with the inherent colonial power discourse.

If we wish to decolonize ourselves, we will have to enrich our other Indian languages and their literatures and take recourse to translation in order to transcend the national spaces and borders. Post-colonialism is a mixed blessing. It has brought about the baring of colonial power structure and empowering of the marginality gendered or engendered. It has considerably increased the significance of literary studies and widened the horizons of globalization.

IV. Connotation of The Study

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most widely known Indians writing in English today. He is a Bengali author as well as a literary critic in the field of English language. The plot of *Amitav Ghosh's; The Calcutta Chromosome* is so complex that there is little consensus among scholars on what actually happens in the novel. Subsequent in the footsteps of *Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Renu* and *J.P.S. Uberoi*, *Ghosh* dramatizes the encounter between Western science, with its accompanying epistemology, and Indian tradition. The novel challenges the relentless West driven search for knowledge, epitomized by the supercomputer named *Ava*, and suggests that only different epistemological premises, based on silence, can counteract Western rationalism.

The novel's literary technique mirrors this preoccupation in that it tells a story from two different viewpoints, one of which remains silent throughout. Narrating the viewpoint of a silent agent raises a number of problems as to the reliability of the narrator, who properly speaking is only a "guesser." The whole narrative revolves around a foundational mystery that remains unknown to all characters. In order to do so, the implied author must write about something of which he too remains ignorant.

This paradoxical condition calls for a revision of the traditional writing agents, so that it is necessary to include the figure of the arch author behind the traditional implied author. This may explain a reticent narrative that relies heavily on the reader's intelligence. Furthermore, narratological reading highlights two themes formerly neglected by scholars, namely that subalterns' cosmopolitanism in the future is rooted in our colonial past and that the interpersonal transference envisaged by the novel merges different people in one body, thus challenging the Western obsession with individualism.

V. Thematic Analysis of The Study

Amitav Ghosh's *'The Calcutta Chromosome'* (1996) is an effort to focus on the implications of a postcolonial novel and to ascertain the post-colonial characteristics to be discovered in *'The Calcutta Chromosome'*. The fantastic world of the novel presents a process of various thematic and technical experimentations and innovations. Ghosh raises many questions regarding The “*Fevers, Delirium and Discovery*” and to make the answers comprehensible to the reader, the writer plays with time, space, and the story line.

The story of the novel moves through the closing years of the nineteenth century into the whole of the twentieth century and then passes on to the early years of the twenty first century. Apparently, it covers the colonial and the post- colonial years of Indian history. Of course, Ghosh has judiciously executed the writer's liberty of rejection, selection and creation.

The novel opens in the early years of the twenty-first century when *Antar* an Egyptian computer programmer and system analyst in New York suddenly finds the ID card of one *Murugan*, and old colleague and researcher, flashed on his computer screen. He discovers that *Murugan* had mysteriously disappeared on 21st August 1995, better known as the *World Mosquito Day*, from *Calcutta*. *Murugan* himself deeply interested in malaria research was very curious about *Ronald Ross*, a British scientist posted in the Indian army in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Ross awarded the Nobel Prize for identifying the Malaria parasite.

Murugan firmly believed that *there was an "other mind" behind this entire operation of research and discovery. It was his theory that though Ross was thinking "he was doing experiment on the malaria parasite" yet, "all the time it's he who is the experiment."*

(The Calcutta Chromosome, P-21)

Thematically and technically, Ghosh has deconstructed the traditional western forms. His constant "border-crossing" from fact to fiction, the disruption of the realities of the narrative technique in fiction character, manipulation of time has been done away with as something ineffectual or superfluous. This experimentation has enriched him with a "double vision" that enables the writer to present a cross-cultural critical analysis. Ghosh has employed "Magic realism" to invoke the impossibility of the happening without losing the immediacy of its experience.

Ghosh the fiction writer turns himself into a historian. In fact, his role is not much altered as both history and literature are interested in power and etymologically the two words are the same, and only in English have they separated in this way. The constant blending of fact and fiction has generated a situation where past has lost its antiquity. By crossing over the physical time, the writer has invented new allegorical meanings. The collision between the West and the East has also been projected symbolically through an ideological conflict between tradition and modernity, faith and reason, scientific knowledge and intuitive knowledge.

Post-colonial writing mystifies the real and demystifies the mystified. It is not the temptation of exotic expression that compels a writer to follow this intricate path but it becomes a necessity that give him the magical power to represent the culmination of many dynamic, cultural, and social forces. The pluralistic sensibility of postcolonial writing has a significant impact on the writer of the coming century.

VI. The Calcutta Chromosome: A Post-Colonial Study

Amitav Ghosh in *"The Calcutta Chromosome"* as a post-colonial writer has rearranged the simplistic equation of life, death, and immortality to prove that "word manipulated" artistically can establish theories that are true and yet stranger than fiction. 'Malaria strikes Back' screams the head-lines in newspaper, periodicals, scientific journals. Teams of research-journalists re-record the details from the past-the historical facts about malaria and the scientist Sir Ronald Ross who was awarded the Nobel Prize for his findings on malaria fever. This sets off the creative artist into the jungle of science - laboratories, scientific vocabulary, the methods of investigation and the scientists.

Amitav Ghosh in his novel *'The Calcutta Chromosome'* takes up this issue of the malarial fever coloring it with mysticism and mystery, supernatural and superstition, calling it the theory of science and counter-science:

"Let me put it like this", Murugan said, "you know all about matter and anti matter right? And rooms and anterooms and christ and anti-christ and so on?"

(The Calcutta Chromosome, P-43)

With this Amitav Ghosh emphasizes secrecy, mystery, and self-contradictory knowledge and confronts what he calls conventional science with the ingenious knowledge science with the ingenious knowledge and method of the uneducated Indians.

Murugan further explains: *"Not making sense is what it's about conventional sense that is. May be this other team started with the idea that knowledge is self-contradictory, may be they believed that to know something is to change it, therefore is knowing something, you've already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history. May be they thought that knowledge could not begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge."*

(The Calcutta Chromosome, P-.88)

Ghosh, being a student of social anthropology, uses his knowledge to unravel layer by layer the enigma related to the discovery by Ronald Ross of the malarial parasite in 1902. The novel has two sections:

'August 20, Mosquito Day' and 'The Day After'.

The first section is devoted to the recollection of certain scientific facts but in a very 'thriller' mode of fiction. It has also been grouped with 'novel of ideas' working-with a 'brainteaser'; and at times judged as a thriller. However, if experiments in fiction writing area to be encouraged to the extent of heterogeneous combinations at the cost of 'pleasure', one would unhesitatingly accept the novel.

The subsequent events in the novel are attempts to trace out the adventure of *Murugan* and the queer truth of what in fact took place on those fateful days to August 1995. The time span is stretched to the history of near about a hundred years studded with events more of a mysterious and supernatural nature than to allow the reader to feel a oneness with any of those experiences. He simply looks aghast and bewildered. Ava's flashing of the badly damaged ID card on its screen arouses the curiosity of *Antar*, the Egyptian archivist working at his New York apartment in the early twenty first century. When the computer Ava projects the holographic projection of the man to whom the card belonged, *Antar* immediately recognizes him as *L. Murugan* and starts his search on Ava and the details he gets through the small screen of his computer.

To intensify the authenticity of the devices and technique used, *Amitav Ghosh* co-related supernatural to attain the 'microscopic structural' unity, spinning the images round and round. The details in the first four chapters pacify the readers' curiosity through the make-believe world where science attains equal mastery over the human brain as there is a good rapport shown between the two; the novelist does it cleverly to make the reader conscious of the shocks to take place thereafter. The incidents thus more in 'three folds of time' and fluctuate until the last.

Murugan's research in this direction is a part of this enigmatic conclusion that in 1890 a secret India team, under the leadership of a mysterious woman called Mangala had obtained much information in this field. A victim of hereditary syphilis, Mangala was found by Dr. Cunningham at Sealdah station and was trained as a laboratory assistant. Murugan takes her to be a genius and 'way ahead of the fundamentals of the malaria problem.'

(The Calcutta Chromosome, P-202)

Mangala's secret investigation regarding the syphilitic patient, in *Cunningham's* laboratory and the observation how certain chromosomes were found in the non-generating tissue the brain and could be transmitted through malaria are as *Murugan* calls them '*The Calcutta Chromosomes*'. *Ghosh* is not content with the combination of science and non-science and their inter-relations; he deepens the mystery by relating these two with the typical Indian belief of rebirth. The strange girl tells *Urmila*-

'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 Calcutta Chromosome, P-P. 194)

Lutchman and *Mangala* belong to the last phase of the 19th century; they continue to be an influence in 1995. *Lutchman/Lachman/Laxman/ Lakhan/Lucky*, all these names belong to the same person but in different situations and at different times. It is merely a game of '*Switching identities*'. *Murugan* finds out in August 20, 1995, an esoteric cult of image worship in Calcutta and finds out that the image is that of *Mangala*. She is called *Mangala bibi* and is offered puja to commemorate her reincarnation. *Mangala's* shifting identity is in *Mrs. Avatounian, Urmila* and *Tara*. Thus, the story moves through such a complicated texture that it appears more a daydream than any palatable reading.

VII. Conclusion

The novel is indeed a quest through the world of superfluities to the world of ideas. It is an attempt to bring together the past and the present with a vision of the future. The reader may either flit between the physical and the psychological time of different characters that progress simultaneously to different geographical places or remain in the same physical location but at different spots of time. The very mystery in the novel is it allows the reader to dig deeper to have new and many more new layers of meanings. Undoubtedly, it is a good beginning of a new trend yet to be adopted by young fiction writers of today. *'The Calcutta Chromosome'* is an amazing and alluring novel written by *Amitav Ghosh*, an anthropologist and contemporary Indian English fiction writer.

The novel writer in English follows the Indian tradition of narrative. It has multiple stories embedded in the main story. It is as a bouquet made out of many stories. Though the narrative is a complex one leading from one story to many stories, the reader is carried away by its sweep. It reminds us of the narrative traditions of the Indian epics *'The Ramayana'* and *'The Mahabharata'*. Some critics have evaluated *'The Calcutta Chromosome'* as a medical thriller, a triumphant ghost story a scientific quest. However, it seems that the author is very well rooted in his own culture - the Indian. The novel, also explores the cyclic time concept and hence the treatment of time is also the Indian one. It moves between the present the future and the late 19th century. It is rather a search for and history of, the elusive and alluring *"The Calcutta Chromosome"*.

While *Ghosh* does not laud religion and spiritual beliefs, it contends that some similarities between science and religion are demonstrated in the novel. The novel poses a question about the rationality of the scientific research-taking place in colonial India. It finds an answer in the book that the relationship between science and subaltern people is plausible if religion can be interpreted as related to science. Though religion and science are perceived as opposite terms, I argue that these two seem to be connected in *Ghosh's* novel. While *Ghosh* neither praises religion nor criticizes science, he raises a question about the rationality of the biased history of the marginalized people.

Ghosh utilizes her suggestion to discuss the subaltern voice in a new way through science fiction. Interestingly *Mangala* and her group's experimenting process very influenced by their religious beliefs, rituals and supernaturalism. Ultimately, we see the post human figure of *Murugan*, which is the outcome of the experimentation of the subaltern group. We previously discussed in the theory section that the post human is a blend of human and machine and it can be both utopian and dystopian; nonetheless, the subaltern people came up with the post human on the path toward the invention of immortality.

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