

## **Hidden History and Marginalization in Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosome**

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### **Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh immerses into a story of medical journalism and tries to explain the chromosome system, advancing other medical discoveries, popular rituals, scientific technology, hallucinations, computers controlled by multinational companies. Within the local and globalized elements, we find strange figures of Marginalised, like Mangala, a clever and witty scientist but an uneducated – a subaltern who comes to discover how the malaria bug can be used to regenerate decaying brain tissue in the last stages of Syphilis. The British scientist Ronald Ross researches about his experiments and he somehow goes in a process of discovery of how mosquitoes transmit malaria through the marginalized characters like Mangala and Laakhan. He was awarded Nobel Prize in 1902 for his work on the life cycle of the malaria parasite. Marginalized who are the actual discoverers cannot come into light because of their low status and uneducated background. The novel is framed by the story of Antar, a lonely, overworked Egyptian data analyst, and Murugan, his Indian colleague. Murugan discovers from the discovery of malaria of the great scientist Ronald Ross that someone 'had systemically interfered with Ronald Ross's experiment to push malaria

research in certain directions while leading it away from others'. Ghosh narrates about the science of malaria, a disease dependent on multi-connection, enmeshed in the logics of a colonial counter science. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is both a science fiction and a barrier that must be overcome in order to explore the unknown and the subaltern. Murugan wants to follow Ross trail, and that of some of the mysterious figure around him. At last he finds it is Mangala, picked up at Sealdah railway station in Calcutta and Laakhan, as assistants in the research for the discovery of malaria. She appears to be both the high priestess of a secret medical cult offering a cure for Syphillis which eventually lead to Ross's winning the Nobel Prize. Ghosh's narrative discredits the Western scientist and discovers the truth of actual discovery of Mangala which is the hidden truth from the records of the marginalised society and medical historiography, whose secret history is discovered by Murugan. Thus it is a quest for discovering the discovery of the marginalized and their role in the discovery of malaria in the novel.

### **Research Paper**

Amitav Ghosh is one of the distinguished Indian English Novelist of our times. Ghosh researches and brings together the social, cultural and political events of the past, present and the future. He is well – versed in the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology, and his Socio- anthropological concerns are remarkably reflected in his novels. History, nation, politics, mythology, scientific technology, search for self, exile, dislocation and reason which sustain his interest.

Ghosh's novels reflect a historicity, as history is often present in his novels. His novels reflect the tendencies and concern of the age. Ghosh attempts to perceive the lives of his contemporaries in lands as diverse as India, Bangladesh, Egypt, England etc. His canvas is often large and his novels are peopled with variety of characters. As a Calcuttan, Ghosh portrays Calcutta in a realistic and the city comes alive on his pages in his novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*. The streets of Calcutta and the landmarks of this city take us on a guided tour of the city. Every significant character is delineated realistically.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) subtitled as a novel of *Fevers, Delirium and Discovery* which is set in Calcutta. This novel is a science-fiction which traces the adventures of Murugan. The novel spans one century and three continents and the main characters are an Egyptian data analyst and malaria obsessed Indian living in New York. Its part science fiction, part history, part thriller and part detective plot. Murugan has a strange theory about

Ronald Ross, the Nobel Prize winner, who discovered how mosquitoes transmit malaria. Somehow this had systematically interfered with Ronald Ross's experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others. Once Murugan shares his views with Antar as follows,

Remember that these guys haven't got a whole lot going for them: they're fringe people, marginal types; they're so far from the mainstream you can't see them from the shore. On the credit side there's a lot of them and they know all about Ronnie, but neither Ronnie nor anyone else knows anything about them. (TCC 92)

This confusion leads to Murugan's disappearance in Calcutta on World Mosquito day 20<sup>th</sup> August 1995. Later Murugan's I.D card is discovered by Antar's personal computer, Ava. Antar investigates Murugan's disappearance as he works in the same 'Life Watch' where Murugan also works. Nothing in this novel stands still for very long. We see what happens in Calcutta in 1995, where Murugan meets Urmila Roy, a journalist struggling with conflicting demands of career and family.

In 1895 Ronald Ross begins his malaria research where the poor, uneducated and marginalized Lutchman and Mangala joins him and they know more than they should about the malaria parasite. They are picked from the Shealdehy railway station. The disease malaria is a cure for the disease Syphilis when it is artificially induced in a body. This is observed by Mangala who is a subaltern, with the help of her assistant Lakaan, yet both are marginalised and powerless.

Ronald Ross, who is a scientist, discovers that malaria is caused by mosquitoes. This discovery comes through a process of 'Chromosomes' through Lakaan and Mangala who are poor subalterns. Murugan's research about this chromosome leads him to the conclusion that Mangala and her associates hinder Cunningham's research so that he will be replaced by Ross, whom they can use as a vessel for their discoveries.

It is not Ross who uses them as assistants but it is they who use Ross to lead him to the discovery of malaria. Mangala's discovery by the means by which malaria is transmitted is a by-product of her real research interest. In Murugan's view the relationship between Mangala's counter - science and that of conventional scientists such as Ross is similar to the relationship between "matter and anti-matter [...] rooms and anti-rooms [...] Christ and anti Christ and so on...it would also have to be secretive in what it did. It would have to use

secrecy as a technique or procedure” (TCC 91). Thus Mangala and her chromosome remains a secret behind when the Western scientist Ross gets the reward for the discovery of these subalterns which is highlighted by Ghosh.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* begins in New York of the near future then a marginalized Egyptian employee, Antar, apparently ‘stumbles’ upon clues that lead him to the disappearance, of a colleague named Murugan. Murugan had disappeared while everyone thinks that he is an ‘eccentric’. But he proves to find out that deliberately people had interfered with the experiments of Sir Ronald Ross, the British scientist who won Nobel Prize for his discovery of the malarial parasite. The subaltern plotters are found to be Mangala and Laakhan or called as Lutchman in the novel. Murugan and Mangala both are affected by Syphilis which is the main reason for their research interest. This novel is not only a science-fiction but also can be called as the ghost story, detective novel, adventure tale and so on. The novel proceeds to trace the agency of a mysterious group of subalterns and their tradition of counter- science.

The novel is about, ‘Fevers, delirium and discovery’ as the subtitle tells us. The story comprises of the three narrative strands that comprises Mangala- Ross who represent the past, Murugan- Urmila who represent the present and Antar-Tara who represent the future. Mangala- Ross with the primitive microscope, Antar’s collaboration with Ava-the demotic computer, and Murugan’s varied use of technology as well as the use of print is well elaborated with minute details by Ghosh in the novel. Actually the plot is launched in collaboration between machine and man that is Ava and Antar.

In his search for Murugan, Antar would have not noticed Murugan’s the burnt ID-Card, and he searches for the unraveling of Murugan’s disappearance from the Life Watch. “Restive he was, Antar probably wouldn’t have given the card a second glance... It was only because Ava went into one of her trances of unrecognition over the metal chain that he took a closer look” (TCC 8). This dissolution of the man-machine process and the discovery of truth come with the help of this machine too. The discussion between science and counter-science, Ghosh has enabled to question or subvert the ‘colonial’ perceptions of Indian-in Post colonial context – the realities.

The marginalized characters discover about the malaria parasite that remains a secret by Ross and his class. Subaltern agency remains unseen even when it enables Ross’s discovery: in the form of Abdul Kadir’s blood – that guides Ross through all the critical

phases of his research. It is Mangala's planning and discovery and Lutchman's actions in the novel, is what Ross actually sees, researches and comes to a conclusion of discovery.

Murugan who is being given clues to 'solve' the mystery knows less about Mangala – bibi and she is treated like a Goddess by the people of Calcutta as she cures the disease 'Syphilis' through her treatment. She takes a pigeon for her treatment which is affected by malaria and the blood of the bird is the remedy for patients affected with Syphilis. Mangala who is marginalized is able to give the cure where even doctors and scientists are not able to give. Hence Mangala, the subaltern is worshipped, admired and adored by the people. She discovers that malaria parasite when it is artificially induced to a person who is affected by Syphilis it transforms to be a remedy for the affected people.

Murugan starts to solve the puzzle because of his 'curiosity' because something that is within him makes him to solve the riddle as he is both affected by Malaria and Syphilis. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a novel of suspense it marks the restoration of history to the subaltern: for history can be seen as the plotting of human experience and agency. It is not the existing history of such plotting out the fact that subaltern agencies and experience have been largely plotted out of individual histories. What is within Murugan makes him to proceed in his search where he finds the process of a 'chromosome' which is outside.

Murugan is a person who is affected by both Malaria and Syphilis and that is why he unties the knot of suspense and mystery by finding an answer that malaria is a cure and remedy for the disease Syphilis. He comes to know about the divine power of Mangala, who is just an assistant to D.D.Cunningham and also she is considered a goddess like figure because she has the power to cure Syphilis. She has also got the knowledge of transcending life beyond life. In this concern two paradigms are analysed. Mangala once in 1893 performs a ritual-that is as follows:

...the woman Mangala was seated at the far end of room, on a low divan, but alone and in an attitude of command, as though enthroned. By her side at the far end of the room were several bamboo cages, each containing a pigeon... they were all slumped on the floors of their cages, shivering, evidently near death... on the floor by the divan clustered around the woman's feet, were some half-dozen people in various attitudes of supplication, some touching her feet, others lying prostrate. Two or three others were huddled against the wall, wrapped

in blankets... They were Syphilitics, in final stages of the terrible disease (TCC 125-26).

Farley, a Western scientist sees Mangala in this state and he wishes to warn the people not to waste their expectations on whatever Mangala offered, by which she could cheat the common and gentle people. This makes Farley to become curious and so he remains there to observe Mangala's performance of rituals. After that, Farley sees the transformations that Laveran presented; "It was then he saw Laveran's rods appear, hundreds of them, tiny cylindrical things, with their pointed penetrating heads piercing the blood miasma" (TCC 128). There he realises the power of Mangala who is actually a powerless marginalized.

The novelist presents a mysterious and mystical aspect of the plot which becomes wonderful to everyone. Ghosh has narrated these strange happening very skillfully and has concluded it as feverish fallacy. The novel presents the story of the secondary world where the subalterns or the marginalised have their own experience of discovery. The incidents that are mentioned in the novel are the clues that are left to the imagination of the reader to find probable solutions. The readers find that there is a network of chromosome who works behind the discovery of malaria. It is discovering the discovery of the marginalised which gives the answer to all the puzzle, suspense, adventure, thrill, horror and technology. As Murugan sees it:

Fact is we're dealing with a crowd for whom silence is a religion. We don't even know what we don't know. We don't know who's in this and who's not; we do not know how much of the spin they're got under control. We don't know how many of the threads they want us to pull together and how many they want to keep hanging for whoever comes next (Kumar 105).

Like Murugan these counter – scientists remain on the margins of the scientific establishment their marginalization is by choice and thus does not leave them powerless. In fact the counter scientists are in such control of knowledge exchange process that they have almost managed to reverse the power structure. In the novel the marginal counter scientists manage to put themselves in the position of authority by systematically releasing bits of knowledge in order to have the conventionally trained scientists. Thus Ghosh has broken the belief that only high caste people have great knowledge while the low caste people do not. It all depends on one's practice, experience and learning but not in one's birth, status or background. Ghosh proves that subalterns too can be intelligent finding out new discoveries breaking out the rule of marginalization. Marginalization is fixed in people's mind according

to their birth identity but it can be broken when subalterns gain their victory through meticulous training and careful observation. Ghosh has portrayed the other side of the subaltern agency where they are not always dull and ignorant rather they have their own perspectives and potentialities and they can view beyond what they are and their living. Ghosh has highlighted this factor to the readers to break their notion of caste system, status and background and to vision life beyond their narrow mindedness.

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