

RESEARCH ARTICLE



AMITAV GHOSH'S "THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME" AS A SCIENTIFIC FANTASY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I presented Amitav Ghosh's novel "The Calcutta Chromosome" as a novel of scientific fantasy. The story jumps back and forth in time and follows different characters, weaving everything together beautifully. In the novel, an Egyptian clerk, Antar in New York City bumps into a lost ID card. It belongs to a strange man (Murugan) that Antar met a long time ago. The man claimed to be the world authority on Ronald Ross, the man that solved the mystery with Malaria in Calcutta in 1898. While Antar digs up information about what really happened to the man, a mystery unravels and by the time Antar finds himself involved in it, it is too late to get out. The novel is a multi-layered novel, presenting different story lines from different times. The idea, of course, is to have them merge neatly in the end.

Key words: Chromosome, computer, colonials, colonialism, fantasy, Malaria, modernism, programmer and turmoil.

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Article Info:

Article Received:18/08/2014

Revised on: 28/08/2014

Accepted on: 30/08/2014

INTRODUCTION

Today, the Indian English novel is subjugated by the second generation of post-colonial writers, who were born after decolonization. These writers were born on Indian soil and write in English with more dynamism, distinctive force, vigour, a boom and a level of self-reliance than colonials. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohan Mistry, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh hold centre stage in the contemporary literary scenario. They have liberated Indian English literature from the colonial yoke. They have received national and international recognition, fabulous royalties and prestigious awards. Amitav Ghosh is perhaps the finest writer, among those who were born out of

the 'Post-Midnight Children' revolution in Indian English fiction. He has authored seven volumes of fiction and five volumes of non-fiction. Most of the novels authored by him turned out to be best sellers. His novels are postulated by personal, non-conformist and extraordinarily contrived themes on the issues and aspects of subaltern, Pre-colonialism, Colonialism, Post-colonialism, Modernism and Post-modernism. In other words, the major thematic pre-occupations of his novels are based upon impressive themes of travel, opium war, migration, historical facts, communal cruelty, political turmoil, corruption, caste politics, love, loss, travellers, diasporic exiles, struggle and strife. After writing first two novels, he has taken eight years space to write '*The Calcutta Chromosome*'

(1996). His first two novels deal with the theme of Colonism. His third novel, '*The Calcutta Chromosome*' is basically a science fiction, although a ghost story and a detective story also constitute the fabric of the plot of the novel. The novel fits into the definition of a science fiction. It is an attempt 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. The British bacteriologist is more close to the people of Calcutta as he did his path breaking research in this city only.

Focus on Discovery:

The novel begins with Sir Ronald Ross's short poem in which he refers to 'His secret deeds', implying a scientific discovery. The novel is divided into two sections- "August 20: Mosquito Day" and "The Day After". The title of the novel and even the titles of the sections indicate that the thrust of the narrative is on "the Discovery" in regard to the cause of malarial fever.

In the beginning of the novel, Antar, an Egyptian programmer and an employee of the International Water Council is introduced. He is a Computer Programmer works on AVA/II e' system which is a Super Computer. He is an Egyptian but work in New York in the 21st century. Quite accidentally, he comes across on Ava screen, ID card of an employee of life watch where he, too, was working in the past. Slowly, steadily, he gets to know that the ID card was of L. Murugan with whom he was working on '*Life Watch*' and who was missing in Calcutta from August 21, 1995.

L. Murugan was keen on discovering the missing link in Ronald Ross's discovery when he was in New York, working for 'Life Watch'. He had written an article entitled, "Certain Systematic Discrepancies in Ronald Ross Account of Plasmodium B". Ronald Ross and his mentor Patrick Manson had arrived at the conclusion that Malaria Parasite was transmitted from mosquitoes through drinking water. However, Ronald Ross suddenly changed his view and came to conclusion that there was a connection between Plasmodium zygote and Anopheles. L. Murugan was puzzled by this sudden change in Ronald Ross's approach to the cause of malaria as the change in his approach occurred within a very short span time. It was L.

Murugan's theory that some native people deliberately interfered with Ronald Ross's experiment and pushed the research in a particular direction, of course, he did not know the reason of it and he desired to do research on it and for that, he was keen on going to Calcutta where Ronald did his research. L. Murugan was obsessed with this idea. In this connection, he told Antar, "You could find a thousand people no, two thousand, may be ten who could do what I'm doing now. But you won't find another person alive who knows more than I do about the subject, I specialize in". (p.43)

L. Murugan's search started when he reached Calcutta in 1995. After that, whatever he did was connected with Ronald Ross. He got to know about him through his diary, documents, letters and also through Ross's 'Memoir'. The image of Ronald Ross, he visualized was that of a European who completed medical education and who was a jolly young man who saw movies, played polo, drank whisky, wrote poetry. What distinguished Ross from other was that he had a deep interest in Science. L. Murugan also got to know a detailed account of Ronald Ross's entry into the search for the cause of Malaria. Ross was the first bacteriologist to make efforts to find out the cause of malaria fever. French Army Surgeon, Alphonse Laveran had already informed the Academy of Medicine that a bug-like worm was responsible for Malaria. Ronald Ross contracted the bug-theory. When Ross came to India, he started his experiment. He was ready to pay money for a few drops of malarial blood, but he did not get responses. One May 17, 1895, he got his first case of Malaria. A patient called Abdul Kadar approached him and Ross made an experiment on him. According to L. Murugan, it was unusual for part of Abdul Kadar to approach Ross as the natives were very much scared of approaching Ronald Ross. L. Murugan tells Antar that Ross never had questions such as "Why this guy Abdul Kadar here, if no one else is?" "Where's he from?", "What's he doing here"? And "What's his story" (p.62). L. Murugan's search begins with these questions in his mind.

Murugan firmly believes that there may be 'another mind' behind this entire operation of research and discovery. So Murugan lays his theory

of counter science. The major principle of counter science is secrecy.

A mysterious person who helped Ross in his experiment was Lutchman. He was a faithful servant of Ross. In fact, it was Lutchman who found a specific species of mosquito (*Anopheles*) that caused malaria and who informed it to Ross.

Mangala is another key figure who played an important role in Ross's experiment. In fact, she was a sweeper woman. Still, she seemed to have knowledge about medical science, particularly about bacteria. She used malarial bacteria to cure syphilis. It was a way of using one disease to cure another. She also found that the treatment caused side effect like personality disorder and she stumbled over something that may be called Calcutta Chromosome. She did not know what it was, but it was related to transformation of personality. Thus, the discovery of malarial bacteria leads to the discovery of Calcutta chromosome. This Calcutta chromosome, as we shall see later 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 systematically paired. It does not run from one generation to the other. Ghosh fantasises 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'. Thus Murugan proves his theory of counter science in malarial research. It is primarily a science fantasy which raises fever and delirium.

The novel's sub-title "A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery" is applied to refer to the mystical aspect of the novel which represents a principle of science and counter-science.

Thus, the discovery of malarial bacteria leads to the discovery of Calcutta Chromosome and L. Murugan draws the conclusion that Abdul Kadar, Lutchman, Mangala were the persons who were deliberately planted so that Ronald Ross's discovery would be helpful in discovering Calcutta Chromosome. Of course, L. Murugan himself could not prove its existence.

Mystery in Discovery:

True to Science Fantasy, there are a series of mysterious incidents that make the novel a science fantasy. After arriving in Calcutta on 20th August, 1995, Murugan leaves his luggage at the Robinson Street guest house. Then he visits the memorial of the British Scientist Ronald Ross. He is thrilled at reading an inscription related to the finding of malaria conveyed by mosquitos. When it begins to rain, he has to take shelter under the gates of Rabindra Sadan auditorium where he happens to meet two women, the reporters of the magazine called "Calcutta". They are Urmila Roy and Sonali Das. Later Murugan learns that there is an award ceremony for Phulboni, a writer to mark his eighty-fifth birthday. Phulboni is the pseudonym of a man called Saiyad Morad Hussain. Sonali Das is the daughter of Saiyad Morad Hussain and she is working as a reporter for a magazine, "Calcutta". She is married to Roman Haldar and Urmila Roy remains unmarried to her family's sake but represents "Calcutta". As we are introduced to these characters, they became "diseased" and are compelled to play their part in the malaria story.

The story speeds like a thriller: Urmila, chasing a fish monger's boy to exchange her rotten fish, bumps into Murugan again, who unravels Cunningham's (an English man investigating malaria in the late 19th century) story with the help of the ancient train timetable in which Urmila's fish was wrapped. Murugan explains to the bewildered Urmila, "Someone's trying to get us to make some connections; they are trying to tell us something; something they don't want to put together themselves". (p.216)

Suddenly the pieces of the story falls into place as Murugan and Urmila discover that Lutchman or Laakhan is the same person (or Phantom) who worked for Cunningham as an assistant to his apprentice Mangala; together they experimented with pigeons by infusing malarial germs into them, then transferring their blood to cure syphilitic patients, thereby creating the "Calcutta Chromosome". This addition to the traditional Mendelian chromosomes had the ability to transfer characters traits across species. As Urmila and Murugan reconstruct history, it becomes clear to the reader that Mangala and

Lutchman have been reincarnated once again. The story ends with Antar re-viewing Murugan's, but with different characters as his neighbour Tara and her friend Maria replace Urmila and Sonali. This suggests that the story can never be quite over, for as each character ends a story, a new one begins. It means that the role of Murugan is changed and now it is to be replaced by Antar. The novel comes to an end. This Ghosh's novel, "The Calcutta Chromosome" exemplifies the theme of science versus counter-science. The novel is based on the theme of disappearance and discovery. One of the major themes of the novel is the dichotomy between science, rationality (the West) and magic/irrationality (the East). Another major theme of the book is the intersection of private and public history. If the novel is read out from these points of view, it becomes crystal clear that it is a novel of discovery rather than a novel of fever and delirium. The themes presented in the novel are the clues that are left to the imagination of the reader to find probable solution.

Critique: Thus, one can say that the whole novel with fantasy in which the artist has made efforts to bring together the past and the present with a vision of the future.

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