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SELF – DISCOVERY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN AMITAV'S GOSH *THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME*

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ABSTRACT

Most of the novels written after the publication of *Midnight's Children* deals with the aspect which focuses on national history cutting across personal narratives. Most of the writers are deracinated from their roots: familial, cultural, national, religious and linguistics and therefore use polyphonic form to explore their past. It comes as no surprise to find that Amitav Ghosh is a writer concerned with India's place in larger international cultural networks, whose fiction seems directly informed by contemporary academic debates about colonialism and cultural identities and also throws light on the past and unfolds its vividness. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is also concerned with the relationship between science, history and colonialism in a futuristic detective story. The novel is fantastic tale of quest and discovery that intermingles the past, present and the future. The writings have been deeply preoccupied with questions of self-discovery and cultural identity, which acquire poignancy and pertinence when the writers happen to be expatriates or culturally deracinated.

Key-Words: Polyphonic, Cultural Identities, Colonialism, Subaltern, Self-Discovery.

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"Expression in English can bring a sense of release to the Indian intellectual as the endeavours to express the deepest turn and twist to his own mind..... Whatever its future form it seems to certain that the Indian novel in English will suppress its counterpart in the regional language."

- Dewett

The novel in India provides the most discursive site for a debate about what should constitute the – appropriate mode for national representation. Most of the novels written after the publication of *Midnight's Children* deals with the aspect which focuses on national history cutting across personal narratives. Writers of such diverse background and interests as Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, m

Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, Boman Deasai, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy etc have been deeply preoccupied with questions of self-discovery and cultural identity, questions which acquire poignancy and pertinence when the writers happen to be expatriates or culturally deracinated. Most of these writers are deracinated from their roots: familial, cultural, national, religious and linguistics and therefore use polyphonic form to explore their past.

The two novelists who have shown exemplary promise and seem to have given a new direction to the Indian novel in English are Amitav Ghosh and Allan Sealy. Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta. Having completed postgraduate training at Oxford in Social Anthropology and currently living in

New York, where he teaches, He was the winner of Sahitya Academy Award, for his highly complex and celebrated work *The Shadow Lines*. He won the Coveted Arthur.C.Clarke prize for his partly science fiction *The Calcutta Chromosome*, also got Prix Medices Etrangere Award for *The Circle of Reason*. He was also awarded with Man Booker Prize for his *Sea of Poppies*.

It comes as no surprise to find that Ghosh is a writer concerned with India's place in larger international cultural networks, whose fiction seems directly informed by contemporary academic debates about colonialism and culture and was the first of the band of St. Stephanians to respond with gusto to the challenge of *Midnight's Children*. Ghosh follows Rushdie to a large extent in his technique and vision, but is also different from the latter in the sense that he does not see the present in the mirror of the past. On the contrary, the present seems to throw light on the past and unfolds its vividness. In his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, (1986) published in 1986, very much written in Rushdie's magical realist mode, attempts to recover a continuing tradition of cultural exchange for India westwards across the Indian ocean to the Gulf states and Egypt. *The Shadow Lines*, (1988) his second novel is a major addition to the Indian novel in English, which deals with relations between the different arms of a prospering brahmin family, the Datta Chaudhuris, displaced from Dhaka to Calcutta by the Partition. *In an Antique Land*, (1992) a travelogue with historical reflection in a text which challenges the privilege of the academic anthropologist's 'scientific' gaze. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is also concerned with the relationship between science, history and colonialism in a futuristic detective story. The novel is fantastic tale of quest and discovery that intermingles the past, present and the future. *Countdown*, (1999) is a deeply psychological novel, revealing the attitude that leads to extreme animosity, abhorrence and suspicion between two countries India and Pakistan. In this novel Ghosh beautifully presents the terrible, shocking and discouraging dislike which is procreated by nuclear explosions.

The Glass Palace (2000) is an attempt to remap the history of three important South Asian

countries: Myanmar, India and Malaysia. The novel is a fusion of history and fiction covers more than a century. Ghosh withdrew *The Glass of Palace* from commonwealth prize short listing. Because according to him, commonwealth is a remnant of colonization and the spirit of this book is anticolonial. *The Hungry Tide*, (2004) continues the realistic mode of *The Glass of Palace*, this time with a contemporary setting plus historical flashbacks. The novel is set in the Sunderbans or "tide country". It highlights not only place but, crucially, dynamically evolving human relationships, in a context that includes cross cultural barriers and communication, and the relationship between the past and present. *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is the first book in the Ibis Trilogy series by Amitav Ghosh. At the heart of this vibrant tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean; its purpose was to fight China's vicious nineteenth century opium wars. As for the crew, they are a motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts. The vast sweep of this historical adventure spans the lush poppy fields of Ganges, the rolling high seas, the exotic backstreets of China. But the encapsulates the vexed colonial history of the East itself, that makes *Sea of Poppies* so breathtakingly alive a master piece from one of the world's finest novelists.

Amongst the numerous postcolonial theories, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the most influential figure in contemporary critical theory come up with the term 'Subaltern'. 'Subaltern' is a British word for someone inferior-rank, and combines the Latin term for "under" (sub) and "other" (alter). It illustrates here her own position as a postcolonial intellectual, who is concerned to reveal the disempowered and silence voices of past from the material and political context of the present. Unlike Spivak's reading of the subaltern studies historical work, this essay combines political reformulation of western poststructuralist methodologies with a re-reading of the nineteenth century colonial archives in India. Moreover, Spivak focuses on the historical experiences of subaltern women, whose voices and social locations have generally been ignored by the subaltern studies collective, as well as by colonial and elite historical scholarship. By engaging with the

historical knowledge of such disempowered women, Spivak expands the original definition of the subaltern, to include the struggles and experiences of women. This expansion of the term 'subaltern' further complicates the lower class connotations of the world because it includes women from the upper middle class, as well as the rural peasantry and the sub-proletariat. And this concept of the subaltern has been followed by Amitav Ghosh in his books *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Hungry Tide*, though not related to the voice of women, but he wants to give recognition to the less known, less fortunate people. As the world worships success, and many times the deserving go unnoticed, and thus their voice is unheard and suppressed, and their voices and social locations have generally been ignored.

The Calcutta Chromosome, like almost all other works of Amitav Ghosh, is an experimental work. It reflects the quest and adventures between two different cultures and the novelists give it the name of 'science' and 'counter science'. 'Science' is led by the colonizers, the West and 'counter Science' is led by the colonized, the east. The story of the novel moves through the nineteenth century into the twentieth century and the into the early years of the twenty first century. The novel is divided into two parts: 'August 20: The Mosquito Day' and 'The Day After'. The reader rushes through a time period of hundred years that moves into a difficult network of cultural variety that connects the distance between America, England, apt and India. The novel conducts British, Egyptian, American and Indian characters encountering in different decades of the nineteenth, twentieth and the twenty first century. Ghosh digs into one event, one pinpointed happening of the past. He keeps probing it till he finds patterns, and parallels. It is wonderful to watch this artist work. He selects an event that he feels is relevant to present times. He establishes connections. On the face of it, this book is about malaria. Fever and is fused with mysticism, mystery, supernatural and superstition of the east on one hand and the experiments of scientific discoveries of the west on the other hand. This is revealed when Murugan tells Antar:

"You know all about matter and anti matter right? And rooms and anti rooms and Christ and anti Christ and so on? Now, let's say there was something like science and counter science?it wouldn't just have to be secretive about what it did. It would have to use secrecy as a technique or procedure". (p.88)

The novel has three different layers of story; the first narrates the life history of Antar an Egyptian computer clerk, who works all alone on his super intelligent machine Ava, in the twenty first century to the place the adventures of an Indian born American scientist L.Murugan who disappears in Calcutta in August 1995. The second story historically revolves around Ronald Ross the British scientist who in 1962 had discovered the way in which malaria is carried by mosquitoes. And the third, a mysteriously illogical account that shows Ross's investigation to be a subordinate research only, that was continues by a larger and more powerful efficiency of his two workers: Mangala the sweeper woman and Lakhan/Lutuchman the dhooley bearer. The fact that Ross discovered the cause of malaria in Calcutta, (India) has deeper connotations for those who are conscious of colonization. In the whole world it was India with all its filth, garbage and puddles that nurtures sufficient number of mosquitoes to make the research possible. Since mosquito cannot be taken as the symbol of cleanliness. Here we can say that Ghosh, in fact, uncovers the whole power politics of the West. So, this book is an attempt to deconstruct Western aura. It shows that the Western sense of confidence and patronage is misplaced. It is a false notion that it guides the destiny of post colonial nations.

The novel opens with Antar who lives in New York. Antar is a native of Egypt and has graduated from Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow. The description about Antar reveals that native of (Egypt) has encountered the west from his childhood and also in his professional life. He works for International Water Council, a global organization that explores and examines the depletion of the world's water supplies. One morning while working his computer Ava jerkily

produces an I.D. Card with a small metal chain attached to it. The card is badly damaged symbolizing for us the bruised ego longs of the card owner. On searching for the owner of the card he found that the card had originated in Calcutta, he comes to know that the man was L.Murugan, who had worked for non-prolific organization that served as a global public health consultancy and epidemiological data bank. Murugan is an Indian although left the country in early childhood. As child Murugan has touched the whole globe.

“It touched on his ‘global’ childhood spend wandering between the world’s capitals with his technocrat father and spoke briefly of his love of Hollywood ‘B’movies and old American T.V. serial..... He spent several years teaching in a small college in a state of New York.” (p.3)

The description of Murugan life also reveals his contact with the West from his young age and his thoughts and ideas reflects Westernization, as he likes to call himself Morgan that shows the common colonial habit of anglicising Indian names. Murugan happens to be the most entertaining character of the novel as well. He is a man haunted with the early history of malaria research, and claims to be the only expert of the Roland Ross in the world, who in India made the discovery of the life cycle of the malaria parasite. The great love of his life is uncovering the medical history of malaria. In his search for the original mind behind the discovery of the malaria parasite, he comes across many western scientists, and this leads him to encounter with the past researchers. Ghosh believes that the purpose of science is not only to reveal but also to create. At the other end of the scientific knowledge lies in the unknown, unarticulated truth. That truth may be unknown but the point is that it is very much there. Thus the fantasy goes on that in counter science; secrecy is used as technique of procedure. For this group of bright researchers, silence is the only religion. Both Antar and Murugan shares the east west encounters through the story told about the experiments that had taken place.

Murugan tells Antar, about an Austrian clinician Julius Von Wagner Jauregg was actually ahead of Roland Ross on malaria research. He was

working on the clue that artificially induced malaria could cure or at least mitigate syphilitic paresis, at least in the Dementia Paralytica stage when it attacks the brain, and won the Noble Prize in 1927 for this discovery. But even before the Austrian in the 1890s the secret Indian team under the leadership of Mangala, a sweeper woman had achieved remarkable success in this field. She herself suffered from syphilis whom Dr. Cunningham had found at Sealdah station and trained her as a laboratory assistant. Murugan believes that Mangala was a genius and has a strong intuition; he also guesses that Mangala was using a variation of Wagner process. She had perhaps noticed that malaria works on paresis through a different route, the brain, and it can cause hallucination. Perhaps that is why primitive people thought of malaria as spirit possession.

We can see that Ghosh here deconstructs and dismantles Western sense of superiority by Indian rationality. These beliefs said to have no scientific basis, yet their strong presence in India can easily be felt. Deconstruction, in the Derridian context is a nihilistic activity. And yet to perform this nihilistic activity Ghosh uses the tool of blind religious beliefs. This is an interesting contradiction of this book.

Murugan describes Antar about mwhen Ross for the first time meet Lutchman:

“Any way on May 25, 1895 at exactly 8 p.m. a guy called Lutchman walks into Ronnie,s life....All he (Ross) knows about Lutchman is that he is a “dhooley bearer in other words the British Government pays him to shovel shit. Starting May 1895 till July 1898, when Ross makes his final break through in Calcutta, lutchman almost never let Ross out of his sight, he gets pretty good at doing luggage impersonations.” I left Secunderabad with the smallest possible ‘Kit’, says Ronnie, “My microscope and my faithful LutchmanHe thinks he’s doing experiments on the Malaria Parasite. But Ronnie never gets it; not to the end of his life.” (65-67)

Lutchman, the downtrodden and oppressed colonized Indian, comes into Rosland Ross’s life and

remains with Ross till the end of his research. Ross also becomes fond of him and calls him a faithful helper. Ross was under the impression that he was experimenting on the Malaria Parasite but in fact, it was he (Ross) who was being experimented upon. Not only this he tells about Farley who was Ross's predecessor, had already found out the role of the so called 'flagella' in sexual reproduction long before Macullen on his visit to Calcutta. He had learnt from Lutchman and his followers. It is Farley, who knew about this fact and also a group consisting of the counter science namely Lutchman and Mangala. He goes to work in the laboratory of D.D.Cunningham. He feels he is being minutely observed by two Indian a male and a female who use the laboratory.

"The woman watching him with a look of such piercing enquiry that he could not avert his gaze from her.....Oh she's just the sweeper-woman, Cunningham said off handedly.....Farley saw her exchanging a glance with the young man who was standing beside her and he had the distinct feeling that a smile and a nod had passed between them.....And this Chokkra (boy)....is a bearer who I've trained to help with my slides....." (P.118-119)

Murugan has spent many years on his extensive research. His clues indicate that Ross's discovery was only a small part of the overall project of Mangala to attain immortality through Calcutta Chromosome. By 1897 Mangala had run into dead end. She tried again and again to stabilize and catch the chromosome in process of transmission. But she failed. She needed more information on the malaria bug. That is why she needed Ross's help, "she actually believed that the link between the bug and human mind was so close that once its life-cycle had been figured out, it would spontaneously mutate in directions that would take her work to the next step." (208) Breaking the law of silence she planted crucial clues in Ross's head and took the research in right direction. Ross here was just a tool. Murugan also believes that Mangala and Laakhan did succeed in transplantation of Calcutta Chromosome. In fact Laakhan himself is a living example of interpersonal transference of the Calcutta Chromosome. This malevolent character with a deformed hand is 'all

over the map, changing names, switching identities.' (P.74)

Both Laakhan and Mangla are characters who change their identities. Ghosh has underlined the value of secrecy in matters of intellectual property. The whole atmosphere of the book suggests that there is much theft and deceit in this field.

He further tells Antar about J.W.D. Grigson and his tour to India for his survey during Ross's research in India. Murugan says:

"And then one day this other guy arrives to spend the weekend. His name is J.W.D.Grigson; he is just out of Cambridge and he joined an outfit called the linguistic survey of India. Twenty years down the road he is going to write a book called 'A Comparative Survey of the Phonetics Structure of the Language and Dialects of Eastern India'." (p.75)

Grigson stays with Ross for some days and encounters Lutchman. Grigson suspects him and through his study of phonetics, understands that his real name is Laakhan and the place to which he belongs, this disclosure of his real identity annoys Lutchman and he makes an attempt to kill Grigson. Laakhan also meets Phulboni thirty six years after Grigson episodes. Phulboni is writing a set of stories on Laakhan. The real name of the Phulboni is Saiyad Murad Hussain. He is an eminent writer. He has taken a tribal name Phulboni. This character is designed to convey authors view point from time to time. The two names are to emphasize the confusion and duality to self. And I think that everyone is like that. Even the mythological reference of the names makes the characters archetype. As Mangala in Indian mythology refers to Maa Kali, Murugan refers to Kartik, the son of the goddess who is reputed for swift movements. Mangala is called 'Manglabibi'. People worships to commemorate her reincarnation. Through this Goddess metaphor, Ghosh insists on the necessity of coming back to life. Not only this he refers us that nothing ends, the journey of the soul is independent of any body, the body dies but the soul travels into another body and lives on, And God has the power to control soul. But in the book Mangla, a human

being, attempts to master the art of transferring souls. She wants to be the controlling consciousness, the mind that sets things in motion. Here we can say that she is described as the wish of a human being to merge in the womb of the supreme mother, i.e. reflects the 'Bhakti Marg', were one merge with the mother. The other path is the 'Tarka' or logic and science; and Ross belongs to this path. But one should remember that both this path may seem contradictory but in real its not's so, they are actually complementary, because logic without intuition is incomplete.

One cannot ignore the fact that both Mangala and Laakhan are nfrom the very lower rung of Hindu caste system. Here is a desired reversal of roles. Mangala of the sweeper caste is worshipped in blood and flesh as well as years after as an image. Ghosh actually demolishes the false concept that class superiority and right to knowledge goes together. He says that knowledge is beyond the castes and society, and it has less concern with the both. *The Calcutta Chromosome* rejects the common western notion of the protagonist and suggests the insufficiency of these ideas of good and evil as the truth of Indian literary norms aggregated by R.K.Narayan in *The World of the Story Teller*. It consists of all kinds of different subjects and ideologies that is related to human life and duality in identities on the universe. Like, Ghosh has also explained Indian concept of changing identities by referring to Lord Ganesha of Indian mythology. A child with an elephant head is a clear sign of possibility and acceptance of duality of personality. Ghosh with a strong nationalist vein tries to establish Indian supremacy in the world of knowledge and science. He is a modern writer who was interested in the past. It hardly matters into which period the actual fable is cast, what matters is the manner, depth and quality of the author's response. This is exactly what makes Ghosh relevant to us. I see this novel as a statement on the necessary isolation of an individual and the role of introspection and silence in it. It is what the psychologists call the individualization process where human being realizes that he is separate from others. It is only after this realization that when one merges into the whole then the next stage comes.

Here, I'm reminded of T.S.Eliot's *Four Quartets*,
Burnt Norton:

"At the still point of the turning world.
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards;
At the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement.
And do not call it fixity,
Where past and Future are gathered."

Overall, we can say that Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, is an extra ordinary fiction, as he has successfully explores new possibilities for the Indian novel in English. His works reflects the aptness and interest of the age with discrete images of national cultures grown over a long period of time and deeply ingrained in the psyche of the people, are resilient and continue to define their respective national identities or 'image of the world'.

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