



A FICTION OF FEVERS, SECRECY AND SILENCE OF AMITAV GHOSH'S 'THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME'

G.VETRISSELVI¹, Dr.M.PREMAVATHY²

¹Ph.D (Full-Time) Research Scholar, Bharathidasan University Constituent College for Women,
Orathanadu.

²Research Advisor, Assistant Professor of English, Bharathidasan University Constituent College for
Women, Orathanadu.



G.VETRISSELVI



Dr.M.PREMAVATHY

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* is an intricately detailed novel, revolves around the historical figure of Surgeon-Major Ronald Ross and his discovery of the source of malaria (disease), which took place in Calcutta. Ghosh's novel, which has been variously labeled as science fiction, a thriller or a ghost-story, could be appropriately defined as a postcolonial allegory questioning the certainties, neutrality and objectivity of Western Knowledge and thus denouncing colonial appropriation, which is not only military, economic and political but as the novel shows also Cultural. Taking as its cue the discovery, in 1898, that malaria is conveyed between infected persons by the female anopheles mosquito by Ronald Ross, a scientist in the Colonial Medical Service, the novel proceeds to unravel the very concept of 'discovery' itself and the empiricist, supposedly universal but nevertheless culturally determined assumptions of modern scientific knowledge that underwrite such a concept. An alternative history of malaria research being to emerge, in which a team working in India in the late 1880s discovers that the malaria parasite can be used to transfer a lot more than just malaria from person to person.

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Ross's own self-aggrandizing diary of his researches and breakthrough, the novel proceeds to weave an ironic counter-narrative in which Ross's heroic self-centeredness is displaced, as is the modern scientific epistemology that he represents. Instead Ross is shown to be the unwitting pawn of a secretive cult of subalterns whose own knowledge of malaria is far in advance of Ross and the Western medical establishment – although it soon becomes clear that Ghosh is drawing into question historicist narratives of Progress that articulate the language of

being advanced in the first place. Whilst the race find the cure for malaria (another one of those metaphors that indicate linear notions of history, time and program) is seen by Ross – and the immortality bestowed by History, the counter scientific cult seeks immortality of a different, more literal kind, allowing Ghosh to entwine subversively the discourse of Science with one of those Indian superstitions that colonialist loved to belittle: reincarnation.

Ghosh has remarked that travelling is always in some way connected with his fictional work, and others have noted that Ghosh visualizes movement as in some way fundamental to human experience not necessarily seeing it as involving a physical journey, but also as potentiality that inhabits the consciousness of even those people often regarded as settled such as peasants. Instead much of his work challenges the assumption that human history is one of settled populations and stable cultures.

On the other hand Calcutta his native City, exerts powerful influence on Ghosh's imagination. Its presents is marked and mediated by his birth in to what is known as the bhadrakalok, the upper and middle sections of Bengali society that emerged in the nineteenth century as a consequence of the reorganization of the Bengal economy under colonial rule. Roughly translated the term means gentle folk of Calcutta constitutes Bengals intellectual, cultural, and political elite, though at its lower reaches the economic position.

A part of the city that backs onto Calcutta's ever increasing slums. Thus if travel is a key register of Ghosh's awareness of the importance of space in human experience, it is nevertheless his recognition that space is not an inert physical dimension exterior to human consciousness but is rather intimately shaped by the particular ways in which it is imagined that determines his examination of culturally created spaces such as nation-states and the borders both physical and imagined that delimit and define them.

In 'The Calcutta Chromosome' the question of knowledge is explored in relation to science and history. Murugan is the driving force in the process, he casts doubts on official science and history, he puts together bits and piece trying to uncover what have been left out by the official reports, thus giving voice to those who have been kept silent. In his enquiry about the official story of the research on malaria, Murugan sweeps across centuries and continents. It's discovered that artificially induced malaria could cure the last stage of syphilis, or dementia paralytic, he crosses from Europe to Asia, from Africa to North America. From Murugan's tale of the past and from the narration of the present

events, three groups of characters emerge, distinct but interacting through space and time, synchronically the western scientists who hypotheses are studied and successively modified the counter scientists.

The upcoming episodes concerning malaria take place in India and this is where the boundaries between science and counter-science become shaky, and dwindle. Murugan pictures the setting where and when the bacteriologist Ross's research started. It is India, in the mid-19th century when malaria one of the most widespread and debilitating diseases in the world becomes the "Zeitgeist", the undertaking on which Europe and the United States invest their money.

From Murugan's words, Ghosh establishes a parallel between the western conquest of the world and western scientific research, implying that they are two sides of the same coin in their common aim to control, dominate and impose power. An Ania Loomba puts it, "The growth of Western knowledge systems and the histories of most disciplines can be seen to be embedded within and shaped by colonial discourse". He takes up the research on malaria mostly because of the current fashion, his discovery is made in a surprisingly short time if compared to the decades devoted to this study by different and better qualified bacteriologists, and his achievements sound like a succession of odd coincidences. In fact all the western scientists who meddle with the research, apart from Ross, disappear in one way or another.

The protagonist Murugan's counter-history is Mangala, the head of the other team. She represents the subversion of Western modes of perception rooted in empiricism and of the primacy accorded to science as dominant discourse.

Only such a person not shackled by the conventions of academia, not biased by any duty to any authority could simply and freely venture to explore what Murugan calls the Calcutta Chromosome, a freak in the scientific field, a non conventional chromosome "an item that is to the standard Mundelein pantheon of twenty-three chromosomes what Ganesh is to the God".

'The Calcutta Chromosome' would be that something involved in a process leading to the

transference of personality and perhaps to immortality; in Murugan's hypothesis, Mangala realizes that her intuition needs official science to be fully grasped. However Mangala does not know that she is a scientist of some sort; her assistant and the people she cured have no other way of explaining her abilities but considering her a goddess. A goddess would not be accepted in the scientific community, that is why her ways and motives remain unknown even when they come in touch with official science.

Secrecy and silence are the elements in which the other team moves. The importance of silence as a mode of alternative knowledge emerges from the very beginning of Murugan's quest in Calcutta. Silence is the subject of the speech Phulboni, an old and acclaimed writer, holds on the occasion of the celebration of his 85th birthday. He talks about the secret of Calcutta, which unlike the secrets of other big cities paradoxically given out, is "withheld in silence".

In Phulboni's words, silence is clarity of vision and vitality. It takes on the connotations of a mistress, ever-elusive but constantly sought for and wooed, because silence is the means that seems to lead to Calcutta's heart, to allow the crossing to a new revelation.

The other team acted in silence and secrecy, why they could not simply and openly operate with the official scientists. One of the obvious reasons, Murugan explains lies in the fact that 'they are fringe people marginal types', consequently they would not be listened and they would not be taken into account let alone believed. That is why even though they lack the necessary tools and, therefore, need official science to reach their aims, they cannot ask for help directly and openly, so they go on manoeuvring in the dark. But there is more than that.

Murugan puts forward the theory is based on the fact that the other team uses secrecy as a technique or procedure. In fact being counter-scientists they conceive no direct communication. What Ghosh is discussing here, through Murugan's words, is western epistemology, the dominant Western way of knowing mastering the subaltern

countries, is that of narrating them according to their own system of values.

Alternative knowledge reacts with silence, yet Ghosh seems to suggest a further step. In 'The Calcutta Chromosome' the subalterns are on the verge of an unimaginable discovery in the scientific field, one that would cause what Murugan defines the "leap into the next quantum", that is to say they are at a point in the process when knowledge is needed in order to effect a change, a mutation 'if it is true that to know something is to change it, then it follows that one way of changing something of effecting a mutation, let us say is to attempt to know it or aspect of it.' Therefore they try, by the silent, unuttered means and modes at their command, to unite their proceedings with the ones employed by official science. In other words Ghosh seems to convey the idea of a new, hypothetical epistemology, which would stem from a combination of two different ways of knowing thus putting an end to the traditional binary opposition between official and alternative knowledge.

'The Calcutta Chromosome' has been variously defined by reviewers as a science fiction novel, a thriller, even a ghost story, not without some good reasons. To a certain extent, the novel shares some of the features typical of these genres, it is set in a mildly dystopia future, characters mysteriously disappear, the supernatural creeps in suspense is created around the final outcome.

So as the story is based on the attempt at unraveling the secrets of malaria research with the contribution of futuristic high technologies, the form of the novel coherently fits its content. The message of the novel is mirrored by the plot, the way the story is structured.

Murugan's intrusion into the real history of Ross and his research implies another level of contamination the one between fact and fiction, through which as chambers affirms, Ghosh makes the important point that the rhetoric of science shares much with fiction. Moreover the novel is built up in much the same way as the alternative history of the malaria research is linear chronological sequence of events that neatly leads from beginning to development and finally, to conclusion grows out of a series of continual shifts in time and space

tightly knit together by the writer, just a Murugan's history of malaria is a patchwork of singular documents, coincidences and weird correspondences, which however, come in line to form a definite pattern. It is not by chance, then that Ghosh puts the metaphor of the book into Murugan's mouth, when he speaks about his alternative history of malaria.

In narrating Murugan's account of the history of malaria, Ghosh tries to show that reality is more complex and diverse than what we are used to seeing. Besides the monuments to official science there is to obscure silent working of alternative science.

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