



## ONTOLOGICAL DEADLOCK: A STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME*

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novels deal with human quest for truth, self-identity and self-knowledge. In the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* the novelist has tried to present the same quest. It is part of human life and his history but not a fiction. Ghosh here wants to suggest that though human isolation is a bane and a challenge but despite this there is happiness, security and brotherhood if we try to get it. The novel ends with no solution but remains a mystery all over. The novel starts and ends with mystery and has certain implications to follow. In short, we can say that it is a mixture of science, fiction, philosophy and various other aspects directly or indirectly related to life, as at any place we can't escape life.

**Keywords:** quest, immortality, selfhood, self-identity, alienation, ignorant, scriptures, ethics.

Amitav Ghosh's novels deal with human quest for truth, self-identity and self-knowledge. In the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* the novelist has tried to present the same quest. The novel presents many persons indulging in one way or other to reach that mirage but like Shakespeare's definition their quest ends in nothing: 'Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifies nothing.' The novel has many shades and moves very fast from one place to other and from one's consciousness to the consciousness of many people. It deals with different people at different places but connected with one particular common thread.

The reasons of search may vary but the quest remains the same as it is for life, for immortality—hence, there is story within story, search within search revolving around each other dealing with the same theme of selfhood, self-identity and alienation. This alienation comes from their immediate surroundings and their quest to succeed. They want to be free from the bondage of

conventional social relationships and want to survive poverty, disease, exploitation and all the things that could harm human beings and their identity. The novel as a science fiction deals with the quest of Murugan, Antar, Ross, Urmila, Sonali and many other like them. The novel represents people who are alien, isolated and ignorant about the basic gist of life. 'Antar', a water bureaucrat spends his time glued to computer screen named 'Ava'. He is an Egyptian living in New York City. One day an image of damaged ID card appears on his screen and his computer demands an account for it. As the card belongs to a former colleague named Murugan for whom he is having an obsession. Murugan, a scientist is having an obsession for Ronald Ross— a Nobel Prize winner for discovery on the life cycle of Malaria parasite. Murugan considers Ross's discovery just a fallacy as the discovery done by him was having some other mind as he says: "There was some other mind, some person or persons who had

guided Ross towards his discoveries and away from other avenues of thought".<sup>1</sup> (TCC:31)

Many records present that Ross had never been so academically inclined or research oriented but he started research only after Dr. Manson's urge to test his ideas about the cause of Malaria. Ross's all discoveries happen per-chance. Murugan believes: "Ross thinks he's doing experiments on the Malaria parasite and all the time it is he who is the experiment". (TCC:67)

Murugan tries to search all the possible causes behind Ross's discoveries that's why he even leaves his job on risk and moves to Calcutta, the place of Ross's scientific research about Malaria. As the story is written in cinematic technique giving full view of the events happened in Calcutta during the year, 1995 and relates them with the events a hundred years ago in Hyderabad and Calcutta. Murugan tells all these facts to Antar and Antar in obsession to search Murugan explores his super computer and gets the information through his computer

Thus, all three Murugan, Antar and Ross are by one way or other connected with each other. Besides these obsessions, there is another mystery regarding Malaria research. This can be called a twist in the story as Ronald Ross appears to be the researcher and scientist but the actual guiding spirit operating behind the scene was a lowborn woman Mangala, an assistant to D.D. Cunningham. She is having goddess like figure to cure people of dangerous diseases. With this view point and Mangala's treatment abilities Ghosh wants to say that "scientific investigations, especially those related to social medicine, health, hygiene and control of epidemics can be conducted with more economy and efficiency by those who are born and brought up indigenously rather than by those experimenting in remote, sanitized laboratories with little knowledge of the nitty-gritty of actual conditions".<sup>2</sup>

Murugan's obsession leads him towards this very conclusion but his single-minded pursuit of his subversive hypothesis had made him an alien amongst his friends and colleagues. His quest for

Ross, Ross for Malaria and Antar for Murugan are entangled through their individual quest and attached to one another just for a great quest i.e. immortality. The main reason for their complex life is their alienation from immediate surroundings. Murugan, a south Indian Hindu born and brought up in Calcutta is lonely researcher in 'life watch'. He is having no one to call his own, similarly Antar a Christian from Egypt in New York orphaned and an issueless widower living and working alone. Urmila Roy, Sonali Das both are in search of self-identity. Urmila and Sonali Das are alienated at their respective places, as Urmila is an outsider at her own home and Sonali is in search of her parentage, they both search their roots but are illusioned.

There are other foreigners such as- Mrs. Aratounian an American, Madam Lisa of Madras, Madam Salminen and many others. "The foreigners embody the interest of the west in the spiritual quest of the East, the colonized world asserts its superiority over its colonizers in what is their greatest pride and professed weapon, matters of the intellect."<sup>3</sup>

Here the writer has used a mysterious force to convey his theme as Antar and Murugan work in same city and their countries are colonized by the same power. Antar has had Malaria and Murugan Syphilis that can be cured by Ross's searched object. Here, we see the obsessive link among all three. R.K. Narayan summed up the novel and its main protagonist's question in the world of the storyteller:

"Everything is interrelated, stories, scriptures, ethics, philosophy, grammar, astrology, astronomy, semantics, mysticism and moral codes. Each forms part and parcel of a total life and is indispensable for the attainment of a four square understanding of existence. The characters in the epics are prototypes and moulds in which humanity is cast and remain valid for all times."<sup>4</sup>

So, it is part of human life and his history but not a fiction. Ghosh here wants to suggest that though human isolation is a bane and a challenge but despite this there is happiness, security and

brotherhood if we try to get it. The novel ends with no solution but remains a mystery all over. The novel starts and ends with mystery and has certain implications to follow. In short, we can say that it is a mixture of science, fiction, philosophy and various other aspects directly or indirectly related to life, as at any place we can't escape life. Similarly, though precise and silent the novelist has tried to explore the hidden and dense meaning of life. Phulbani in 1995 on his 85th birthday pays homage to silence and through the mouth of his fictional encounter, Ghosh reflects certain ideas about life as "mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life; that it is inanimate, without spirit or voice. It is not indeed the word is to the silence, what the shadow is to the fore shadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life." (TCC: 24)

We can say that *The Calcutta Chromosome* has many ideas and it ends in an ontological deadlock, it works like a brain teaser undermining conceptual certainties and read the world as a mighty conundrum, where questions and problems are given contextual answers, closest to theatre of the absurd, in attitudes and the use of form, it is nevertheless rooted in a very different historical and intellectual climate.

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