

Interrogating History through Fiction: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*

Rakhi Nara

Research scholar in English, Guru Ghasidas University,
Bilaspur, Chattisgarh, India.

Dr G. A. Ghanshyam

Professor of English, Govt. M. L. Shukla College,
Seepat, Bilaspur, Chattisgarh, India.

ABSTRACT

The article discusses postcolonial literature and its fusion with postmodernism through the works of Amitav Ghosh. Postcolonial writers reject institutionalized versions of history and instead question the dominant perspective. Ghosh's novels, including *The Calcutta Chromosome*, blend history with fiction, using techniques like magical realism and supernatural elements to present an alternate perspective of reality. The novel deals with medical history, computer applications, and religious cults against the backdrop of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in India, America, Britain, and Egypt. Ghosh's use of characters and incidents helps to dismantle the Western sense of superiority through Indian philosophy and presents the authority of marginalized Indian people over Western higher-class scientists. The author notes that different postcolonial writers employ diverse techniques to portray various aspects of history.

KEYWORDS

Amitav Ghosh; Post-colonial; Truth.

Post-colonial allegories are concerned with neither redeeming nor annihilating history, but with displacing it as a concept and opening up the past to imaginative revision. (Sleman 165)

A well-known term Postcolonial literature represents the literature of the colonized people and nations during and after the end of colonialism. Exile and migration caused due to colonialism resulted in hybridity, multiculturalism and plurality, and it is their causes and effects that are expressed in postcolonial literature.

Postmodernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past. It is both the continuation of modernism and its transcendence. Writers of this era deconstruct and dismantle the established ideas and beliefs. These writers employ certain specific techniques to their

writings that lend uniqueness to this genre of literature. The works of these writers are characterized by dissolution of borders; lines and patterns; the fluidity of time; no unity of time, place and action; magic realism; poststructuralism; intertextuality; religious syncretism; a sense of belonging nowhere; psychoanalytic approach; the alternate perspective of history and contemporary events; etc.

Postcolonial writers weave various disciplines such as science, history, sociology, politics, philosophy, psychology, and literature into one piece of writing. The writers repudiate the institutionalized version of history. They interrogate, evaluate and analyse whatever is laid before them because history is written by those, who were in power and dominance, from their point of view. Through

their writings, they try to present the other possibilities inherent in it.

History is the reward of customs, traditions and human experiences at different junctures of time. The cultural and social events and situations recorded in past could be referred to as history. Ghosh uses history to make us aware and interrogate certain aspects of it. He presents the alternate perspective of reality through fiction. He does not provide us with just bare facts of history; rather entertains us with its conscientious usage. He incorporates several techniques like magical realism, fantastical realism, supernatural elements etc. into his narrative for a better and sensible representation of history.

A historical novelist, Amitav Ghosh expresses the migrant's sensibility and diasporic consciousness in his writings through the use of history. Ghosh blends facts of history with fiction in such a beautiful way that it becomes difficult for the reader to separate fact from fiction. Several postcolonial authors like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh and many more take history as the basis of their writings. Every writer's style of mingling history with fiction is different. Different writers employ different techniques to portray diverse aspects of history.

In the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (TCC), Ghosh has extensively dealt with the incident of history and knits the plot of the story around it. Along with history, the novel delves deep into sociology, philosophy, literature, psychology, politics and above all science. The novel could be referred to as science-fiction as it is based upon Ronald Ross' discovery of the malaria parasite. At the surface level, it appears that the novel is a story narrating the discovery of the malaria parasite but at the deeper level it is the story of transmigration of the soul.

Through the characters and plot of the novel, Ghosh presents the contrast between science and counter-science. His intention in the novel is to dismantle the western sense and superiority through Indian Philosophy. He tries to establish the authority and control of marginalised lower-class Indian people over Western higher-class scientists.

The novel subtitled as *A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery*, deals with

medical history, computer applications, and religious cults set against the background of the closing years of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and the early years of the twenty-first century India, America, Britain and Egypt. Ghosh narrates his medical thriller full of mysteries and myths by incorporating certain specific techniques which brings a qualitative change to the present era of literature. Ghosh's manipulation of narrative techniques could be analysed through the characters and incidents of the novel.

The novel opens in the twenty-first century with Antar an Egyptian computer programmer and system analyst in New York working on his supercomputer to search for a person whose damaged identity card is found. He discovers that the lost person is L. Murugan, a colleague and researcher in Life Watch where he works and is also the one who has done extensive research on the medical history of malaria. He came to an inference that Ronald Ross who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1906 for his work on the life-cycle of the malaria parasite (1898) was heading in the wrong direction and was motivated out of the maze by some people onto the correct path.

Lutchman, a 'dhooley bearer' entered Ross' life and experiment, and planted a seed in his mind that a particular species of mosquito might be the malaria vector and supplied him with samples of *Anopheles* mosquito. Some days later Ross succeeded in his research, he saw in the stomach sack of *Anopheles Stephensii*, the placement of plasmodium zygotes.

Ghosh distorts the Western sense of superiority through Ross' false belief in himself as the conductor of research. Murugan mocks at Ross and comments:

He thinks he's doing experiments on the malaria parasite. And all the time it's he who is the experiment on the malaria parasite. But Ronnie never gets it; not to the end of his life. (TCC 67)

Ross' research was controlled by the uneducated lower class 'dhooley bearer' Lutchman and Mangala a sweeper woman.

Ghosh dismantles the hegemony of the West over the East by employing magic realism in his narrative. Through the use of magical realism and mysticism, he presents

the underlying themes of the novel. He incorporates the elements of mysticism in dealing with the secret religion of silence.

Mangala and Lutchman are members of a secret religious society and they believe in the cult of silence, trying to conceal their identity. The novel never clearly identifies the beliefs and aims of this secret society as it could break the code of secrecy.

Ghosh through his narrative suggests that this group of people believed in counter science. This group:

started with the idea that knowledge is self-contradictory; maybe they believed that to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you've already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history. Maybe they thought that knowledge couldn't begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge. (TCC 88)

These believers in counter science used secrecy as a technique of their operation. Silence is a religion for them. These people had developed the most revolutionary technology of all time in the medical field. These people were already ahead of Ronald Ross on malaria research.

Ghosh through the use of magical and fantastical realism establishes the place of Indian folk higher than the Western rationals by assimilating the elements of supernaturalism, mysticism and myth.

In 1927, Julius Von Wagner-Jauregg won Nobel Prize for his discovery that artificially induced malaria could cure, or at least alleviate syphilitic paresis, although very little was known at that time about the process in which it worked. But in the 1890s, much earlier than that, the secret Indian group under the leadership of an enigmatic woman called Mangala, had achieved remarkable success in this field of research. Mangala had developed a particular strain of malaria that could be cultivated in pigeons. She started treating syphilitic patients by a specific mechanism of transporting malaria bug to the patient from the bird. The process resulted in transpositions “. . . of randomly assorted personality traits, from the malaria donor to the recipient . . .” (TCC 206) through the

pigeon. It hinted at a freak chromosome which eluded standard techniques of detection and isolation. It was only found in the non-regenerating tissue, the brain, and could be transmitted through malaria. Murugan calls this DNA carrier- the Calcutta Chromosome “. . . a biological expression of human traits that is neither inherited from the immediate gene pool nor transmitted into it” (TCC 207).

Mangala and her associates wanted to achieve the ultimate transcendence of nature – ‘immortality’. It is a technique of interpersonal transference of human traits in which all information could be transmitted chromosomally, from one body to another:

When your body fails you, you leave it, you migrate – you or at least a matching symptomology of yourself. You begin all over again, another body, another beginning. Just think, no mistakes, a fresh start . . . a technology that lets you improve on yourself in your next incarnation . . . (TCC 91-92).

It is a Hindu concept that after death soul travels from one's body and merges with the Supreme i.e., God. The whole process is called resurrection. Ghosh concocts a personal symbol of transmigration of the soul from the myth of incarnations and reincarnations inherent in Indian philosophy to establish Indian supremacy over the Western nations.

The concept of transmigration of the soul and the right to knowledge irrespective of class, creed and cultural separation is universalized. Ross attempts to solve the mystery of malaria with reason or science but Mangala attempts to find a cure for syphilitic patients through the counter-science of faith. Ghosh has confirmed the Indian Philosophical thought in the novel by employing magical realism in the narrative.

Mangala and Laakhan were assistants in Cunningham's laboratory where Elijah Monroe Farley arrived to detect the ongoing experiment on laverans parasite. Farley was amazed by the sight of the superstitious tantra ritual performed by Mangala, curing patients suffering from syphilitic dementia:

First, the assistant went up to the woman, Mangala, still regally ensconced on her divan, and touched his forehead to her feet. Then in the

manner of a courtier or acolyte, he whispered some word of advice in her ear. She nodded in agreement and took the clean slides from him. Reaching for the bird-cages she allowed her hand to rest upon each of the birds in turn, as though she were trying to ascertain something. Then she seemed to come to a decision; she reached to the cage and took one of the shivering birds into her lap. She folded her hands over it and her mouth began to move as though muttering a prayer. Then suddenly a scalpel appeared in her right hand; she held the bird away from her and with a single flick of her wrist beheaded the dying pigeon. Once the flow of blood lessened, she picked up the clean slides, smeared them across the severed neck, and handed them to the assistant. (TCC 127)

In the novel, Ghosh has awed the readers through various things like a detective story, medical mystery, spirit possession, investigation of history and experiments undertaken by the British scientists during the colonial period. The mysterious followers of the cult of silence never forgive the persons who try to break the code of silence, suggesting their connections with the brutal murders and missing of some British scientists and officials. Farley mysteriously disappeared and met a fatal doom at Renupur (railway station) for knowing what should not have been known about the secret society. The station-master, who reported to the police that Laakhan was carrying the luggage of Farley, gets killed by him. J.W.D. Grigson also met with an accident, but with great difficulty saved himself from the ghost train.

The secret society took action not only on those people who tried to break the code of silence but also assimilated many people into their cult. Cunningham had to work and obey according to the dictates of the secret society. Later on, we find instances in the novel, of Antar and Murugan getting entrapped and falling prey to the secret society. Ghosh here very skillfully places the subaltern in the centre and the higher western class to the margins as is shown in the novel; the British

act as mere puppets in the hands of illiterate Mangala and Laakhan.

Ghosh incorporates the technique of fantastical realism by employing elements of fantasy, enfolding it with reality. Through his imagination, Ghosh mingles the components of the stories of ghosts, phantom trains and mystery with the real experience. Phulboni, a writer who went to Renupur at his young age, witnessed the supernatural powers of ghosts and phantoms. With great difficulty, he saves himself from getting killed twice by train; once from the phantom train and the other by a real train. The whole experience was full of mysterious happenings like the lantern, rail siding, ghost station-master, ghost train and the one whose face is wrapped in darkness - Laakhan. ". . . he heard a scream, a raging, inhuman howl that tore through the stormy night. It hurled a single word into the wind - 'Laakhan' - and then it was silenced by the thunder of the speeding train." (TCC 227)

The incident reveals clearly that the Laakhan who is responsible for the death and disappearance of Farley, station-master and Grigson is not exactly the same whom Phulboni met, but his spirit after a span of thirty years. Throughout the novel, we find the occurrence of the name and person Laakhan/Lutchman/ Lucky. The shifting nature of names is a clue to the text's central revelation of incarnations and reincarnations concerning 'the Calcutta chromosome'.

Mangala too could be related to her successive exemplifications: Mrs Aratounian, Urmila and Tara. The various personas take Mangala's train into the early years of the twenty-first century. Though physically different, all of them share the indomitable spirit of Mangala. Both Laakhan and Mangala are the characters who change their physical identities. The continuity of spirit is symbolized through a clay figurine found by Murugan in the Ross Memorial, which later surfaces in the Kalighat episode, linking clearly the entire period of action. By granting continuity to the power of the image, Ghosh is stressing the theory of transmigration of the soul. The message of Indian Philosophy pertaining to the eternal human quest is woven by him into the fabric of a novel.

Ghosh delves deep into the secret philosophy of silence. He distorts the hegemony of intellectual knowledge by the knowledge inherent in silence which is beyond comprehension. Silence is pregnant with a vast and deep knowledge of the soul which especially the western masters are unable to comprehend. It is the custom of the secret cult, not to reveal the ideas and beliefs of society to anyone until he or she becomes a member of the cult. Phulboni became a member of the secret cult and has accepted silence as his religion. The writer in the novel himself defines the power of silence. He emphasises the mystical quality of silence and pays his homage:

Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life; that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice. It is not: indeed, the Word is to this silence what the shadow is to the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to the truth, what language is to life. (TCC 24)

Phulboni has not only dealt with the power of Silence but also written short stories entitled the 'The Laakhan Stories', which mysteriously feature a character named Laakhan. In the stories, Laakhan shifts his identity from the postman, a village schoolmaster and so on. The normal readers of the story are unable to comprehend Phulboni's stories. These stories too confirm the idea of interpersonal transference of the soul which is the sole aim and object of the secret society of silence.

Ghosh has vividly narrated the religious tantra rituals performed by the secret society of religion for the transmigration of the soul. He employs the technique of fantastical realism in the narrative so as to amaze the readers with its mystical and supernatural strands. Sonali, who works at the Calcutta magazine, becomes the eye-witness of the same ceremony that takes place in Robinson Street, wherein Laakhan's spirit is transferred into the body of Romen Haldar and the entire ceremony is performed by Mangala bibi in the form of Mrs Aratounian. The ceremony is performed in an eerie atmosphere:

She [Sonali] caught a glimpse of the tops of dozens of heads, some male, some female, young and old, packed in

close together. Their faces were obscured by the smoke and flickering firelight . . . A figure had come out of the shadows: it was a woman . . . She seated herself by the fire and placed the bag and the birdcage beside her. . . Then she reached out, placed her hands on whatever it was that was lying before the fire and smiled . . . Raising her voice, the woman said to the crowd, in archaic rustic Bengali: 'The time is here, pray that all goes well for our Laakhan, once again.'... The drumming rose to a crescendo: there was a flash of bright metal and a necklace of blood flew up and fell sizzling on the fire. (TCC 138-140)

Together with the incorporation of certain techniques in narration, Ghosh also crafts his characters by employing symbolic meaning to them which creates, deconstructs, reconstructs and reaffirms myths. Laakhan and Urmila are characterised by the mythical characters of Ramayana. Lakshman, the Sanskritized version of Laakhan, is Ram's brother, whose motives are simply loyalty and love, and it is a common Indian joke to cast aspersions on Lakshman's motives. The name Laakhan, therefore, conjures up the image of one who comes second, who follows faithfully, but one who remains partially eclipsed in the narrative: a resoundingly good choice for the recursive Laakhan, Mangla's assistant in the novel. Murugan is the most honoured God of South India. The other name for Murugan is Kartik, the eldest son of Goddess Durga, who is known for swift movements in Indian Mythology. The eternal war between Satya and Astya is re-enacted through these characters entwined in the text. Mangala along with her fictional reincarnations Urmila and Tara reflect the mythical Goddess Kali/Durga. The quest is always in progress and all the characters are controlled by the archetypal mother in all forms of life, the great Goddess.

The collision between the West and the East has also been projected symbolically through an ideological conflict between tradition and modernity, faith and reason, scientific

knowledge and intuitive knowledge.
(Adhikari 182)

Ghosh has not only dealt with techniques such as magical realism, fantastical realism, fantasy, magic, supernaturalism, myths and folklore but also with new cinematic narrative techniques to accomplish his purpose of shocking the readers so as to ascertain the superiority of marginalized groups over the western central associations. These techniques increase the credibility of the text and reduce the distance between reader/spectator and text/screen by the use of recurring images and motifs. The realization of aural reception subdues and accentuates the feeling of visibility by the use of strong visual images. A master in handling the language, Ghosh makes transitions either smoothly and abruptly or expectedly and unexpectedly through a metaphorical device. Phulboni's mysterious experience with the phantom train in Renupur is the distinctive illustration of a metaphorical device which represents fear of death and mystery.

Ghosh also experiments with vision mixing very efficiently to present fact and fiction simultaneously. Urmila's childhood dream of Gods and Goddesses entering through the front door of her flat materializes in her real experience of witnessing, smiling flesh-coloured faces of idols including one of

Ganesha and the old man in his workshop at Kalighat.

Almost all the major characters in the novel are haunted by a secret (ghost) that links him or her to the vital Calcutta chromosome mystery: Mangala and Murugan are syphilitics, the glamorous Sonali is in search of her natural father, Phulboni quests for physical immortality as a writer, and so on. Not only are the characters of the novel, but the entire human race is in search of the truth; knowingly or unknowingly, a desire that lies deep inside the secret world of silence.

Ghosh has emphatically depicted the myths of the transcendence of nature inherent in Indian philosophy through varied narrative techniques of the twentieth century bringing a qualitative change to this era. Ghosh dismantles the western rational notion through Indian irrationality presenting an alternative perspective of truth.

... Amitav Ghosh accomplishes the near impossible by the artistry of the audio-visual technique. The most significant reason for employing this method is to give credibility to our world that contains the voice of logic and illogic, matter and anti-matter, science and anti-science. Ghosh is determined to establish that truth is stranger than fiction. (Adhikari 274)

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