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Unmaking History: Subversive Representation of the Past in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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"Only the successful are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten." E. P. Thomson

Abstract

In this article Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* is analysed from a postmodern and postcolonial perspective placing it in the sub-genre of what Linda Hutcheon has termed as 'historiographic metafiction'. Postcolonial history usually involves a subversive agenda, challenging dominant hierarchies and foregrounding marginalised figures and events to offer new interpretations of the past. The colonial master narrative of Ronald Ross's discovery of the malarial parasite is juxtaposed against a parallel narrative of subaltern occult practice that comes alive in Ghosh's story world. Introducing the stories of the marginalized and oppressed groups as rightful historical subjects I have shown how *The Calcutta Chromosome* questions hegemonic histories and legitimizes sources beyond the official records. In the background of a powerful textualized presence of the master's narrative, the postcolonial writer offers his own text. And Ghosh, in this genre-baffling novel, has done just that.

Keywords- *Metafiction, Narrative, Subaltern, Historiography*

In times such as ours when reality is constantly outdoing our imagination, a novel like *The Calcutta Chromosome* merits a closer study. Coming as it does from one of India's finest storytellers, waxing prolific with highly engrossing novels coming thick and fast at quick intervals, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, has done exceedingly well both in terms of its reception as well as in contributing to the 'historical turn' in postmodern fiction. It is a remarkably fluid narrative that eludes neat categorization. It brings together elements of the thriller, the science fiction, detective novel, ghost stories and historiography in a seamless blend, creating what may be called a metafiction. Metafiction is an elastic term that covers a wide range of

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fictions. By juxtaposing fictional characters and historical figures and parodying official records and realist texts and by over-plotting to unravel the mystery in history, texts like *The Calcutta Chromosome* lay claim to their metafictional character. But here I intend to extend the ambit of metafiction and shall attempt to read it from the perspective of what Linda Hutcheon terms as a 'historiographic metafiction' – "a puzzling narrative form which combines history with fantasy, the high with the low, the individual history with "world" history, in order to capture the contradictory nature of the postmodern ethos.... The striving for self-identity against the background of history is the purpose behind the writing of historiographic metafiction" (Onega 16). While Amitav Ghosh's novel is concerned with an overriding historiographic interest in which a slice of subaltern history contends with the colonial master narrative to redeem its legitimate place, in form, it relies on a cinematic narrative technique that mingles facts and fiction, taking the reader backward and forward in time and plunging him in to a Baudrillardian hyper-reality where the distinction between illusion and reality disappears. The history of malarial research and Ronald Ross's memoirs are retold in a zigzag fashion mixing 'reality' and 'fiction' in the style of a metafictional vision-mixing so that the realistic and detailed picture of Robinson Street, Calcutta is suddenly dissolved into the mysterious world of Laakhan and Mangala. Linked to the history of malarial research is the idea of 'matter and anti-matter', 'science and counter-science' around which the story revolves. The world and life of matter projected through Ronald Ross, Antar and Murugan is juxtaposed with another super-terrestrial world represented through Laakhan, Mangala and their likes from the subaltern world. What provides the impulse for the writing of historiographic metafiction is the discovery that literature is capable of revealing truths that traditional history cannot. I agree with Susana Onega when she says that the contemporary creative writer becomes a historian in an attempt to fill in the gaps left by traditional totalitarian history. The postcolonial writer is caught in the Borgean 'Biblioteca de Babel' and fights for creativity and originality by having recourse to the subversive potential of parody in an ironic display of the fictional nature of his/her own writing. But before I proceed with my proposition that *The Calcutta Chromosome*, as a historiography metafiction, augments Amitav Ghosh's attempt to rescue subaltern history from its liminality, I would like to present a brief overview of the plot for my readers.

The novel is titled *The Calcutta Chromosome: A study of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery*. It has two sections – 'August 20, Mosquito Day' and "The Day After". The story is set in the future but it delves in to the past. It opens in the 'not too distant future' where Antar, an Egyptian computer analyst working with "Lifewatch", a global public health consultancy under the International Water Council, New York, spots a damaged ID card flashing across his versatile computer screen. Antar gets interested and with the help of AVA, his super computer, traces the ID as that of his former colleague, Murugan - an interesting

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character ‘with thin and discoloured hair, bright , black eyes, moon-like face, a boxer’s nose and a trimmed goatee in an aggressively jutting chin’. This Murugan, by his own admission, is the world’s only expert on Ronald Ross and the greatest love of his life is the medical history of Malaria. Murugan is the principal thread in the narrative. He is obsessed with his own theory –“An Alternative Interpretation of Late Nineteenth Century Malaria Research; Is there a Secret History?”. Years ago Murugan had written a summary of his research in an article titled ‘Certain Systematic Discrepancies in Ronald Ross’s Account of Plasmodium B’ which received a very hostile reception from the scientific journals to which it was submitted. These journals branded Murugan as a crank and an eccentric and he lost membership of the science society. This resulted in an increasingly erratic and obsessional behavior and Murugan started talking publicly of the “Other Mind”- a theory that some person or persons had systematically interfered with Ross’s experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others. Murugan was confident that a conspiracy was there as regards Ross’s research and to find the missing links he landed up in Calcutta in 1995. The very next day he vanished. Connected with Murugan’s claim is the ‘other’ group in which Laakhan and Mangala are the principal players. They are members of a secret society and are devotees of the cult of silence. This group of underground scientific/mystical movement believed in a counter-science and it was also working with ‘*plasmodium falciparum*’ but in a different way. This group, according to Murugan, wanted to achieve the ultimate transcendence of nature by using a technology that involved certain species of birds like pigeons as intermediaries, in which all information could be transmitted chromosomatically from one body to another. The disciples of this society can transfer their chromosomes in to another, and gradually become that person or take over that person. As against the research done by established scientists like D.D.cunningham, Elijah Monroe Farley and Ronald Ross, there is the team of Lakhan and Mangala, the illiterate subalterns who also carried on their own brand of experiments into various strains of malaria with the purpose of isolating and developing what Murugan calls ‘the calcutta chromosome’. The calcutta chromosome is a unique chromosome that does not need to be reproductively transmitted but through certain mystic ritual could yet enable migration of chromosomes from one body to another. “When your body fails, 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 (Ghosh 91). The aim of this secret team is a journey to the unknown and a quest for immortality. Amitav Ghosh seems to hold that at the other end of scientific knowledge lies the unknown, the unarticulated truth.

If Amitav Ghosh, as is his wont as a quintessential anthropologist and a postcolonial novelist, is re-inscribing the history of an esoteric and secret mystic society and

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superimposing it on the recorded and established colonial history solely for the sake of establishing the “truth”, then the narrative of the secret group appears to resist this attempt. This group worshipped the cult of silence. They resisted any attempt to let their activities made known to the public. The series of disappearances from Farley to Romen Halder is also linked to their secret ritual and practices. Does this resistance constitute a metafictional trend? The facts of science, requiring communication, that is, the narrative of discovery are held in tension by the counter-scientific will to secrecy and improbability. To quote Linda Hutcheon – “postmodernism is a contradictory cultural enterprise, one that is heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest. It uses and abuses the very structures and values it takes to task. Historiographic metafiction, for example, keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical contest, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here—just unresolved contradiction” (Hutcheon 106).

Mangala and Laakhan are the “silenced other” who have been silenced for so long that they have lost all desire for expression. Postcolonial authors are trying to generate a sense of lost history by attempting to glean faint traces from colonial archives by meticulous research and by turning to secret and esoteric practices hidden in vernacular culture, myths, legends, and folklores which is least susceptible to the distorting influence of the colonizer’s discourse. As in the case of many African authors, in Amitav Ghosh also, a revisionist historiography through the medium of fictional narratives is taking shape, filling the gaps and erasures left by the master narratives and colonial records. Susana Onega’s observation is quite in place here. “It is precisely in the literature of a people whose history has been textualized only in the master’s voice, that we can test the power of fiction to generate and model a sense of history” (Onega 193). Thus the untextualized story of Mangala and Luchhman in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the medieval Indian slave in “In An Antique Land” and the girmitiyas in “The sea of Poppies” are surfacing in a writing-back enterprise from the post-colonies. The marginal voices and discourses such as folklores, legends, secret esoteric practices and other such orally transmitted body of knowledge are used by the postcolonial writers in their attempt to reconstruct a sense of that untextualized history.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* is remarkable for the way it blends in a postmodern fashion, the present, past and future blurring their distinctions. While Antar’s reconstruction of Murugan’s life has the feature of a science fiction, Murugan’s reconstruction or rather deconstruction of Ross’s malarial research and his attempt to validate the role of Mangala and Lachman in Ross’s success take us back to his favourite theme of scripting subaltern history vis-à-vis the master narratives.

The need to be inscribed in ‘text’ serves as a requirement to assert one’s identity and power as Edward Said has emphasized in his remarkable work ‘Culture and Imperialism’.

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“Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (Said xiii). In the background of a powerful textualized presence of the master’s narrative, what option is there for the postcolonial writer except to offer his own text? To take a cue from Jesus Benito, - “a people whose history is bound to the powerful presence of the white text have traditionally seen their oral, popular discourse reduced to absence: it is only through literature that their lost heritage can be recovered and become textualised as history” (Benito 190). Hayden White sees history as the collection of narratives we tell ourselves in order to create a past from which we would like to be descended. For him all history is verbal fiction that is partly invented. Postcolonial novelists from India like Rushdie and Ghosh are shaping a fictive heritage and forging their own history. Amitav Ghosh’s fictional narratives are not just an oppositionality. They are attempts at a recreation and re-contextualisation of history written from a linear and univocal perspective. His novels aim at the recovery of the subaltern identity and history that has been erased by the culture of empire. Shelly Walia’s comments are appropriate in this context. “In order to counter the bias perpetuated by euro-centric norms, and its view of the pre-colonial era as a pre-civilizational limbo, a need for ‘cultural resistance’ such as Franz Fanon has endorsed in his “Wretched of the Earth” becomes imperative. Characteristically, therefore, the postcolonial author who traces his ancestry to Fanon and Said evokes a native version of his precolonial history” (Walia 54).

Novelists from postcolonial India have taken up the task to ceaselessly shape and re-mould the colonial narratives in their literary texts and have gone beyond the exercise of indulging in poetics and rhetorics alone towards expressing their political concern by way of exposing the falsity of representation in the dominant narratives which shared a subterranean agenda.

Amitav Ghosh’s engagement with colonialism in the *Calcutta Chromosome* takes the form of colonial medicine in a colonial society and its reception by the colonized. The Eurocentric self representations about Europe’s civilizing mission, modernity, progress and reason are questioned in the narrative. While proceeding to unravel the very concept of ‘discovery’ and from Ross’s own self-eulogized ‘memoirs’ and his Nobel winning ‘breakthrough’ in malaria research, Ghosh weaves an ironic counter-narrative in which Ross’s heroic self-centeredness is overthrown. Instead, Ross is portrayed as an unwitting pawn in the hand of a secret cult of subalterns whose own knowledge of malaria is far in advance of Ross and the western medical establishment. Anshuman K. Mondal has put it very cogently when he substantiates this argument and I quote – “Murugan’s account of Ross’s discovery reverses the authority of the colonial situation so that whereas Ross had written about how he had performed experiments on unsuspecting Indians, Murugan claims that it

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was Ross himself that was being used” (Mondal 55) “He thinks that he’s doing experiment on the malarial parasite. And all the time it’s him who is the experiment on the malaria parasite’ (Ghosh 78). Thus, the direction of scientific knowledge is reversed and the ‘diffusionist’ narrative of scientific discovery is challenged which has always claimed that knowledge travels out from the western centre to the non-western periphery. Ghosh shows how subalterns and subaltern knowledge contest the very concept of ‘discovery’ itself. For it is clear that ‘at the margins of western histories of science there is a tacit acknowledgement that colonial scientists, for example, drew on prevailing indigenous systems of knowledge, and that scientific knowledge was less a one way process of scientific discovery than a dialogic process of interaction and interdependence’ (Chambers 58). Mondal ascribes to *The Calcutta Chromosome* a place in the margins of ‘that grand narrative of Western scientific heroism’. The novel, according to him, seeks to displace the usual relationship between the West and Others, metropolis and colony, centre and margin. There are three major thematic displacements in the novel that attempt to subvert the western grand narrative.

The first is the geographical preeminence given to Calcutta as a site of scientific research as against famous world metropolises like London, Paris, Oxford, New York etc and if Murugan’s thesis of counter-science belonging to the mystical and subaltern group of Lachman and Mangala bibi is reckoned, scientific knowledge has its origin not entirely in the west but also in India. Ghosh is also contesting the western authority of debunking other ways of thinking and other system of ideas as being the anti-thesis of proper knowledge and classifying non-western epistemologies under the rubrics of religion, mysticism, superstition and myth.

The second displacement, according to Mondal, involves the displacement of scientific authority from the British to the Indian and from the trained, elite scientists to the subalterns. Ross in his ‘Memoirs’ boasts of his heroic battle against the bureaucratic and political obstacles to prove his courage and determination which exemplifies that power and agency lies with the individual and the individual is the origin and centre of the narrative. As against this, in Amitav Ghosh’s subaltern narrative, power is de-centered and shifted towards the hand of the subalterns.

Mondal continues that the third displacement effected by the author Amitav Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome* is one that challenges the erasure of other epistemologies by modern Western scientific rationality. By positing a counter-science of the subalterns Ghosh deconstructs the myth of scientific rationality which bases its claim to pure ‘knowledge’ and ‘discovery’. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* Ghosh contends this claim of scientific rationality and shows that ‘the single perfect moment of discovery’ is a moment of revelation. Scientific rationality is based not just on ‘reason’ but also on ‘faith’

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These displacements in time and space through the use of ‘film technique of the cross-cut, dissolve and montage’ and through the different quests of Antar, Murugan, Phulboni and Farley – contribute to a narrative structure without a centre, without a central character and without a central event. As a result we have a ‘marginal’ or ‘subaltern’ text which hints at the postmodern idea of a ‘margin without a centre’- a truly metafictional text that attempts to subvert the colonial narrative and rewrite the postcolonial subtexts over and above the grand narratives of empire.

Integrated in to the structure of the novel and augmenting the author’s principal concern of narrativizing the ‘other’ history is the uncanny and the ghostly. Ghosh grafts a larger vernacular tradition of ghost fiction in to this novel. Amitav Ghosh has all along championed the cause of the vernacular and he gave ample evidence of it in his letter to the jury of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize withdrawing *The Glass Palace* from the “Best Book” nomination in 2001 on the ground that this prize ‘excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries’. The erasure of vernacular knowledge in postcoloniality has remained a fundamental concern with Amitav Ghosh and in his fiction he attempts to excavate this lost and buried knowledge. So pervasive is this trait in his novels that they can be aptly described as a “literature of haunting”. Bishnupriya Ghosh contends ‘that the lively commerce in ghosts that we see in Ghosh’s fiction and non-fiction testifies to a spectral ethics particular to postcolonial epistemological endeavours; the ghost, in this context, is a thing that is there but not yet of the human world, a corpus / corpse of lost or invisible knowledge. In this sense, Ghosh’s postcolonial spectrality envisions a utopian recuperation of that corpus, gesturing towards a future’. (B.Ghosh 117) Ghosts bear witness to erasures in the ‘living present’. Avery Gordon in her “Ghostly Matters” asserts that ghosts are entirely necessary to grasp the complexities of our social world for they speak eloquently of ‘invisibilities’ and ‘exclusions’ as in Tonny Morrison’s “Beloved” the ghost appears as “the seething presence of the absent”. Dipesh Chakraborty in his ‘Provincialising Europe’ has shown how subaltern life worlds surfaces in our living present to give the shock of the uncanny to modern historical consciousness. In ‘The Calcutta Chromosome’ ghost stories in the form of “Laakhan” stories of Phulboni, the tribal pseudonym of eminent writer and National Award winner Saiyad Murad Hussain, appear three times. Ghosh himself has confessed his being influenced by Rabindranath Tagore’s “Kshudhita Pashaan” (The Hunger of the Stones) before writing TCC. Almost every character in TCC has something to with ghosts. Each major character in the novel is haunted by a secret that links him / her to the Calcutta chromosome mystery. Ghosts become the metaphors for accumulated past in the Calcutta Chromosome. Bishnupriya Ghosh has put it very succinctly when she observes,- “In Ghosh’s hands ,this vernacular ghost genre becomes the genetic blue print for the novel in English” (B.Ghosh 134).

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I conclude with a note of agreement with Bishnupriya that for Amitav Ghosh literary writing is also an ethnographic and historical project that strives to counter elitist historiography's tendency "to obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed, by conscious efforts, to the making of history" (Thompson 11)

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