

**Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosome: A World of Mystery**

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh has written a complex, fascinating and highly imaginative story of quest. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, we discover a world of mysteries rather than rationality. It is an expression of the urgent desire for discovery and change that underlies actual movement and experience of travelling

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In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, we discover a world of mysteries rather than rationality, "where Mangala's real talents become those of magician rather than of an artisan. The counter-sciences may have extraordinary power to overturn science but their motives like that of their counterparts are self-seeking rather than humane."<sup>1</sup>

Urbashi Barat observes:

After all, the quest is not a drug..... There can, accordingly, be no comforting rounding-off, but rather only a step further towards the realms that are accessible especially to the poor, the marginalized, the colonized, the survivor.....the cult of silence and secrecy spreads to territories governed by the word and reason. Western knowledge and science had once conquered the East, but inevitably the Empire must strike back. Through its subversive quest, *The Calcutta Chromosome* celebrates the eternal, celebrates the triumph of the spirit over all that bogs it down in the mire.<sup>2</sup>

Tapan K. Ghosh also expands on this theme:

What Amitav Ghosh has written is, in fact, a complex, fascinating and highly imaginative story of quest and discovery that weaves past, present and future into an intricate texture and is narrated, despite its burden of erudition, in a crisp, racy and crystalline prose that grips the reader's attention till the end.<sup>3</sup>

Jaya Banerjee considers it "for fetched" and compares it to the grandma's Bengali braid,' with the thread of malarial research running through the novel:

If Ghosh ever drew his storyline on a blackboard he would end up with real granny's knot of a plot- each character's life intertwined with the others in some way or the other. As for direction, he processed in every decreasing circle until he comes to the centre which is where he started in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

The theme of journey in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, like his earlier novels *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines* and *In An Antique Land*, is a recurrent theme.

Pradeep Trikha comments: ".....for him (Ghosh) it is not merely a passage through space, but rather an expression of the urgent desire for discovery and change that underlies actual movement and experience of travelling.<sup>5</sup>

Madhumalati Adhikari comments on the theme of journey:

The intricate relationships of the, place and characters, often mind-boggling, propels the reader to embark on a journey of an uncircumscribed domain of the past, present and future. Initially, the thematic originality and complexity bewilders the reader but a close scrutiny discloses that like his earlier novels.....Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) has universalized the specific through the concept of ..... journey ..... The spiritual and corporeal exploration, the promise of alternative worlds and visions, invariable compel the (individual) to shuffle between different geographic locations and points of time.

"Travelling," Jung observes, is an image of aspiration of an unsatisfied longing that never finds a goal. It is a "quest" that starts in the darkness of the profane world and gropes towards light.<sup>6</sup>

Pradeep Trikha adds:

In *An Antique Land* describes Ghosh as a traveler interested in men, places and scenery: he thinks travel is man's primordial quest to expand his awareness into realization. Both Antar and Murugan in *The Calcutta Chromosome* have an urgent desire for discovery and they undergo profound experiences during the

course of their researches, even Ronald Rose expands his awareness when he works in Cunningham's laboratory Hence to study, to inquire to seek or to live with intensity through new and profound experiences are all modes of travelling or spiritual and symbolic equivalent of journey. Antar and Murugan are travelers in that they are restless.<sup>7</sup>

If Antar initiates the journey, Murugan completes it in the end. Whether it is journey of Antar or Murugan, it is a journey to the unknown. On the face of it, the book is about malaria-a retelling of the story of Ronald Ross's discovery of the life-cycle of the malaria parasite much of which is available in medical history and Ross's own memoir. *The Story of Ross*, the Nobel Prize winning British bacteriologist, is a familiar one to Indian-it is often included in school texts- and his memorial arc at the entrance to the P.G. Hospital is a common sight to the pedestrians in Calcutta, In spite of that epochmaking discovery in the late nineteenth century, the disease still remains a curse in our life continuing to take its annual toll of thousand of lives. It is one of the reasons why the story of Ross evokes at once a fascination and a sense of regret in our minds.

Jaya Banerjee says: "Each character is the hunter and the hunted, his or her life woven into an intricate pattern with the lives of others. The ribbon that touches each life is a sinister, mysterious belief in supernatural."<sup>8</sup>

The story moves from the god-forsaken village of Renupur in north India which abounds in ghosts and ghostly trains, through a little Egyptian hamlet on the western edge of the Nile Delta with its

“brilliantly sunlit vision of sand and mud-brick and cracking water-wheels-which is believed to be “the most sacred site of the ancient Valentinian cult: the lost shrine of silence, to New York in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where Antar tries to solve the puzzle of Murugan’s disappearance with the help of his garrulous supercomputer Ava.

Antar launches a computer- aided search for the missing Murugan. He finds himself embroiled in a bizarre tale defying all explanations. He is lost in the lives of men and women with whom he has no direct link, discontinuity creeps in his life and he journey on and on in search of the real goal. The Ghosh Journey is a symbol of life that man must undertake in search of truth and fulfillment. Murugan and Antar are in search of truth and fulfillment. Let us put it in right perspective. Queried by Antar “ this other team-to use your phrase-was already ahead of Ross on some of this research.....Why wouldn’t they publish their findings and put themselves the running for the Nobel, Murugan explains:

You know all about matter and anti-matter, right- matter, right? And rooms and anterooms and Christ and anti -Christ and so on? Now, let’s say there was something like science and counter-science. Thinking of it in abstract, wouldn’t you say that the first principal of functioning counter- science would have to be secrecy.<sup>9</sup>

When Antar expresses his inability to follow his line of reasoning Murugan further explains:

Not making sense is what it’s about-conventional sense that is. May be this other team started with the idea that knowledge is self-contradictory: may be 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. May be they thought that knowledge couldn’t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

Against the background of the historical facts of Ronald Ross’s discovery about malarial fever, the novelist presents the supernatural power of Mangala , an assistant to D.D. Cunningham. He smells a conspiracy behind the success of Ross. The Source of the other group is silence the concealed truth. Murugan finds that Phulbani the greatest living writer of Bengal and the winner of the National Award is the chief exponent of the cult of silence. However incredible it may sound, these people had developed “ the most revolutionary medical technology of all time.<sup>11</sup> these people helped Ross. Murugan puts it humorously.

He thinks he’s doing experiments on the malaria parasite and all the time it’s he who is the experiments the malaria parasite. And all he them it’s he who is the experiment of the malaria parasite. But Ronnie never gets it, not to the end of his life.<sup>12</sup>

In his journey to Calcutta in August 1995, Murugan’s search is exactly for these people. He confronts many people and sometimes he makes contemplative moves to meet them as if they were holding their horses for him. He fathoms that most of them “are irredeemably subordinated to the mysterious Calcutta Chromosome.<sup>13</sup> he is convinced that the “marginal group” helps Ross to achieve what he yearned for” immortality.” “the ultimate transcendence of nature.” In his search for the “ marginal

group,” he got the help of Urmila the power of folk medicine acquired through trial and error and practiced by Mangal is ratified by Ghosh. According to Indian faith, human soul migrates from one body to another but the movement is controlled by a superpower.

Mangala a human being, attempts to carry out the same exercise on her own,” because she think she is a god and what that means is that she want to the mind that sets the things in motion. The child in the Kalighat episode informs Urmila: “Today is the last day of the puja of Mangala- bibi. Baba says that tonight Mangala-bibi is going to enter a new body.”<sup>14</sup>

This conscious exercise surely grants greater power the man Ghosh draw upon

the Indian myth of Ganesha to explain the theory of “transposition of personality.”<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion:

In spite of the themes of quest and journey so delicately written by Amitav Ghosh, we are unable to see reason behind his writing this novel. We have to search for the hidden agenda. Is not The Calcutta Chromosome an attempt at an exoticization of India? Meenakshi Mukherjee a perceptive scholar and teacher put it. Against all the inventions and terminology and disappearing from the screen and life itself without making any impression the reader’s mind, their journeys and quests do not arrive at any discovery.

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