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The Post Colonial Characteristics in Amitav Ghosh's Calcutta Chromosome

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ABSTRACT: Postcolonialism is a study of the structures of power relations between the colonizers and the colonized. Aime Cesaire calls post colonialisms as "relations of domination and submission. Thought it may seek to dismantle the oppositional, colonial, Eurocentric binaries of the centre and the margin, the self and the other, the elite and the subaltern, the west and the East, totalization and fragmentation, essentialization and dispersal, what it has really done is to retain the binaries and to turn them upside down in respect of discursive power" (Shukla 2). The ultimate goal of postcolonialism is not only the colonial experience but the production of knowledge" that is non-dominative and non-coercive in a setting that is deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions and the strategies of power (3). Postcolonialism cannot mean the same thing to every state that has had the colonial experience. It must have a location and is culture specific. Though the drive to domination inheres all social relations, it affects diverse colonial subjects in diverse ways through diverse modes. It blends Marxism, post structural theories, Lacanian psychoanalysis and interdisciplinary approaches in various degrees, considering the various needs of various people.

I. INTRODUCTION

Both 'post' and 'colonialism' of postcolonialism are problematic for a country like India. Bill Ashcroft et al. in their book *The Empire Writes Back* points out, "More than three quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism" (30). But countries like India have had their lives already shaped when colonialism arrived. India has a rich culture and history. Even when the East India Company presented its charter in the court of the Moghul king Akbar, India was a great civilization whereas England was inhaling the first whiff of the Renaissance. Post colonialism does not keep us ever reminding of our object position as colonial subjects but also rubbing it into our consciousness. English is the medium through which postcolonialism as well as colonialism expresses itself; it is also the medium of project globalization. Postcolonialism in postcolonial countries comes up in fiction, and not in poetry or drama. Novel is an instrument of colonialism; it must also be that of postcolonialism: the malady itself must provide its cure. Postcolonialism in Indian fiction in English can be considered in various ways. The postcolonial novel has specific post/structural strategies as well as thematics. We have novels primarily rendering the engagement with colonial experience, novels dealing with women as colonial subjects, novels dealing with marginality, especially the subalterns, and novels dealing with either the abrogation or appropriation of the language of the metropolitan centre. Indian English novel has been obsessed more with cultural interaction between the East and the West than with the discursive powers and strategies which led to the depletion of Indian knowledge and culture. There has been an upsurge of women writers in English in India allegedly brought about by postcoloniality. Many women novelists have been published more in English than in languages like Hindi, Bangla, Tamil, and Telugu. Most of the women writers in English pursue both feminine and feminist concerns. Some writers, with no hesitation, write the woman's body and are not shy of any discourse on sexuality. All such novels which write the woman and her body may be categorized as feminist, and as feminism has links with postcolonialism, the novels can be termed postcolonial. Postcolonialism becomes mere verbiage if it does not lead to decolonization; decolonization is reifying itself only in bits and pieces. If colonization is underivable, decolonization is desirable and the best way to do it is to decolonize the mind. As most postcolonialists agree, it is difficult to recover the precolonial past; it is better to structure our present syncretically by building between our cultural heritage and non-compelling knowledges and discourses of others, especially of the West. What is happening in India is that our mind is still in bondage. It is language that constructs the world.

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Our knowledge of the world comes through the language. Even today we have English in our midst, not as the site of colonialism but as a transnational language. Harish Trivedi argues that instead of India conquering English, "English has certainly conquered India all over again" (Trivedi 9). We have not appropriated English as postcolonialists claim, but we have abrogated our rich languages and not saved them from being appropriated by English and believe that Indian English is exclusively our own. Though the use of English has greatly increased in India, it is still the language of the centre with the inherent colonial power discourse. If we wish to decolonize ourselves we will have to enrich our other Indian languages and their literatures and take recourse to translation in order to transcend the national spaces and borders. Postcolonialism is a mixed blessing. It has brought about the baring of colonial power structure and empowering of the marginality gendered or engendered. It has considerably increased the significance of literary studies and widened the horizons of globalization. Amitav Ghosh is one of the most widely known Indians writing in English today. He is a Bengali author as well as a literary critic in the field of English language.

The plot of Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* is so complex that there is little consensus among scholars on what actually happens in the novel. Following in the footsteps of Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Renu and J.P.S. Uberoi, Ghosh dramatizes the encounter between Western science, with its accompanying epistemology, and Indian tradition. The novel challenges the relentless West driven search for knowledge, epitomized by the supercomputer named Ava, and suggests that only different epistemological premises, based on silence, can counteract Western rationalism. The novel's literary technique mirrors this preoccupation in that it tells a story from two different viewpoints, one of which remains silent throughout. Narrating the viewpoint of a silent agent raises a number of problems as to the reliability of the narrator, who properly speaking is only a "guesser." The whole narrative revolves around a foundational mystery that remains unknown to all characters. In order to do so, the implied author must write about something of which he too remains ignorant. This paradoxical condition calls for a revision of the traditional writing agents as described by Wayne C. Booth, so that it is necessary to include the figure of the archiauthor behind the traditional implied author. This may explain a reticent narrative that relies heavily on the reader's intelligence. Furthermore, my narratological reading highlights two themes formerly neglected by scholars, namely that subalterns' cosmopolitanism in the future is rooted in our colonial past and that the interpersonal transference envisaged by the novel merges different people in one body, thus challenging the Western obsession with individualism.

Amitav Ghosh's *'The Calcutta Chromosome'* (1996) is an attempt to focus on the implications of a post-colonial novel and to ascertain the post-colonial characteristics to be found in *'The Chromosome'*. The fantastic world of the novel

presents a process of various thematic and technical experimentations and innovations. Many questions regarding *'The Fevers, Delirium and Discovery'* are raised by Ghosh and to make the answers comprehensible to the reader, the writer plays with time, space and the story line. Ghosh practices structural "synaesthesia" (Breitinger 98).

The story of the novel moves through the closing years of the nineteenth century into the whole of the twentieth century and then passes on to the early years of the twenty first century. Apparently, it covers the colonial and the post- colonial years of Indian history. Of course, the writer's liberty of rejection, selection and creation has been judiciously exercised by Ghosh. The novel opens in the early years of the twenty-first century when Antar an Egyptian computer programmer and systemanalyst in New York suddenly finds the ID card of one Murygan, and old colleague and researcher, flashed on his computer screen. He discovers that Murugan had mysteriously disappeared on 21st August 1995, better known as the World Mosquito Day, from Calcutta Murugan himself deeply interested in malaria research was very curious about Ronald Ross, a British scientist posted in the Indian army in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Ross, was ultimately awarded the Nobel Prize for identifying the Malaria parasite. Murugan firmly believed that there was an "other mind" behind this entire operation of research and discovery. It was his theory that though Ross was thinking that "he was doing experiment on the malaria parasite" yet, "all the time it's he who is the experiment."¹

Thematically and technically Ghosh has deconstructed the traditional western forms. His constant "border-crossing" from fact to fiction, the disruption of the realities of the narrative technique in fiction (plot, development,

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character, manipulation of time etc.) has been done away with as something ineffectual or

superfluous. This experimentation has enriched him with a "double vision" that enables the writer to present a cross cultural critical analysis. Like Rushdie, Ghosh has employed "Magic realism" to invoke the impossibility of the happening without losing the immediacy of its experience.

Ghosh the fiction writer turns himself into a historian. In fact, his role is not much altered as Both history and literature are interested in power and etymologically the two words are the same, and only in English have they separated in this way. The constant blending of fact and fiction has generated a situation where past has lost its antiquity. By crossing over the physical time, the writer has invented new allegorical meanings. 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.

Post-colonial writing mystifies the real and demystifies the mystified. It is not the temptation of exotic expression that compels a writer to follow this intricate path but it becomes a necessity that give him the magical power to represent the culmination of many dynamic, cultural and social forces. The pluralistic sensibility of post-colonial writing has a significant impact on the writer of the coming century. Amitav Ghosh in "The Calcutta Chromosome" as a post-colonial writer has rearranged the simplistic equation of life, death and immortality to prove that "word manipulated" artistically can establish theories that are true and yet stranger than fiction.

'Malaria strikes Back' screams the head-lines in newspaper, periodicals, scientific journals. Teams of research-journalists re-record the details from the past-the historical facts about malaria and the scientist Sir Ronald Ross who was awarded the Nobel Prize for his findings on malaria fever : This sets off the creative artist into the jungle of science - laboratories, scientific vocabulary, the methods of investigation and the scientists. Amitav Ghosh in his novel 'The Calcutta Chromosome' takes up this issue of the malarial fever colouring it with mysticism and mystery, supernatural and superstition, calling it the theory of science and counter-science :

"Let me put it like this', Murugan said, : you know all about matter and anti matter right? And rooms and anterooms and christ and anti-christ and so on?"²

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 is 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 could not begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge." (P.88).

With this Amitav Ghosh emphasizes secrecy, mystery and self- contradictory knowledge and confronts what he calls conventional science with the ingenious knowledge science with the ingenious knowledge and method of the uneducated Indians. This paper attempts to examine how this theory of science and counter-science is presented and with what purpose.

It gives an impression of a queer experiment with a variety of themes and technique. The skilful blending of literature, science, philosophy, history and psychology and para-psychology results in an attempt to survey the past in connection with the present anticipating certain echoes in the future. Ghosh, being

a student of social anthropology, uses his knowledge to unravel layer by layer the enigma related to the discovery by Ronald Ross of the malarial parasite in 1902.

The novel has two sections : 'August 20, Mosquito Day' and 'The Day After'. The first section is devoted to the recollection of certain scientific facts but in a very 'thriller' mode of fiction. Urbasi Barat rightly judges the very device used in the novel :

"It sometimes seems as though our whole planet had swung into the fog belt of melodrama "and to write truthfully about this planet is inevitably to write a thriller." With all its apparently incredible action and simplistic characterization."³

It has also been grouped with 'novel of ideas' working-with a 'brainteaser; and at times judged as a thriller. But if experiments in fiction writing area to be encouraged to the extent of heterogeneous combinations at the cost

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of 'pleasure', one would unhesitatingly accept the novel as Pradeep Trikha opines " "The novel is likely to become a literary touchstone for its content technique."⁴

The subsequent events in the novel are attempts to trace out the adventure of Murugan and the queer truth of what in fact took place on those fateful days to August 1995. The time span is stretched to the history of near about a hundred years studded with events more of a mysterious and supernatural nature than to allow the reader to feel a oneness with any of those experiences. He simply looks aghast and bewildered. Ava's flashing of the badly damaged ID Card on its screen arouses the curiosity of Antar, the Egyptian archivist working at his New York apartment in the early twenty first century. When the computer Ava projects the holographic projection of the man to whom the card belonged, Antar immediately recognizes him as L. Murugan and starts his search on Ava and the details he gets through the small screen of his computer. The very device is novel as Indira Bhatt rightly points out in her essay, quoting Malcolm Bradbury, that Ghosh has manipulated the time span as :

"an exploitation of relation between antecedent and present, between the time span, of that is told and the time it takes to tell, between narrated time and narrational time, between matter attended to scenically and in detail and matter scanted or sketched. "⁵

To intensify the authenticity of the devices and technique used, Amitav Ghosh co-related supernatural to attain the 'microscopic structural' unity, spinning the images round and round. The details in the first four chapters pacify the readers' curiosity through the make believe world where science attains equal mastery over the human brain as there is a good rapport shown between the two; the novelist does it cleverly to make the reader conscious of the shocks to take place there after. The incidents thus more in 'three folds of time' and fluctuate till the last. Murugan's obsession with the early history of malaria, the career of Ronald Ross, the Nobel Laureate, and above all the undercurrent of the belief that some external force initiated the idea regarding the cause of malaria in the mind of Ross, continue as a very significant part of the main theme. The mystery does not cease its impact here; it enlarges its spell when Murugan tells Antar :

"The way I see it, it would not just have to be secretive about what it did; it would also have to be secretive in what it did. It would have to use secrecy as a technique or procedure. It would in principle have to refuse all direct communication, straight off the bat, because to communicate, to put ideas into language would be to establish a claim to know-which is the first thing that a counter science would dispute : (88)"

To justify the complexity of knowledge and its acceptability in relation to science, Murugan enhances the very argument with an explanation :

"Not making sense is what it's about conventional sense that is. May be this other tem 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 have already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all; you only know its history. (P.88)".

Murugan's research in this direction is a part of this mysterious conclusion that in 1890 a secret India team, under the leadership of an enigmatic woman called Mangala had obtained much information in this field. A victim of hereditary syphilis, Mangala was found by Dr. Cunningham at Sealdah station and was trained as a laboratory assistant. Murugan takes her to be a genius and 'way ahead of the fundamentals of the malaria problem' (P. 202). Mangala's secret investigation regarding the syphilitic patient, in Cunningham's laboratory and the observation how certain chromosomes were found in the non-generating tissue the brain and could be transmitted through malaria are as Murugan calls them 'The Calcutta Chromosomes'.

Ghosh is not content with the combination of science and non-science and their inter-relations, he deepens the mystery by relating these two with the typical Indian belief of rebirth. The strange girl tells 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'. (P. 194). Lutchman and Mangala belong to the last phase of the 19th Century, they continue to be an influence in 1995. Lutchman/Lachman/Laxman/

Lakhan/Lucky, all these names belong to the same person but in different situations and at different times. It is merely a game of 'Switching identities'. Murugan finds out in August 20, 1995, an esoteric cult of image worship in Calcutta and finds out that the image is that of Mangala. She is called Mangala bibi and is offered puja to commemorate her reincarnation. Mangala's shifting identify is in Mrs. Avatounian, Urmila and Tara. Thus the story moves through such a complicated texture that it appears more a daydreaming than any palatable reading. Para-

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psychology thus enters to bring a queer synthesis of fact and fiction, a vision quite enjoyable as a fantasy as one finds in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* :

"The shadow of the dome pleasure Floated midway on the waves; where was heard the mingled measure from the fountain and the caves. It was a miracle of rare device, A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!"⁶

The novel is indeed a quest through the world of superfluities to the world of ideas. It is an attempt to bring together the past and the present with a vision of the future. However scattered, the details may appear to be, in the worlds of Madhumalti Adhikari, the novel is :

"The space and time montage Disruption of time and space enables us to visualize and seek the complexities of plot structure and admit a conglomeration of ideas. The reader may flit between the physical and the psychological time of different characters that progress either simultaneously to different geographical places or remain in the same physical location but at different spots of time."⁷

If seen from a different angle, Indira Bhatt's observation looks more rational and acceptable. She writes :

"When one asks the question of why and in what direction the events lead to, one feels baffled. A mystery novel would have clues that lead to the solution. Here the novelist has wonderfully and vividly created the mysterious happenings and has attempted to relate them, only to arrive at nothingness..."⁸

The very mystery in the novel is it allows the reader to dig deeper to have new and many more new layers of meanings. Undoubtedly, it is a good beginning of a new trend yet to be adopted by young fiction writers of today.

'The Calcutta Chromosome' is an amazing and alluring novel written by Amitav Ghosh, an anthropologist and contemporary Indian English fiction writer. The novel writer in English follows the Indian tradition of narrative. It has multiple stories embedded in the main story. It is like a bouquet made out of many stories. Though the narrative is a complex one leading from one story to many stories, the reader is carried away by its sweep. It reminds us of the narrative traditions of the Indian epics 'The Ramayana' and 'The Mahabharata'. Some critics have evaluated 'The Calcutta Chromosome' as a medical thriller, a victorious ghost story a scientific quest. However, it seems that the author is very well rooted in his own culture - the Indian. The novel, also explores the cyclic time concept and hence the treatment of time is also the Indian one. It moves between the present the future and the late 19th century. It is rather a search for and history of, the elusive and alluring "Calcutta Chromosome".

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