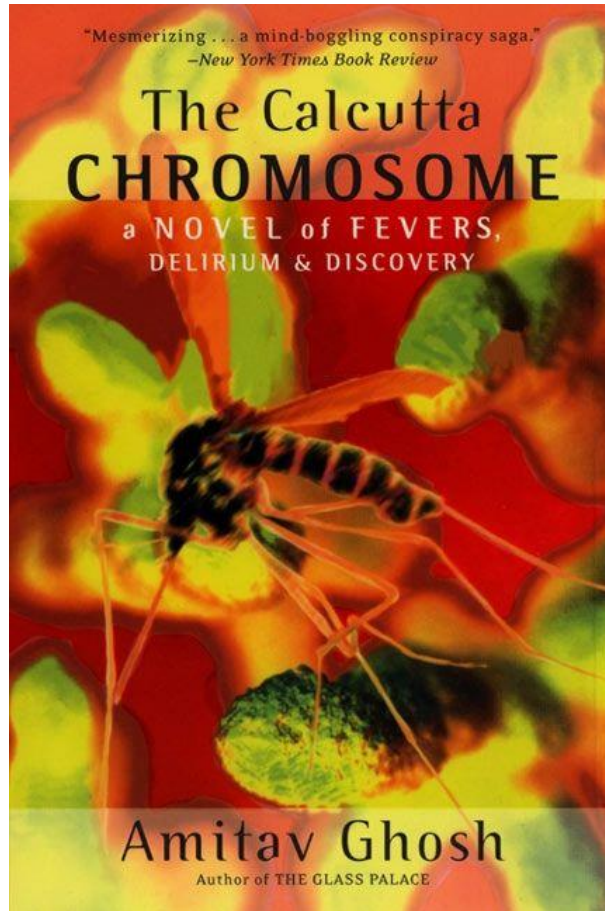


Silence as a Tool of Resistance in Acquiring Knowledge in
Amitabh Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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Abstract

Amitabh Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* would be one of the best examples of a postcolonial discourse that rewrites the subaltern history. The novel not only provides an alternative history which is about subaltern people but also talks about the scientist Ronald Ross, the Noble Prize winner for his discovery of malaria transmission. More importantly, Ghosh punctures the idea of scientific objectivity by highlighting a counter-scientific cult that actually paved the way of Ronald Ross's discovery of the malaria parasite. Through a close analysis of this novel the motto of this paper would be to trace the ways that actually situate the subalterns at

the centre of this discourse. It would also go on decoding why Managala and Laakhan, the two subaltern figures chose the path of secrecy and remained silent through ages. And finally, it would also discuss how Ghosh, in this novel, actually makes the subaltern speak through silence.

The Calcutta Chromosome

Amitabh Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a work of science-fiction narrative. The novel centers around the character of Antar who is engaged in his search of his former colleague L. Murugan, who happened to be writing about the possibilities of a subaltern cult as the driving force behind Ronald Ross's award-winning discovery of the malaria parasite. The group comprised two subaltern figures, including the scavenger woman Mangala and Ross's favorite servant Laakhan. The group experimented with pigeon sacrifice and religious rituals in their ultimate quest of achieving immortality.

The Calcutta Chromosome as a science-fiction narrative not only fictionalizes the lives of the scientists but also claims that non-scientific cult may be as valid as those sanctioned by legitimate forms of knowledge. Thereby, the novel is a postcolonial discourse where Ghosh deliberately switches the central attraction from the oppressor to the oppressed. But if so, why is Mangala, the doubly marginalized, oppressed woman silent throughout the novel? Through a close analysis of this novel the motto of this paper would be to trace the ways that actually situate the subalterns at the centre of this discourse. It would also go on decoding why Managala and Laakhan chose the path of secrecy and remained silent through ages.

Three Narrators

The narrative consists of three narrators: an omniscient narrator, Murugan and Sonali Das. The novel is a replica of multiple juxtapositions where the author places science and counter-science, fiction and reality together and while doing so provides an alternative story to the subaltern. The novel begins sometime in the future with Antar, an Egyptian working in the information industrial technology. Antar comes across a distressed identity card and tries to retrieve its owner through his super advanced computer AVA. AVA with its powerful search engine traces the card to be of Murugan, a former Indian colleague of him who mischievously disappeared in Calcutta in 1995. Murugan had his keen interest in Ronald Ross and specialized on him. He does research on Ross and comes up with the doubt of an untold story. Murugan believed Ross has been manipulated by a group of Indian counter-science cult responsible to lead Ross to a particular direction and wrote an article: "An Alternative Interpretation of Late 19th Century Malaria Research. Is There A Secret History?" There is indeed a secret story weaved by Mangala, the sweeper woman who manipulated the scientist Ross in order to help her much advanced discovery, the ultimate prize of gaining immortality. Here, at this point the novelist emphasizes on the issue that scientific discovery was not a one way process brought to India only, but is a work of mutual collaboration of both the ruler and the ruled.

Not Merely a Postcolonial Text

Nevertheless, it is hard to categorise *The Calcutta Chromosome* as a postcolonial text only as Ghosh experimented with boundaries. Here, fiction and facts blend and clash making multiple aspects possible. The novel can be termed a scientific memoir, science fiction, historical narrative and a detective novel at the same time. Mike Frangos, in his essay "The End of

Literature: Machine Reading and Amitabh Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*", states that this book is 'famously difficult to classify' (Frangos, 2). It contains history, the future (posthuman), the machine reading, the possibility of cultural history and so on. He mainly focuses on the representation of science and the digital technology that is used in the book. According to him, "the novel imagines a future of the digital in which the digital archive's capacity for nearly infinite storage allows the reader, in this case Antar, to achieve the perspective of the posthuman future" (Frangos,7). He also points out how digital technology, memory and digital archives are relevant to the historiography of this novel. Similar to Frangos's viewpoint, Diane Nelson in her essay, "A Social Science Fiction of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery: The Calcutta Chromosome, Colonial Laboratory, and the Postcolonial New Human", writes that this novel makes the reader think about the 'human' in new ways, a new human that seems to have some more technology-based characteristics. She also argues that in Ghosh's novel it is clearly stated that machine is using human and human activities are fully manipulated by machines. However, she focuses more on Ghosh's representation of the enrichment of colonial science laboratories and their use of advanced technology. On the one hand, she praises science and technology for making life easier while on the other she criticizes Western scientific history and Western colonizers' portrayal of the British colonizers as 'scientist' and colonized as 'mice and guinea pigs' (Nelson, 254). Thereby, according to Nelson the novel is a critique of the portrayal of Ronald Ross as the prototype of the trueborn 'scientist' and his act of not acknowledging indigenous help while using them illegally as guinea pigs.

Tabish Khair in his essay "Amitabh Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*: The Question of Subaltern Agency" writes, "What Ghosh does seek to do and largely succeeds in doing is to depict the *Coolies* (the subaltern in general term) as occupying a space". The term subaltern is derived from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who used it to designate non-elite social classes and groupings like the proletariat. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak often insisted on the specific gendered forms of understanding. She has also noted the extent to which postcolonialist forms of analysis have, in their blind spots of gender issues, taken up traditional masculinist positions. Her contribution to the understanding of the subaltern state under colonialism was to expand its signification to include groups even more downgraded than the groups mentioned by Gramsci, and also those who do not figure on the social scale at all: for example, tribals or unscheduled classes, untouchables, and, within all these groups, women. Interestingly, Murugan's research work on Ronald Ross introduces Mangala a subaltern woman having scientific knowledge more than her Western contemporaries. According to Ranajit Guha the subaltern's participation in the nationalist movement is not included in the elitist historiography. Ghosh might have taken Guha's argument and added a new thought into it. Throughout the novel Ghosh emphasized on the issue of the contribution of the subaltern intelligence that is not acknowledged in Western historiography.

Delving Deep into Scientific Archives

It is remarkable to see how Ghosh delves deep into the scientific archives, journals, Ross's memoir and letters to enlighten the contribution of the marginalized class in this scientific discovery and also emphasizes their exclusion from history. Mangala is after 'a technology for interpersonal transference', that would help them gain life after life through incarnation. The Austrian clinician Julius Von Wagner Jauregg was actually ahead of Ronald Ross on the malaria

research. He was working on the clue that artificially induced malaria could cure Syphilitic paresis. But even before Wagner, Mangala, herself suffering from syphilis had achieved remarkable success in this field. In 1995, Mangala chose the body of Mrs Aratounian and later on Tara's body, Antar's neighbour, also known as Urmila Roy. Laakhan, was reincarnated as Romen Halder in 1995 and again as Tara's helper Lucky. Simply put, they strategized a way of encoding knowledge and transforming it from one individual to another amidst utter silence and secrecy without any documentation or proof. The silencing of Mangala can be best described using Spivak's remarks on the 'native women' (like Mangala). Spivak finds in her "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern" that the native woman is doubly oppressed, caught between native patriarchy on the one hand and foreign masculinist-imperialist ideology on the other. So, when and how are the subalterns allowed to speak and generate knowledge in Ghosh's text?

Silence as a Tool of Resistance

Knowledge, however, is a tricky term and Ghosh although silences Managala's knowledge, defends her silence by making it a tool of resistance to debunk the Western ideology of perceiving knowledge. Ghosh in his postcolonial narrative deliberately opposes Spivak's ideology of speaking on behalf of the subaltern. As a matter of fact, Ghosh entirely denounces the idea of documenting Mangala, the subaltern's dissident knowledge. To rely on Derrida's theory of deconstruction, our mental life consists not of concepts—not of solid, stable meanings—but of a continually changing play of signifiers. Every signifier consists of and produces more signifiers in a never-ending deferral, or postponement, of meaning: we seek meaning that is stable, but we can never really find it because we can never get beyond the play of signifiers. Thereby, knowledge, here, as a concept is fleeting and always being delayed and deferred. This is well illustrated when Murugan is explaining the logic of the counter-scientific cult:

Maybe this other team 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 (*Calcutta* 103–104).

Network of Stories

Claire Chambers in her essay "Network of Stories" writes that Murugan's identification of a knowledge that recognizes its own 'impossibility' draws both on postmodernist thought and on a strain of Hindu thought which indicates that accepting the fact that one cannot know everything is the first step towards knowledge. This philosophy is illustrated in the *Upanishads*, in which it is stated:

One thing, they say, is obtained from real knowledge; another, they say, from what is not knowledge. [...] He who knows at the same time both knowledge and not-knowledge, overcomes death through not-knowledge, and obtains immortality through knowledge (Sen, 128).

Chambers also adds in her essay that the implication given both by this passage from the *Upanishads* and Ghosh's novel is that conventional knowledge is useful, but only when its limitations are recognized. However, Murugan indicates that language is insufficient to explain phenomena and inevitably changes the thing that it attempts to describe. He confirms this by arguing that the secret group "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" (*Calcutta* 103). Ghosh seems to be arguing that any claim to knowledge — whether it be historical, scientific, or aesthetic — is a construct, dependent on its cultural origins. This is not to say that the attempt to gain knowledge is a futile one, but that one must recognize the limitations of one's attempt from the outset. Thus, Murugan arrives at the contradictory, yet insightful, realization that "knowledge couldn't begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge." Hence the idea of perceiving knowledge as a fixed identity is challenged by Ghosh as he shows the dynamic approaches of knowledge that keep on changing. Likewise, the *Calcutta Chromosome* is of a completely different chromosome. Instead of determining the nature of the DNA, it is unique and mutates. It not only resists empirical documentation but suspends the very concept of deeming knowledge as fixed and constant. Mangala's experiments with the disease and the nature of the Chromosome undermine the fixed and constructed notions of Western episteme while celebrates the fluidity and mutability of knowledge.

To Conclude

I would like to conclude by saying that the urge of making Magala's knowledge public and preserved is denied by Ghosh and by doing so he actually uses her silence to be a potent medium to deconstruct the Eurocentric discourse of 'othering'. Silence is therefore posited in the novel as a radical alternative to the vociferous assertions of knowledge. Hence, the narrative is also a celebration of the Orient over the Occident by dismantling both the androgenic and Eurocentric sense of superiority. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is indeed a postcolonial novel that not only challenges but also resists the colonial voice through the voiceless colonized Indians where the 'phantom' of the subaltern looms large behind the actual discovery of the malaria research.

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