

Shuddering The Roots of Science In Amitav Ghosh's Novel 'The Calcutta Chromosome'

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is one of the India's most celebrated writers in the English language. His third novel "The Calcutta chromosome" (1996) presents the story of medical science. It is complex, fascinating, highly imaginative story of the quest that weaves past, present and future into an intricate texture. It also explores the history of the malaria, parasite .Ghosh unveil the sinister episode lies behind the research of malaria parasite. There are certain missing links of history which connects with the research of malaria. In this paper we discuss the subversive strategies which Ghosh employees in the text to conclude that it is time we questioned the root of the science. Ghosh shatters the superiority complex of the west through falsifying Ross's false belief in himself as the conductor of the research. Science is interrelated with myths and tantra. Science is overpowered by counter –science. Local practitioners proved it through many experiments.

Keywords: Shuddering, Quest, Counter-Science, Subversive, Amitav Ghosh.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is a world renowned Indian Anglian novelist and author of the present decade. He is one of the brightest star in the galaxy of Indian fiction in English. Born in 1956 Calcutta, Ghosh spent his early years in Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, while he studied in Delhi, Oxford and in Egypt. He writes both fiction and non-fiction and he has penned 15 books so far intertwining history and life experience. His books include The Circle of Reason, The Shadow Line, In An Antique Land, The Calcutta Chromosome, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide, It is Trilogy. He won many International awards. Recently he won 54th Jnanpith Award.

The present novel The Calcutta Chromosome (1996) is a medical science thriller novel. By this novel Ghosh takes on the avatar of a science thriller writer. Ghosh expands the scope of the novel by mixing advanced computer science, religious cults and wonderful portraits of Victorian and contemporary India. The story moves forward and backward in time. In this paper we discussed about the shaking roots of science. Roots of science is questioned through Mangala. Science is interrelated with myths and tantra. In this novel uneducated people also do experiment as the educated do.

It is a multilayered novel as its title reflects. Firstly, all the main characters are affected by malaria at one point or the other, then they get into feverish hallucination. Secondly, every single character is involved in a quest. Antar searches for Murgan and his theory. Murgan searches for the past of Ronald Ross, and Ross himself is in search of microscopic parasite. Urmila is in search of Phulboni. Thus, the novel becomes the collection of searches. Delirium is a state in which past and present get mixed. So is the case of the narrative in this novel.

Ghosh weaves the plot of this novel around a historical event that led to the discovery of the killer malaria and its cure, while at the same time, the novel also investigates into other issues central to the politics of science. The novel open in twenty first century with an Egyptian clerk Antar in New York who trips through a damaged identity card on his computer. He discovers that the lost person is L.Murgan, a colleague and researcher in Life Watch where he works, and is also one who has done extensive research on the medical history of malaria. He came to an inference that Ronald Ross who was awarded Nobel prize in 1906 for his work on the life-

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cycle of malaria parasite was heading in the wrong direction and was motivated out of the maze by some people onto the correct path.

Ghosh, through the story line subvert the superiority of the western scientific investigation and proved that they were far behind the scientific progress made by India. The search for immortality is carried by Mangla and Lachman. Mangla is the upholder of the cult of secrecy and by this weapon she controls western science in form of Ross, Farley and Cunningham. Mangla uses this weapon of silence to achieve intellectuality. She tries to find a cure for syphilis through "counter-science" or faith (204).

Mangla uses malaria as a treatment for syphilis. The same theory is declared by Julius Von Wagner-Jauregg, the Nobel prize winner 1927. But it was in the 1890s that this secret group of Indian people, with their leader. Mangla had already achieved a significant milestone in their field of research. This group had developed a specific kind of malaria that could be cultured in pigeons. One of the main motive of this Mangla was to find out a cure for syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease, by way of transporting the malaria microbes to the patient through the bird (203).

Mangla is also the representative of the Goddess Kali or Durga with all her immense powers of regeneration. Ghosh put forward the idea that personality traits can be transmitted from one body to another by way of the malaria parasite. Mangla is the first to see the implication when she administers the malaria virus as a cure for syphilis, she see it as a means to gaining immortality.

This theme of transmigration and immortality play an important role in this novel. The followers of this theory that the soul is immortal, and death is nothing more than a change of clothes holds their faith in continuance of life. Mangla resurgence into the forms of Mrs Aratounian, Urmila and Tara and Laakhan transform into Lucky. This pattern reaffirms the logic of reincarnation.

Against the background of the historical facts of Ronald Ross's discovery about malarial fever, the novelist presents the supernatural power of Mangla. She is portrayed as a goddess who could cure syphilis. Mangla perform certain rituals for transcending life beyond life. Sonali witnessed that type of ceremony where Laakhan's soul is transferred into the body of Roman Halder.

She caught a glimpse of 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 fire light... Then there was stir in the crowd and Sonali forced herself to look down again. A figure had come out of the shadows: it was a woman and she was dressed very plainly in a crispy- starched saree, with a white scarf tied around her hair. Her figure was short and matronly and Sonali took her to be in late middle age ... she had a cloth bag slung over one shoulder, an ordinary Jhola, in her left hand she was carrying a bamboo bird cage. She seated herself by the fire and

placed the bag and the bird cage beside her. She took out two scalpels and a pair of glass plates. Then she reached out, placed her hands on whatever it 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'... there was a flash of bright metal and a necklace of blood flew up and fell sizzling on the fire (139-140).

The body on which the rituals are performed is that of Roman Halder and a woman is Mangla in form of Mrs Aratounian. In Calcutta such mysterious rituals are performed in the name of some special knowledge of transcendence. Then there is the mention of a station-master who gets killed at Renupur on a moonless Amavasya night at the hand of a boy called Laakhan.

In this novel Ghosh uses the technique of magic realism by mixing the elements of fantasy with reality. When the young Phulboni goes to Renupur, he witnesses the supernatural powers of ghosts and phantoms. It was only after a hard struggle he saves himself from getting killed twice by train. Like a suspense thriller, the novel describes the unusual mysterious things as lantern, ghost station master, ghost train and the man Laakhan whose face is wrapped in darkness" he heard a scream, a raging, inhuman howl that tore through the stormy night. It hurled a single word in to the wind-'Laakhan'- and then it was silenced by the thunder of the speeding train." (227) Phulboni portrays an extremely mysterious character Laakhan with the help of 'magic-realism'. Laakhan was the person to keep changing his identity from the postman to a village school master and so on. So, these complicated 'Laakhan stories' confirms the idea of interpersonal transference of soul. In this way the novelist attempts to explore the oriental belief of life, birth, and rebirth.

At the end, Ava shows Murgan, Urmila and Sonali rushing to the station Sealdah, where they are told Phulboni and Mrs Aratounian have gone. This is the place from which Murgan has been recorded as missing since August 1995 and is not heard of till his ID card appears on Ava's screen. What happens to the rest of them is left to the imagination to the reader. But Sealdah is the station from where Mangla and Laakhan were hired, it is the place of the vanishing trick causing most of the characters to disappear. This mystery with its mysticism remains almost unexplained and unrelated. Ghosh tries to explain this with his theory of counter-science and secrecy there of and contradictions of knowledge. Murgan clarify the concept of science and counter science:

You know all about matter and anti-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 the abstract (in contrast to concrete of science), wouldn't you say that the first principle of a counter-science would have to be secrecy? The way I see it, it wouldn't just have to be secretive

about what it did (it couldn't hope to beat the scientist and that game anyway); it would 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 a claim to know which is the first thing that a counter-science would dispute. (88)

Ghosh mentions the search for the ultimate transcendence of nature, of immortality: "what I am really talking about is a technology for interpersonal transference" (90), explaining the failure of the body and migration therefrom. This is what he calls Calcutta Chromosome.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper is to discuss disruptive tactic used by Amitav Ghosh in the present novel where he talks about the marginalised people and their ancient cultural rituals and crumble the claims of Western science.

Conclusion

Author asserts that the computer aided research of Ghosh's protagonists, Antar and Murgan, reveals cracks in the claims of Western science to autonomy and universal applicability. The unexpected concentration of Europeans in discovering a treatment for malarial disease was not to protect human lives but to make certain the unobstructed development of

the world and dominate the colonies. The novel questions the belief in the grand narrative that liberation of humanity is only possible through science and offer other alternatives also. The occult characters and the mystic group of counter-science strike the western scientific principles which somehow represents India's superiority in knowledge and science.

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