

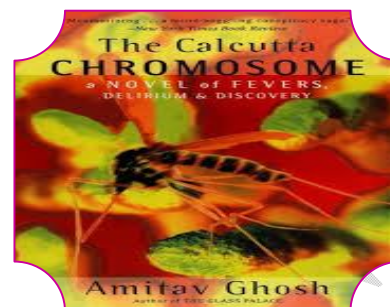


THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS : THE SUBALTERN ASPECT IN THE NOVEL “THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME” OF AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali Indian Author is mostly known for his award winning novels. *The Glass Palace*, *The Shadow Lines*, *Sea of Poppies*, *In An Antique Land*, and *The Hungry Tide*. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is one of his important novels and award winning works of science fiction. Ghosh is well known for his interest in the Indian colonial history and the contribution of the English language in the postcolonial world. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* he points towards an “alternative” history that makes me interested to work on this book. Ghosh’s writing style is very much inspired by the other Bengali Indian writers such as Rabindranath Tagore or Phanishwar Nath Renu. His childhood was spent in Calcutta and his representation of the geographical picture of Calcutta in the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* is also influenced by his personal experiences.

The Calcutta Chromosome is known as his famous “postcolonial” work of science fiction. This novel contains the idea of “alternative” history which is about “subaltern” people and of course a history of Ronald Ross, the famous doctor and Nobel Prize winner for his discovery about malaria transmission. The novel is mostly centered on the “subaltern” people, their silence and their history.

KEYWORDS: postcolonial, subaltern, uneducated, science fiction, post human.

INTRODUCTION :

The novel starts with the appearance of a character Antar who belongs to the most technologically advanced world and works with his advanced computer Ava. He is the protagonist who, with the help of Ava, is looking for one of his missing colleagues Murugan. Murugan is one of the most important characters, a voice of rationality. He does research on Ronald Ross and comes with a doubt about the untold history. According to Murugan and his research, Ronald Ross does not really discover the malaria transmission but he is strongly manipulated by a “subaltern” group.

The issue of subaltern people as a subject of writing and representation is always controversial and of course challenging. Amitav Ghosh takes this challenge eagerly and opens a new way of thinking about the subaltern. He also challenges the Western hegemony of knowledge and science and provides an alternative history of India and Indian knowledge of alternative science and technology. Immortality and the subaltern are two ideas that come together through Ghosh’s novel. Ghosh wonderfully establishes a strong connection between these two ideas.

In Ghosh’s novel, the idea of colonialism, subaltern history and colonial history of India are combined together with science-fiction. We find that the novel points towards the future and that this future belongs to the “subaltern” people; Ghosh writes alternative colonial history through fiction.

Since the early seventeenth century the Indian subcontinent was one of the most important British colonies. Though India achieved independence in 1947, the consequences of colonialism are still very visible in this country. According to many postcolonial scholars colonized people's history is determined by their colonizers. The colonized people cannot get rid of the impacts of their colonizers. The colonial creation of the "I" and the "other," the "colonizer" and the "colonized," the "oppressor" and the "oppressed," the ruler, the native bourgeoisie, the working class or middle class, the lower class and most importantly the "subaltern" became the subjects of postcolonial studies.

Subalterns and their participation in postcolonial studies are crucial issues because they are considered as marginal people. "Subaltern" is a term first adopted by Antonio Gramsci; he was interested in the historiography of the subaltern. The meaning of the term "subaltern" is "of inferior rank" and in postcolonial studies it refers to the "most inferior class" in society. Subaltern groups include peasants, workers, and, most importantly, the subaltern women and the unprivileged people of a country and society who do not have access to hegemonic power. In postcolonial studies, subaltern studies cover an important part as subalterns belong to the lowest class of the society and do not have access to history. They are not allowed to raise their voice against the colonial or native brutality and violence. Subalterns are believed to be uneducated by their oppressor (both Western and native), having no sense of knowledge and science, more devoted to religion, superstitious and spiritual practices and so on. Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman and Gyan Pandey are the most influential writers on (postcolonial criticism) subaltern studies.

The voice of subaltern people, their capability of speaking and their history are important issues in subaltern studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," argues that the subaltern cannot speak because others are "speaking for them" According to her to recover the voice of the "subaltern" is quite impossible. She criticizes this matter of trying to be their representative, because it is impossible for people to represent subalterns who are in a privileged position of the society and cannot unlearn their own privilege.

According to Ranajit Guha the subaltern's participation in various nationalist movement has not been included in the Indian historiography. Subaltern people cannot even enter in the era of "modernity;" modernity is defined first by the Western people.

Amitav Ghosh chose science-fiction to write a fictional subaltern history of the participation of the subaltern in the scientific discoveries. Science-fiction is a term first used in the 1926 by Hugo Gernsback. Most science-fiction points towards the future and Amitav Ghosh pick up the science-fictional utopian issue and connects it to the postcolonial utopian dream. Ghosh combines postcolonial history with science-fiction successfully. He uses the term "counter-science" in a new way and connects it to science. Such fusion of science and counter-science becomes the center of the novel. The subaltern utopian dream is projected by this fusion of "counter-science" and science.

Amitav Ghosh's novel introduces the alternative story of the subaltern and their "utopian dream" of achieving the ultimate test of immortality; it is connected to the science-fictional and philosophical term "post human." We get to see new views of the post human, importantly in this novel, Amitav Ghosh suggests a new way of thinking about subaltern history and future. He places science and knowledge and subalternity together to propose an alternative history. Amitav Ghosh introduces a new way of thinking about the written history of those discoveries and the untold histories behind them. He rewrites the history of discovery of the Malaria bug in colonial India and includes the subaltern as the main subject of this alternative history. This alternative history provides an open ended way of thinking about subaltern futures as well. For that purpose, science-fiction is an influential way to rethink the future.

In this novel we get to see a group of subaltern people and their story is told by Murugan and the third person narrator, who do not belong to that group. However, through Murugan's representation we get to know something more than what the written history of the subaltern and also the history of science contain. The character of Murugan appears mysteriously from the very beginning of the novel and through the whole book he remains mysterious and a bit unusual. Calcutta is not new to Murugan. He is an India-

born American who works in LifeWatch and a colleague of Antar; Antar is the protagonist. His early childhood was spent in Calcutta. He is an American and Indian hybrid and his name is also a bit strange because it is not a typical American name and not even an Indian one but still has an Indian kind of tone.

The story starts with the appearance of an Egyptian character, Antar, who belongs to the future, and works with his super advanced computer Ava. He looks for the owner of a lost ID card that belongs to a corporation named International Water Council who wants to control everything. Eventually Antar comes to know that that ID card belongs to his former colleague Murugan, who disappeared when he went to Calcutta in 1995. Antar is interested in the ID card because he wants to know the mystery behind Murugan's disappearance and Ava wants him to find Murugan. It seems, the corporation is interested in Murugan and his research; the corporation itself wants Antar to look for Murugan.

Beside history, the Indian context of the novel is also interesting. Through the novel's description the readers can even visualize the events that happen through the novel. The typical Indian family, traditions, religious belief, faith, rituals, even the geographical picture of Calcutta are very interestingly shown in this novel. His description of the roads in Calcutta is very authentic and the readers come to visualize the picture of Calcutta by themselves.

The story begins in the future where Antar appears with his super fast computer Ava. Interestingly, the omniscient narrator mentions Ava as "she," a female figure and the main subaltern character Mangala is also a woman. Ava acts like a human figure and also as a machine through the entire novel. Ava makes Antar think about Murugan and makes Antar believe all the stories told by Murugan. Through Ava all the evidence and events related to Murugan and the mysterious situation are represented in the novel's plot. Ava is the person or machine who wants Antar to investigate more on Murugan and to find out the subaltern group. Most importantly, Ava is also responsible for the first appearance of Murugan's lost and burnt ID card and also for the recovery of the deleted email of Murugan, and the emails he sends to Antar regarding his research. It is stated in the novel that, The message might still be found, Ava told him. It would just take a while. It had been typed on one of those old-fashioned, contact-based alphabetical keyboards. The electronic signals emitted by the keys were probably still traceable. It was simply a question of matching the electronic "fingerprint" of Murugan's E-mail message to every electronic signal that was still alive in the ionosphere. Antar tries to find out the mystery behind Murugan's sudden disappearance in Calcutta and the truth behind those events that happened in Calcutta as well, during Ross's research on the malaria bug. According to Murugan there is something more behind the history that is written about Ross's research on the Malaria bug. He claims that there are some other people who want Ross to be successful on the path of Malaria discovery. Murugan states that those people belong to a subaltern group in Calcutta and initially he introduces them as Luchman and Mangala.

However, we come to see Luchman, appearing as Laakhan, Lakkhan, Lakshman, Lucky, Romen Halder and Mangla as Mrs. Aratounian. Murugan says about Laakhan that, "he was all over the map, changing names, switching identities". Moreover, in the final phase of the book Murugan predicts that Urmila will be the soul bearer of Mangala. Murugan writes articles about his research on Ross's discovery, and he names one of them as "An Alternative Interpretation of Late Nineteenth-Century Malaria Research: Is There a Secret History?" According to Murugan these people already have invented that Malaria is caused by mosquito bites and the cure for this as well. Mangala and her team are looking for something more than this invention, and Murugan names it "Calcutta Chromosome" which will help them to get the ultimate pleasure of immortality. Murugan describes the "Calcutta Chromosome" and says it's not symmetrically paired. And the reason why it's not paired is because it doesn't split, into eggs and sperm. And guess why that is? I'll tell you: it's because this is a chromosome that is not transmitted from generation to generation by sexual reproduction. It develops out of a process of recombination and is particular to every individual. Murugan, through this speech, introduces the uniqueness of the chromosome. According to him this Calcutta Chromosome is very special and non-transmitted one. As he names this special chromosome followed by Calcutta, it points towards the uniqueness of the city Calcutta itself as well.

The term "counter-science" Murugan uses is really very interesting because counter science refers to something that is quite opposite to science. Murugan introduces this term and says, You know all about matter and antimatter, right? And room and anterooms and Christ and Antichrist and so on? Now, let's say there was something like science and counter-science.

He introduces the term counter-science as something anti to Western science. However, this counter-science is the subaltern's own kind of science. It is interesting that, rather than calling it superstition or rituals, Murugan calls it counter-science to make its connection with science. This word counter is used to criticize the historical interpretation of the subaltern and their lives. Ross and Mangala both do experiments on human and animal lives. However, Ross's experiments are considered as scientific, Mangala's as counter-science though she uses some scientific equipment while doing experimentations. We see Mangala using a scientific instrument such as a "scalpel" while doing experiments on the pigeons. According to Murugan, that is the way through which Mangala invented the cure for syphilis.

Although Ghosh does not praise religion and spiritual beliefs, I argue that there are some similarities between science and religion that are shown in the novel. The novel raises a question about the rationality of the scientific research that takes place in colonial India. I find in the book an answer to the question that the relation between science and subaltern people is possible if religion can be interpreted as related to science. Though religion and science are seen as opposite terms, I argue that these two terms seem to be related to each other in Ghosh's novel. Though Ghosh does not praise religion or criticize science, he raises a question about the rationality of biased history of the marginal people. Ross and the other scientist go through the scientific experimentation to find out the reason behind malaria infection; however, Mangala and her group come to the solution earlier through their own kind of experimentation which is a combination of science and religion. Metaphorically, again we can consider the scene when Mangala does her experimentation on the pigeons with the scalpel. I think this scene is most important because it establishes the mystery or spiritual thing with science to establish a connection.

Spivak suggests to bring the subaltern into conversation and to speak to them and Amitav Ghosh takes the attempt to bring the subaltern into a conversation through their actions. Here we come to see, their silence is much stronger than their voice. They speak through their silence and secrecy. Their silence is introduced as their power rather than their weakness. Speaking, here, means to reveal, however, that the subaltern group likes to hide their secret actions rather than reveal them to others. Silence seems to be their tool that they use to hide their actions and motives. Moreover, they get the opportunity of doing experiments on their oppressors. Such representation of silence and secrecy of the subaltern provides an open ended way of thinking about their voice. Margery Sabin also suggests to write about subaltern consciousness in new and innovative ways through literary technique. Ghosh uses her suggestion to discuss the subaltern voice in a new way through science-fiction.

Interestingly Mangala and her group's experimenting process is also very much influenced by their religious belief, rituals and supernaturalism. Chakraborty's interpretation of the subaltern's alternative modernity helps Amitav Ghosh to name the subaltern's own kind of experiments "counter-science" rather than calling them superstitions. Their own kind of modernity and religious practices, that are called counter-science, seem to be more powerful than scientific research; according to Murugan, by using such kind of modernity the subaltern people become much faster than the scientist. It is during colonialism and according to Murugan they already have invented the path to the post human. Interestingly, Murugan, an Indian-American man, becomes their tool of experimentation. Because none of the subaltern characters appear as a post human figure but Murugan does.

Finally, we come to see the post human figure of Murugan which is the result of the experimentation of the subaltern group. We already have discussed in the theory section that the post human is a combination of human and machine and it can be both utopian and dystopian; however, the subaltern people came up with the post human on the path toward the invention of immortality. I argue that as they already have invented immortality, the post human figure of Murugan is the result of another experimentation.

Ghosh brings up science and counter-science together to rewrite subaltern history and to propose an open ended way to rethink subaltern voice. We also get to see the reflection of Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea about the "alternative modernity" for subaltern people. The meaning of modernity is something different to the subaltern; their own kind of modernity is based on religious and spiritual belief. Amitav Ghosh makes readers think about the alternative subaltern modernity in a new way. He establishes a connection between the subaltern's own kind of modernity and science .

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