

Elements of Science Fiction and Thriller in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Calcutta Chromosome'

Dipika J. Patel

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is a diasporic Indian novelist and travel-writer. He was born in Calcutta and lived in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, England, Egypt and more recently in America. He stays in India too. He got educated first in New Delhi and then in Oxford where he got his PhD in anthropology in 1981. His history-narrative *In an Antique Land* (1992) draws on his Egyptian experiences. His first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is a magic realistic work concerned with a young weaver who travels from his home in Bengal to the Gulf and then to Algeria. His next novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is, like Khushwant Singh's *Mano Majra*, a partition novel. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) introduces elements of science fiction and thriller into a novel about the late 19th century malaria research that questions the primacy of western science. *The Glass Palace* (2000) is a multi-generational saga, set in Burma, India and Malaya. Domic Head observes, "Ghosh's humanism has affinities with the work of earlier Bengali artists such as Rabindranath Tagore and the film maker Satyajit Roy, but his mastery of various fictional sub-genres is uniquely his own and has made him one of the finest of his generation of Indian writers of English."¹ Amitav Ghosh's other works include the travel-account *Dancing in Cambodia*, *Large in Burma* (1998) and *The Imam and The Indian: Prose Pieces* (2002).

The Calcutta Chromosome is a classic of modern Anglo-Indian fiction. This is, no doubt, a great success after Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* in the 1970's. The novel is written in several chapters and each chapter is divided into many parts just designated as one, two, three and so on. The novel is about 'Calcutta chromosome.' The 'Calcutta Chromosome' means the study of fevers, delirium and discovery of the cause of malaria, one of the deadliest diseases of ancient times. More importantly, the novel, like Edward Said's *Orientalism*, claims that the genius for discovery also lies in the eastern countries. The white hegemony cannot be true always. The east is as important as the west. The Europe must also think of Asia and Africa when it thinks of man's destiny. So the novel is seminal in so far it establishes the fact that the east is equally important.

Opens with its one important character Antar, also known as Ant. He is a technical assistant in an office of water service, in *LifeWatch*, now merged in the International Water Council, New York. This Antar was brought up in Egypt and he has travelled the world. He works in the said office as a technical assistant and he works with his mega computer Ava. Here, as 'Egdon Heath' in Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels, the computer Ava plays a vital role. It is a character almost. Antar as well as is conversant in several languages -- English, Hindi,

Egyptian or Arabic. This man can go to any place so easily and he goes to Calcutta, his native, often. In his New York apartment there lives a Guyanese woman Maria. In fact, she is of an Indian birth. Lately comes another Indian, Tara as a stranded woman. She is in search of a dwelling house and Antar helps her the same. His communications with the two goes for long. Be it as it may Antar does not have any family, representing the so called modern people -- familyless, sometime lifeless too.

Antar remembers a man called L. Murugan, also known as Morgon for his western people. He hears that Murugan is missing and he with the help of his Ava, finds him finally in Calcutta.

This Murugan applies for special leave and gets to Calcutta. His intention is to carry a fresh research on the discovery of medicine for malaria which already a British man called Ronald Ross has discovered. Murugan wants to find out the reality whether the British medical man in British Government Service in India discovered it or it was the work of some Indian. When he arrives at Calcutta he meets two women -- Urmila Roy and Sonali Das. The former is a nice lady working in Calcutta magazine office while the latter is the daughter of some yesteryear cine-artist. Sonali is a film lady. Her films are hits already. The two are yet marked in their way of life. If Urmila is a little haughty and sophisticated and spinster, the other is familiar with man's sexual politics. She has an affair with Roman Haldar, a business magnet of the city. When Morgan meets them they are going to a city hall for listening to the speech of a great Bengali writer Phulboni. This man is a Muslim and he is a fine Bengali writer. His works on man's silence in the face of nature's odds is of some interest for all.

Murugan conducts a series of researches and finds something quite interesting. Accordingly he says when the British governed India they had their medical service. One man called Dr Cunningham was posted at Calcutta in a hospital. This man conducted lots of details about how malaria, the deadly disease would come. He tried to find out how malaria germs would spread and to where. Yet Cunningham did not carry the experiment further. Later on, he went back to England abruptly. Then a man called Ronald Ross, born in India in 1857, and had his education probably in England was posted in his place. This man served most of his life in Secunderabad, in the then Hyderabad's Nizam's state. There Ross had some instructions from his friend Mansion in England. This friend had served in China and wanted to confirm his investigations. He had worked on filaria, the bug that causes elephantiasis. So Ross finally with the help of an

Indian laborer Lakhan or Lakshmana -- had discovered the germs of it.

Murugan was not happy with the western attitude that the eastern people were dullards or grossly unscientific. He hated their expression of 'the Other Mind.' So finally he discovers how Ross found out his findings. His paper is entitled Certain Systematic discrepancies in Ronald Ross's account of Plasmodium B.

Amitav Ghosh writes about his experience in the world. This is something new for Indians. Like Naipaul and Henry James, he writes of his continental life. His characters are from all parts of the world. Truly it is a world novel.

Be it as it may, Ghosh's character Antar lives in New York. He stays in a flat where his neighbour is a Guyanese woman Maria. An Indian lady Tar is there. One day he too goes to Calcutta and holds discussion with Murugan about his researches. Both speak of malaria problem. Murugan tells him right from the start. He says, after he was asked by Manson, Ross arrives to Madras. He goes to Secundarabad in Nizam's state. He finds a patient called Abdul Kadir and experiments on him. But he finds no success. He finds another man called Lakshman or Lakhan. The laborer is a 'dhooley-bearer.' He has some fever. For the next thirty-four months both stay together. They go to Nilgiri hills in 1897.

Murugan at Calcutta stays at a house where Ross lived once in Robinson Street. Even he goes to a lab where Ross worked. At this time an English man J.W.D. Grigson, a Cambridge scholar arrives in India and he conducts a linguistic survey of words in eastern languages. It is he who enlists words related to Lakhan, Lakshmana, or Lacaan. He lived with Ross some time. He converses with Lakhan also. Murugan says by way of a joking that these western people were clever. They wanted to discover not only medicine for malaria but the source of immortality. Murugan tells Antar: See why I have to go to Calcutta Ant?' Murugan shouted as they bore him inexorably towards the entrance. "If there is a Calcutta chromosome I've to find it. I guess I need it more than you do." (p. 92) This is how the novel gets its title "The Calcutta chromosome."

It is rather a coincidence that Urmila Roy who works in the Calcutta magazine and who likes the writer Phulboni says that she had an interest in Phulboni's Laakhan stories as written. This is what one must know with much relish. Accordingly, the writer Phulboni had once gone to Renupur near Sealdah. The two places are associated with Ross and Lakhan as they strolled there for their research. When Ross had with his follower gone to the upper India, Lakhan had stayed at Renupur railways station. Phulboni stays there once. Interestingly when he has to stay at a station's shanty, of course with his lantern and gun, at night he notices Lakhan's spirit almost disturbing. This is how Amitav Ghosh connects many characters with the main story line.

What more about the Calcutta chromosome? When Cunningham stayed at Calcutta and he had done some research on malaria, one scientist from Baltimore, USA, Dr

Elijah Monsoe Farley arrives there to see his research and slides on malaria. Interestingly when Farley goes to Cunningham he finds a rustic woman helping important things for Cunningham. As Murugan recounts this lady had even finely discovered fine germs of malaria. Actually she was to be honored. But what happened later, Ross conducted more research and he got the Noble Prize. Both Cunningham and Ross had accomplished their work there. Mangala was a fine nurse who had helped Cunningham, if Lakhan had helped Ross later. "The Calcutta chromosome, he said, that's my name for what she was working towards."2(p. 202)

Amitav Ghosh, just like a fine family writer, describes family affairs of the characters. He writes of Urmila Roy at length. This lady is a spinster. She has two brothers -- the first in some agency and the second a sportsman. One day the second man earns some honor and they decide to celebrate the event with their honored guest the business man Roman Haldar. That day, Urmila, by her mother is asked to buy and cook some fine fish. The same day she has a press meeting for a minister of communications. Yet the mother insists upon her. Alright Urmila buys some fish from a treacherous vendor. She verifies the quality of it a little later. She finds it below. She runs out for the vendor. She knocks upon the door of a man who happens to be her father's enemy. She goes to another house -- a mansion of Roman Haldar. She calls a servant and asks him whether Haldar is at home. The servant says no. Still she asks them whether the fish-boy is there. The security says sternly none of that trade is there and disallows her. Still she thrusts inside the house and the secretary abuse her. Yet she is hard-skinned and in their skirmish she falls fainting. Later Murugan arrives there. He finds her familiar. Urmila is a strong willed lady and she does not entertain him first. Later she asks him why he is after her. He says he is keen to have the paper that is wrapped around her fish pack. The said paper has details about Ross's researches. This appears rather strange as though in a detective fiction. Finally they go home and go to a place where Ross had worked in a lab.

In yet another dialogue or sub-narrative we find Murugan speaking to Urmila Roy that Mangala was the person behind Ross's analysis of malaria. He tells her:

Syphilis or to put it moiré precisely, syphilitic paresis -- the final paralytic stage of syphilis. From farley's account it seems there was an underground network of people who believed that she possessed a cure. Remember that we're talking about the 1890s --long before the discovery of penciling. Syphilis was untreatable and incurable: it killed millions of people every year, all around the world. These people who came to see Mangala may have believed that she was a witch or a magician or a god or whatever: it doesn't matter -- the conventional medical treatment for syphilis at that time weren't much more than hocus -- pocus either. Let's just stick with that old saying about no smoke without a fire. If a whole crowd of people believed that Mangala had a cure, or a half way effective treatment, it must have been because she had a certain rate of success. People aren't crazy: if they traveled long distances to see her they

must have thought she offered some kind of hope. (p. 204)

The novel ends with a small discovery. As we know Murugan is busy in his cell somewhere in Calcutta. People want to see him. So Antar with his Ava finds him somewhere. He tells Murugan: "people have been looking for you. Where have you been" (p. 255).

Criticism about the novel is still coming forth. Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* is now an established classic. Often it is stated as a novel of "fevers, delirium and discovery." It is a science fiction, no doubt. It is a medical thriller, no doubt. This is an astonishing work, no doubt. It

dramatizes the adventures of the enigmatic L. Murugan, an authority on Sir Ronald Ross—the Nobel prize-winning scientist who solved the malaria puzzle in Calcutta in 1898. It is said:

2. Conclusion:

With its extraordinary range of characters, advanced computer science, religious cults and wonderful portraits of Victorian and contemporary India, this is the novel in which Amitav Ghosh takes on the avatar of science thriller-writer. Winner of the Arthur C. Clark award, this is another major novel by India's most accomplished writer of English fiction.³

References

1. Domic Head, *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2006, p. 434.
2. All the textual references are from Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, New Delhi: Ravi dayal, 1996.
3. *Ibid.*, cover page.