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(Re)construction of ‘History’ as a form of Subaltern Politics in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*, which aligns with the postmodern approach towards history as a form of hegemonic construction by people in power. It thus reflects on history’s prospects of being a meta-narrative that acknowledges the knowledge formation system as a form of socio-cultural-political domination and endorses progressive politics. In this paper, I argue that Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* highlights the power-play hidden underneath authoritative history and reflects on people’s undocumented, quiescent experiences vis-à-vis the subaltern status quo. To carry out his objective to re/deconstruct history’s position as “master narratives” (Jameson 148), Ghosh uses the silence and secrecy of the subaltern group presented in the novel as tools of resistance against this dominant role of history that mostly favours the privileged and powerful. This research, using the framework of postmodern historicity and subaltern consciousness, critically analyzes how this treatment of history shows the “inadequacy of elitist historiography that follows directly from the narrow and partial view of politics to which it is committed by virtue of its class outlook.” (Guha 39) Through exploring the politics of silence in the novel embodied by the *Dalit* people, it finally shows how the self-imposed secrecy practised by this group in *The Calcutta Chromosome* reverses Western epistemology’s disregard for scientific and medicinal practices by the Orient and reclaims its role in history.

Keywords: History; Hegemonic construction; Subaltern resistance; Politics of silence

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Science fiction as a literary genre has the potential to break through normative modes of understanding the narrative world. To speak of this potential, Patricia Kerslake argues that Science Fiction has always been able to posit itself outside the hegemonic bind of canonical literature and therefore is a genre that lacks boundaries. (Kerslake 1) Due to this subversive quality, science fiction has become a space for postcolonial voices to present alternative history, which can accumulate the multiplicity of various “sub-histories”. It has hence created the space to “question, critique or move beyond the impulse of colonization” (Grewell 26) and thus can serve as the “dark subconsciousness” of the oppressed people living in an imperialistic world. (Roberts 66). In doing so, postcolonial science fiction stands against the hegemonic Western epistemology. Amitav Ghosh’s very Indian sci-fi, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, takes a position against the hegemonic approach towards knowledge formation practised by Western science while reversing the notion of history by politicizing silence. In the novel, Ghosh utilizes science fiction’s transcendental quality to rewrite the tremendous historical discovery of the root cause behind malaria by Ronald Ross, which posits the plot in a critical praxis of historiography. Levi Strauss defines this traditional historiography as “nothing but the myth of Western and especially modern, bourgeois, industrial, and imperialistic societies.” (1996). *The Calcutta Chromosome* becomes an amalgamation point for this postcolonial attitude of science fiction, the postmodern essence of meta-narratives and the politics of alternative history. Through his rewritten version of history, Ghosh brings up a completely fictionalized “sub-story” to show how history is biased and washes out the marginal from the scene. He creates a web of informational politics to shift power in the hand of subjugated class. The subaltern’s “silent” existence, embroiled with political agency, becomes a voice against hegemonic epistemology and authoritative historiography.

The novel starts with Antar enquiring into Murugan’s disappearance from his previous organization, LifeWatch, in search of the “secret” behind Ronald Ross’ seminal discovery in the malaria experiment. Murugan ardently believes that Ross’s discovery was merely a step in the process of a group of subaltern people keen to explore their ways to immortality through transmission and mutation. Eventually, it becomes the tale of a combined search for truth undertaken by a group of people among whom Antar and Murugan play vital roles. They are connected through the same quest to understand the mystery behind one of the most incredible advances in biomedicine. Antar and Murugan are driven by the urge to find the sub-histories left behind Ronald Ross’s journey towards discovery. They play the role of investigators in the process of historicizing the truth. Their attempt to investigate historically documented “facts” questions the

authenticity of written history and instead emphasizes history's narrative avatar. Through these characterizations, Ghosh successfully takes on the role of a narrative historian "to understand, and explain, in writing, the connections between events and occurrences in the past" (Munslow 6). He trivializes the gravity of historical knowledge that traditional documentation offers by blending literature with historicity and referentiality. While the very fact that this story is more about the silent assistance Ronald Ross has been receiving in his discovery process is a shift of focus in the text. It also echoes Linda Hutcheon's thought that "even the factual histories are not to be trusted as transparent in terms of language or structure". (10) The story supplements this view as Ghosh presents his readers with a series of uncanny and bizarre elements, reinforcing the unreliable nature of what is written. Written history or the other forms of informative knowledge is perceived as self-contradictory by the subaltern "Silence" group who believe "knowledge to be self-contradictory, "to know something means to change what is already known and so access to the realm of knowledge can begin only when one acknowledges the impossibility of any absolute knowledge." (Ghosh 103-104)

While these thoughts operate at the level of challenging the limits of knowing and how 'true knowledge' is an illusion, it also points out the untellable aspects of history, which constantly evolve. According to the subaltern community in the novel, in every act of knowing, there is a changed unknown future. This view towards history is something living in the "liminal."¹ (Bhaba 299) while treating it as both retrospective and anticipative, sublimity makes history a contested zone for analysis and breaks through its limit to specificity.

It is also notable that Antar attempts his investigation through things absent in the historical texts or database, such as a bracelet, correcting fluid or newspaper. The non-textuality of this process indicates how written history's factual approach often misses out on details that need attention. It also points out that to know/perceive an event to its authenticity, one has to dig into the silences, fragments and unruliness of everything. Similarly, Murugan's journey in search for the secret behind Ross' work is prompted by his view that the history written by Ross in his memoirs and the scientific record of his achievements exclude the participation of other people surrounding him who held more power and understanding than Ross. Murugan asserts his suspicion regarding Ross's version of the history as a "rewritten" one when he asserts that "Ross wants everyone to know the

1. Homi K. Bhabha defines "liminal space" as an in-between place that can be understood by going beyond the boundaries between borders, identity, politics, history, aesthetics, knowledge and so on.

history of his discovery the way he is going to tell them about it, and he does not want to leave even a single moment from it for anyone else's assumption (grab). (Ghosh 30)

The lines above show Ross' obsession with documenting his version of history for the world in which he silences the assistance of others to keep him in the focal point. Even when Murugan approaches the History of Science Society to propose a panel on the early research process of malaria and follows the rejection of his proposal with multiple emails, his membership is revoked with a warning of legal action upon his trial to attend any meeting arranged by the society in future (Ghosh 20). This shows the denial of the people in power even to entertain questions about an established history. He then stops trying to bring his case to a public scene and delves into the investigative journey alone. Murugan and Antar voluntarily take this voyage of enquiry into the untold parts of history through their trial to understand the subaltern agency of the "silent" team in Ross' laboratory.

This view towards narrative history as subjective and repressive is traceable in the characterization of Mangala, the leader of the silent subaltern group. Her supernatural existence brings about not only the subaltern agency into the scene but also how the Western outlook towards science is situated in contrast to that of India. Critics in Subaltern Studies have pointed out that elitist historiography of nationalist movements always excludes the participation of subaltern groups. Ranajit Guha explained that through the assimilation of a subaltern group's agency or rebellion into "the career of someone from the elite class, the nation or the people [the hegemonic narratives], it becomes easy for the historian to abdicate the responsibility he has of exploring and describing the consciousness specific to that rebellion and be content to ascribe to it a transcendental consciousness ... representing them merely as instruments of some other will" (Guha 38). Ghosh's novel picks up on Guha's argument and articulates it through the subaltern's participation in scientific discovery by Mangala's powerful existence. It points out that Ronald Ross' historical memoirs and the sole credit entitled to him for his scientific discovery follow this same route of trivializing the subaltern's participation in history. Even though he was aware of the unnatural ether of his laboratory (as he could sense something irregular about it), he never cared to know the whereabouts of his assistant, Lutchman alias Laakhan, or the other people, such as Mangala. Ghosh reverses this scene by employing a group of subaltern people with their communication strategy, silence, whose motives transcend the "mundane" desires pursued by science. They want to achieve something higher than what science may provide, so they are not even concerned about the credit of discovering malaria's mystery to Ross. Their solidarity towards

this target is the "signifier of their consciousness" (Guha 42) in the history course. Murugan, who understands this political agency more than anyone (as he claims), describes Mangala as someone who thinks "she is a god", and according to her, the objectives of her project are motivated by the desire to "set things on motion", which again is a form of power-practice (Ghosh 143). But Murugan asserts that Mangala is also supposed to tell others about "her history since that is also a part of the experiment" (Ghosh 143). Thus digging into the unintelligible and untold shares of history also holds the potential to create newer forms of historicity and an inclusive future for the subaltern people the novel vouches for.

Interestingly, these views contend that "her history" is also a part of the experiment. It conveys much of Ghosh's motives in this novel and suggests that just like Mangala, he also engages in his experimentation with the concept of history. Very much postmodern fiction, the author blends history with the plot, literal with imagination, and eventually, he becomes the "mind that sets things in motion". (Ghosh 143) Mangala's history cannot be summarized in any linear strategy; to understand her, one has to grasp "the patches scraps and hints for the observant reader and then accumulate that in the body of rumours, beliefs and unrecorded untold stories of the subaltern." (Banerjee 55) Mangala hence can be read as a mirror reflection of Ghosh himself, whose motives are not summarised in a simple patch. However, understandably, at least one of his motives is to deconstruct history to create a space for the unrecorded ones, while for Mangala, the motive is to achieve immortality.

To achieve this effect of giving voice to the unrecorded stories of the subaltern and negate Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Ghosh recruits a group of assistants in Ross' library who are socially subaltern (a hooley bearer and Mangala—a sweeper woman). Their socioeconomic status bars their access to a scientific laboratory or methodological knowledge, but their understanding of the world gives them a stronger position than Ross holds in the story. Therefore, Mangala and Laakhan's presence in this novel challenges the history of Western scientific discoveries and the denial of subaltern agency or even their existence in colonial history. Ross skips detailing about his assistants in the memoir, while Ghosh indicates that his experiments were not merely supported by the unnamed assistants but guided mainly by them indirectly. Ghosh gives them names in his novel, as seen in many other postcolonial remakes (e.g., *The Meursault Investigation*). They contribute to the discovery process through information, even offering their body for medical experiments (Lakkhan). Even Murugan hallucinates himself of having been the subject of an experiment for Ross in his past life. These inclusions of the roles played by Indian people in the history of West's scientific research

offer the readers an alternative history which is more prosperous, fuller and inclusive. It also reinforces how history can be subjective, biased and is subject to narrative and the political agency of its documenters. Ghosh's approach here echoes Guha's criticism against "unhistorical historiography", which leaves out to document this "politics of people" as explained by Guha:

For parallel to the domain of elite politics, there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people. (Guha 40)

Besides these attempts to tell the untold and historicize the subaltern in general, Ghosh also attempts to curate the body of medical history in the Indian subcontinent, which has long been a place for medical experiments. Most of colonial history has been unwilling to acknowledge the value and effectiveness of folk/indigenous medical practices from the Indian subcontinent. Mondal and Gaur contend that colonial intellectuals ignored the necessity of documenting folk medical practices in India as they were more focused on historicizing the complex caste system prevailing in the Indian subcontinent. (Mondal and Gaur 11). Mondal and Gaur also contend that even though a group of subaltern people had been involved in the medical practices by providing remedies for different ailments, due to their lack of scientific institutionalization, their presence remained invisible. Their folk medical techniques were instead described as "grossly fantastic" by Western scholars in the history of the Indian medical system written by them. (Mondal and Gaur 14) In some cases, this native group of folk medical practitioners were even mocked by the Western clan due to this lack of theoretical knowledge. (12) *The Calcutta Chromosome* takes a different strategy to highlight these native healing practices from India to reflect how biomedicine is yet to give the due credit to these eastern routes of remedies. We can see people suffering from various diseases (such as syphilis) treated by Mangala, which Farley interprets as unknowledgeable quackery. (Ghosh 85) This is the typical attitude of the colonial power, which disregards anything that does not fit into the rationality created by the West and addresses those as irrational, unscientific and contemptible. Ghosh initiates a conversation regarding the value of Eastern mysticism and folk practices by incorporating Indian medical practices into the history of Western rational

science. This act further highlights the biases of history since it is the voice of the robust and institutionalized documenters only, echoing Alun Munslow's note: "The past and written history are not the same thing." (4)

This section moves towards the critical tools used by Ghosh to understand this reorientation of historiography. As mentioned in the beginning, silence and secrecy are the primary strategies to shape this alternative history for the subaltern people. The text's treatment of the silent subaltern characters (such as Mangala and Lakkhan) as more knowledgeable and diplomatic than Ross adds a new dimension to the thought process of scientific knowledge and history. While traditional history tends to conceptualize silence as passive and lacking agency, Ghosh presents silence as a choice for this group of people. On the surface level, a silent group of people would hold low importance and be treated as absent by a historicist. But Ghosh questions this approach of history to overlook the silent catalysts underlying the factual details of any phenomenon by entitling them with a significant focus in the novel. Mangala's more powerful gaze than Ross' obscure and obsessive visions further expands this further.

Mangala's silence and minimal physical presence are symptomatic of her visionary personality. Unlike Ross and his historical memoirs, she can see beyond the surface and reclaims a position in history for the silent agents of resistance. Murugan expands on her character, saying, "She is more than talent and a genius instead. She didn't require the Western theories or zoological study to be able to differentiate between ideas and things; rather, her gaze is enough to interpret a situation on its own merit" (Ghosh 243). Therefore, Mangala transcends beyond the tropes of speech, historical accreditation and epistemology, and through her silence, Ghosh manages to subvert the supremacy Western science and history hold. These all make her presence subversive to history's accumulation of individual being into homogeneity and reallocate the "strangeness, exotic sensuousness "or "Indianness" throughout history. (Said 72)

It is to be noted that the novel's setting is colonial India, and the chromosomal functionality is also named after the city, an example of Ghosh's complex ways of deconstruction or refabrication of history. His novel not only relocates the contribution of unsung people in any xamajor history (in this case, that of malaria discovery) but also revises the historical connection between Calcutta and colonial medicinal practice. While Calcutta was often cited as reminiscent of London's architecture, the British colonial discourses in the nineteenth century also regarded it as a hub of disease, death and darkness. (Howell 176) This historical association with disease and unhealthy environment prompted the medical practitioners of the West to choose it as a site for their medical experiments on people from the lower class (Lakkhan in *The Calcutta*

Chromosome serves the same purpose). Furthermore, even though there are instances of adopting the irregular non-western healing practices to cure diseases, such as adopting inoculation to treat smallpox, eventually, this practice was disregarded as unscientific. It was a denial that oriental practices have been instrumental in treating many fatal diseases in history, and instead, vaccines were initiated as a more refined way of treatment. Rajani Sudan explained this attitude as an attempt to distinguish medical practices to reinforce “cultural distinctiveness” and supremacy. (“Contracting” 98) Ghosh’s version of the medical history in Calcutta counters this discursive approach very technically as the novel’s attempt to historicize India’s medicinal world locates it in a place imbued with supernatural transcendentalism: Calcutta. Hence, even though Calcutta becomes the setting for an experiment in a colonial manner, its uncanniness resists the power-play of history through the essential ethos of postcolonial sci-fi. Even Ross’ experiments are manipulated by the subaltern Calcutta group for their purpose. Thus the novel projects onto Calcutta’s potential to be a space for “creative uncanny” to emerge. It also becomes appropriate for Ghosh’s representation of the “Counter-Science” ethos or supernatural “Silence”. (Howell 178)

Nevertheless, even though the novel demands its readers to engage with a complex web of various perspectives towards history, informational exchange, politics of resistance and subaltern representation, it can be summed up as a thought-provoking attempt to point out the blind spots in history. It hence assumes that traditional historiography is elitist as it disregards subaltern autonomy. It also conveys that history is written and therefore subjective; it is elitist, therefore, selective and/or subject to manipulation of those who have the cultural capital such as language, technical tools and access to media for circulation, which is more evident in the era of digitalization. Through this trial to voice out for the subaltern people’s participation in the official history of scientific research, Ghosh stands for a revision of history, including the politics of marginalized people beyond this specific event. This paper has tried to figure out the historical lapses *The Calcutta Chromosome* wants us to ponder about through using subaltern agency and imagination. It also attempted to show that this text stands as a testimony of how history misses out on accumulating the roles and narratives of the “other” subaltern identities as it ultimately becomes the version of the narrative written and circulated by people in power. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is hence a literary “search of subaltern consciousness”, which stands as an evidence of how literature can contribute to upset the authoritarian role of history through “dramatic, speculative, and open-ended ways of representing subaltern consciousness even to revisionary history” (Sabin 177).

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