

Power Politics And Literature: A New Historicist Reading Of The Calcutta Chromosome

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Abstract:

Literary texts, according to critics like Stephen Greenblatt and Alan Sinfield, are the vehicles of power because power and its subversion existing in societies have been tellingly presented in literary texts. So, to resist power, literary texts have become prime tools for the contemporary writers, and to meet this end they employ literature by showing their explicit interest in resistance and subversion of power. Therefore, the past has been used as an impetus for political struggle in the present by the new historicist critics, and it implies that literary studies are inseparable from the sphere of politics. So, wherever question of power arises, truth and politics intersects. Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) is a fine specimen of the power politics between classes. This paper will attempt to read this novel from the purview of power exhibited in its polymorphous forms.

Keywords: Power, knowledge, subversion, new-historicism

Introduction

The novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* opens with a depiction of Antar, an Egyptian working in the information technology industry in the New York of the near future. His hi-tech computer, Ava, shows him the trace of an I. D. card that has been lost in the virtual system, and Antar gradually realizes that it belongs to a former colleague of his, Murugan, who 'disappeared' while on leave in Calcutta in 1995. Murugan had been doing research on the Nobel prize-winning scientist, Ronald Ross (1857 - 1932), whose ground-breaking discovery that malaria is transmitted by the bite of a mosquito was made in Calcutta one hundred years earlier. He had always insisted that Ross's scientific discovery had been manipulated by an Indian 'counter-science' group that had "systematically interfered with his experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others" (Ghosh 36). By placing science and counter-science together, the narrator challenges the Western scientific knowledge and its biased history. Though there were other European scientists from France, Germany, Russia, and Italy etc who had done pioneering work in the discovery of the parasite, but it was Ross who succeeded in his research and gained all the credit. The novel critiques the English attitude that led to the entry of Ross in the research for the discovery of the malaria parasite:

Ross wasn't a Pasteur or a Koch: he just didn't have as much variety to his game. His stuff on malaria was about the only cutting-edge work he ever did. And even that was a freak one-off thing. (27)

The attitude of Ross' father who diverted his son's interests from poetry to medical science represents the pragmatic approach of the West to achieve superiority and credit in all possible fields of knowledge:

There's no goddam service here doesn't have a Ross in it, you name it, Civil Service, Geological Service, Provincial Service, Colonial Service ... There's this outfit that's short on Ross right now: the Indian Medical Service. (Ghosh 45)

The narrator points out the assumptions regarding the expertise and seriousness that is associated with the seriously engaged scientists of the West:

He looks in the mirror and asks himself: What's hot in medicine right now ... What's going to bag me a Nobel? And what does the mirror tell him? You got it: malaria there's where it's at this season. (Ghosh 45)

The chosen area of the British research scientist was a meticulously planned effort to secure distinction in the respective field. Moreover, the novel questions Western assumptions of rationality and knowledge. It is ordinary lab assistants Lakhani and Mangala with little attributes of Western logic or rationality who overpower Ross. Because of their advanced knowledge of the malaria parasite and its efficacy in curing syphilis, the narrator grants them the status of the real achievers, of the ones embarking upon a breakthrough in the field of medical science.

Another point that draws attention is how Ross was using poor, destitute Indians for his experiment by offering them money. It was purely for pragmatic reasons – to secure name, fame and glory for himself and the British Empire. This reveals the colonial mindset of using 'the other' for furthering their own interests. But the secret science cult had no such logic. They eliminate certain scientists like Farley and reveal the discovery only to Ross, but their aim is not to gain name. It is something far beyond the orbit of Western rationality. Their aim is purely spiritual. The human sacrifice they carry out is to achieve a higher goal – 'immortality'. They are not motivated by worldly desire for recognition and rewards.

Thus, the novel gives scope to re-interpret and decode the unmapped secrets of history. It translates the other side of history and projects contributions and experiences of the silent and usually suppressed voices of history. These silent and invisible figures that live far away from the historical figures are widely perceived by as significant characters in the novel. The narrative brings the narration closer to individual history, rather than the recorded history, thereby providing a mere commentary of history. In doing so, the novel projects history of the colonized rather than the colonizer.

The novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* is likely to present what history does not say. This gap of what is not being said becomes the foreground for practical imagination in the course

of the novel, which endeavours to establish a link between the past and the present through stories. The novel fruitfully merges reality and fiction from history and present. However it is not a new thing in the Indian literary tradition to enmesh history and literature. It is the tradition that has borne epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* that have survived for hundreds of years as history, mythology, and literary masterpieces.

The novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* finely highlights the invasion of British and how it affected India and Indians in context of the malaria research. Historical events and imaginative fiction are subtly interwoven into the narrative fabric of the fiction as narrative strategy. It is right to state that the fictionalised history that the novel presents is an allegorical representation of subverted history in which an attempt is made to fill in gaps and absences. A strong stand for the rights of the dispossessed is well depicted in the novel by giving due respect and recognition to the uneducated subaltern figures. It presents their situation and their stories to the world. These features are also seen in Amitav Ghosh's other literary works as well. The various characters he creates in his works have varied and intense stories they want history to take notice of. *The Calcutta Chromosome* also presents ordinary fictional characters that are filled to the brim with stories of historical events as felt and experienced by them. The fictitious characters such as Antar and Tara in the future, Murugan and Urmila in the present and Ross and Mangala bring in a direct convergence of history and imagination with one another in the novel.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Antar becomes obsessed with the idea of uncovering the secret of Murugan's disappearance and this sets him off on a bewildering journey of encounters (many of them computer-mediated) with characters from both past and present, from Egypt, India, America, and Britain. He suspects that Murugan may have been right in thinking that Ronald Ross's discoveries had been secretly engineered by an Indian 'counter-scientific' cult. This cult, he discovers, is led by an enigmatic scavenger woman called Mangala, helped by Ross's favourite servant, known as Laakhan. The group of subaltern figures, Murugan suggests, believes that to know something is to change it, because as soon as something is known it is already changed, since by then "you only know its history" (Ghosh 104). Mangala and her followers wanted to effect a mutation in their progress towards finding the secret of immortality, which is the ultimate goal of all their endeavours. Their strategy was to allow Ross to make his malariological breakthrough, because "if you wanted to create a specific kind of change, or mutation, one of the ways in which you could get there is by allowing certain things to be known" (Ghosh 217).

As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly multi-stranded, connecting the generic boundaries between science fiction, cyberpunk, fantasy, and stories of the supernatural. In most of the points in the novel, particularly the section of Renupur station passage, the real world and the internet world collide, where "characters and stories appear from and disappear into; centres which connect worlds, a kind of real world internet portals" (55). The narrator constructs several grids in the novel that intersect each other; the railway network that connects the India of Ronald Ross's day being overlaid by the new technologies of the internet and holographic communication. It also weaves together information about historical movements, such as Gnosticism and Theosophy, with fictional explorations of holographic communication

with the help of the supercomputer Ava and reincarnation of the subaltern characters like Mangala and Lakhan. Perhaps it is done mainly to create a complex narrative that oscillates between countries and between many different historical periods. Antar, by using computer mediated communication and holographs, discovers that Murugan while researching the real-life scientist Ronald Ross had uncovered the workings of an Indian “counter-science”. He realises that Murugan may have been right in thinking that Ross’s discoveries had been secretly engineered by an Indian “counter-scientific” cult, which includes characters such as Mangala and Laakhan. . Murugan assumes:

[Murugan:] what these guys were developing was the most revolutionary medical technology of all time. Forget about the Nobel, forget about diseases and cures and epidemiology and shit like that. What these guys were after was much bigger; [...] the ultimate transcendence of nature. (Ghosh 105)

As theosophical practices, we can see the Indians’ experiments with pigeon sacrifice and religious rituals in an ultimate quest to achieve immortality. The novel provides a re-visioning of science not only through a blurring of the lines between science, social science, and fiction but also by rediscovering and reviving the afterlives of oriental counter-science, offers a fundamental epistemological challenge to Western science. It is done in the novel by projecting Mangala, the head of the ‘anti-science’ group, who is able to adopt a perspective that offers another approach towards discovering a cure for malaria. The “anti-science” group’s long-pursued dream of immortality as the driving force brings the readers into the realm of science fiction and at the same time renders Mangala as a “goddess”. The reason for conducting research is not because she “wants to be a scientist” but rather that “she wants to be the mind that sets things in motion”, comparable to the Hindu God Ganesh. (Ghosh 249) The novel by its act of retelling and reinvention, recreates the event of scientific history through a resistant reading of Ross’s Memoirs in which he foregrounds the role of marginalised natives and investigates the possibility of transmitting native knowledge through bodies across generations. It is Murugan’s thesis that the Calcutta chromosome transfers biological correlates from one individual to another through transferences that are nonsexual and which penetrate the barrier of brain and blood. Murugan traces this back to Mangala Bibi, an illiterate sweeper woman who ends up working for the nineteenth-century British scientist D.D. Cunningham. Mangala Bibi is the secret counter-science cult’s high priestess, which deals in transference of the mind; and the twentieth century American lady resident in Calcutta, Mrs Aratounian, the experienced babysitter in New York, Tara, and finally Urmila Roy, the self-sufficient Calcutta correspondent, are all to be perceived as Mangala’s “reincarnation”. Working outside Western empirical methodologies, Mangala has been attempting to evolve a technology, referred to as ‘interpersonal transference’: an ancient vernacular strategy of transmitting knowledge from body to body even after death.

Furthermore, Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* has attempted to subvert the binary of colonised and coloniser by exploring the social, technological, and economic structures of the city. The laboratories, railway stations, hospitals, country clubs and colonial mansions are the entities in the city through which the scientific, technological, communication, social and political networks of the imperial endeavour are manifested. The

categories of coloniser and colonised, British and Indian and powerful and powerless are redefined as well as reasserted in the novel by the characters. The novel finely demonstrates the subversion of Western objective notions of science and technology, and shows how colonised and diasporic characters use science and technology in order to exercise their political as well as social aims.

The novel retells the story of Ronald Ross and his malarial research. Universalisation of Western science and Ronald Ross as a lone genius working in a “savage” land is interrogated, and the Indian “assistants” who accompanied him in Calcutta’s Hospital laboratory is given credit in the novel. But more importantly, Claire Chambers points out that the novel projects how “science, technology and medicine were not conveyed to India by the British in a one-way process of transfer, but were in fact involved in a complex series of cross-cultural exchanges, translations and mutations” (58). It can be acknowledged as the novel’s best job of subverting the binary of West and non-west.

The disparity between powerful and powerless, British and Indian, institutions and individuals are minimized by the practices of Mangala and Laakhan and it shifts the emphasis to a kind of interconnectedness. In the cross-cultural exchanges of ideas as well as disease, the colonial cities play a crucial role, as Porter points out, they were “magnets for pathogens no less than people” (23). They created as in the case of Laakhan the possibility of increased contact and movement. De Certeau ascertains that the city through its everyday practices allows colonized subjects, to “make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy and in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules.” (xiv). In the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the Indian and diasporic characters use everyday practices of walking, transformation, conversing and particularly dwelling in Calcutta to reassert but more importantly reinscribe and transform the institutions of the British empire. Two other characters Romen Haldar and Mrs. Aratounian, who are crucial to complicate and subvert the British structures and dwellings through their daily practices in the novel.

It is important to recognize the complexity and uniqueness of the exchange of science, technology and architecture that took place between indigenous and British people in the space of the Indian city. For example, in the novel through Urmila’s everyday practices, the narrator shows Calcutta as a space that both promises and delimits certain types of democratising interaction. Notwithstanding the institutions and networks of power, like de Certeau, the novel asserts that human invention and adaptability is the most valuable “technology” and resource in the city. Suraiya claims Calcutta’s motto is, “ignore the potholes and dead telephones. It is people that count, and Calcutta— first, last and always— is people” (35). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the narrator has convinced us that it is the people of Calcutta (non-Western, lower caste, female, and subaltern included) that count. Moreover, it is seen that the novel’s experimentation of knowledge, however objective and culturally neutral it seems, is in fact unavoidably shaped by culture and power.

Hence this novel finely shows that power is not static in the hands of a particular class of the society. It may pass on from centre to periphery or vice versa. Power is always entangled

with class struggle and it is recorded in the literary texts of the particular period. The novel's use of new technology, such as Super computer Ava is regarded as a super Panopticon, a system of surveillance, which resembles Bentham's original concept of Panopticon. The society depicted in the novel is less regimented than the society described in Foucault, however, characters like Antar seems to develop ways of escaping surveillance. The novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* initiates a subversion of the established binary of Colonised and Coloniser by exploring the social, economic and technological structures of the Calcutta city, particularly. The characters in the novel have redefined the categories of coloniser and colonised, British and Indian and powerful and powerless in a vivid manner. Moreover, we have seen that the novel questions Western assumptions of rationality and knowledge. The lab assistants with little attributes of Western logic or rationality are prone to overpower Ross in the novel. Because of their advance knowledge of the malaria parasite and its efficacy in curing syphilis, the narrator recognises them as the real achievers, the ones who undertook a major breakthrough in the field of medical science. Moreover, it is seen that the novel's experimentation of knowledge, however objective and culturally neutral it seems, is in fact unavoidably shaped by culture and power.

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