



THE EAST- WEST ENCOUNTER: EXPLORING GHOSH'S THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME

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The novel **The Calcutta Chromosome** is about the medical history of malaria research carried out by the English scientist Ronald Ross. Ross was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1906 for his successful discovery of the Malarial parasite. The novel also critiques western historiography and the universal claims of western science. Ghosh subverts the claims of western science by inserting a parallel history of the Indian 'Counter-Science' cult that was far ahead of Ross in the knowledge about the cure for malaria. This secret cult shrouded in mystery is an important element in the novel and sustains the interest of the readers throughout. The novel has several incidents which seem uncanny and incredible. There are mysterious disappearances, ghosts and the spirits entering human body and reincarnations. The connections that Ghosh establishes to lend credibility to it spread across centuries and places as farfetched as Calcutta and its small villages to New York in America. There is a long chain of people involved in the secret working of the Counter science cult who are brought together by some invisible super power that directs them to do so which it is believed would lead to the attainment of immortality.

The novel begins in New York, in the future, with Antar, an Egyptian employee of the International Water Council working on his Super computer Ava. A remnant of the ID card flashed on the screen leads Antar on the trail of its owner, who finally turns out to be Murugan, an employee of the same organisation where Antar works. Ava reveals that Murugan has been missing and was last seen in Calcutta in 1995.

From New York the novel shifts its location to Calcutta where the real drama unfolds. Ghosh takes us back into the late 19th century when major developments in the discovery of

the malaria parasite were taking place. Most of the action in the novel takes place in Calcutta. Calcutta has always been of special interest to Ghosh. The Ronald Ross memorial in Presidency College Hospital in Calcutta that figures in the novel reminds us of the history of malaria. Murugan's interest in the history of malaria and his thorough research in the subject had given him the theory of the 'Other Mind': "a theory that some person or persons had systematically interfered with Ronald Ross's experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others."

Murugan tells Antar about the scientists like Grigson, Farley and Doc Manson who were seriously devoted to scientific research to discover the malarial parasite. A scientist like Julius Von Wagner – Jauregg discovered that artificially induced malaria could cure syphilis in the dementia paralytica stage when it attacks the brain. It won him the Nobel Prize in 1927. But finally it was Ross who achieved a breakthrough in the research.

Ghosh critiques the self-proclaiming attitude of the west as the sole possessor of knowledge, meaning and scientific advancement. He makes ordinary people of society the real heroes who helped Ross carry out the experiment. It is Mangala and Lutchman or Lakshaman, the lab assistants, who surpass the scientists in their knowledge of the disease, its cure and in their knowledge that malarial parasite can be used for curing syphilis. Though they are poor, uneducated rustics yet the brilliant western scientists are no match for their expertise in the field of medical science. The goals set up by the western scientists are tangible and are capable of being realised in the physical world. But what the secret cult desires is purely transcendental. They want to achieve immortality or a "technology for interpersonal transference."

Farley sees the sweeper woman Mangala in a pose that is entirely different from what is usually associated with her job. While searching for the Laveran's parasite, he notices a macabre performance in the outhouse. In the eerie atmosphere, he sees Mangala in a position of command, sitting on a divan like a goddess with a number of people lying prostrate before her. Some of them are syphilitics, wrapped in blankets. Lutchman, the assistant, fetches her, the slides. Finally, Farley finds the Laveran's parasite in the slide, which Lutchman hands him. But Farley watches secretly the blood oozing out from a pigeon Mangala had freshly beheaded. It is the most unlikely source. This uncanny drama performed before Farley's eyes shows how mystery, faith in reincarnation and immortality are an integral part of Eastern religious faith and cultural beliefs but can in no way be rationalized or justified by Western rationality.

And this incident of Mangala as the Goddess, performing a human sacrifice is repeated several times in the novel. The drama spans over centuries and characters involved in it change with the changing times. It is believed that every year Mangala-bibi, the Goddess, entered a new body, completing the process of reincarnation. Murugan believes that he is the chosen one, tying the loose threads in the workings of the secret cult. The 'counter science' group had chosen Ross to discover the malarial parasite, without getting Ross to know about their secret activity of manipulating his research because,

"They believed that to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you've already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history."

This highlights the engagement of 'counter science' cult with higher pursuits, surpassing the Western scientist's worldly aspirations for achievements. This secret group not only creates history but also acknowledges the important fact of constantly transforming it. This shows that there is no ultimate end to history. In fact it is a continuous process constantly being transformed as it is created. Reincarnation and the making of history are juxtaposed and this truly reflects Ghosh's idea of history.

It is change or mutation that the 'counter-science' cult favours. Murugan explains this to Antar, "they've taken their work to a certain point and then they've run smack into a dead end: they're stuck, they can't go any further... they decide that the next big leap in their project will come from a mutation in the parasite... how do they speed up the process? The answer is: they've got to find a conventional scientist who'll give it a push." (CC 89) However it is these marginalised individuals like Mangala and Lutchman or Laakhan who lead the secret counter science cult and involve different people in their experiment in transmigration of souls. Phulboni, the poet, Sonali, Urmila, Mrs. Aratounian, Tara, Roman Haldar and Antar and Murugan, belonging to the present and future are all a part of its secret plan. They are all a part of history as it is in the process of being created.

During his youth, Phulboni the writer had closely encountered death in the form of the Ghost, Laakhan, who carries a signal lantern and puts him on the railway tracks. Laakhan is the ghost of a 14-year-old boy whose death was conspired by the stationmaster in Renupur. The boy had his thumb missing from one of his hands. Lutchman, Laakhan, Roman Haldar, the 14 year old boy who is Sonali's servant, Lucky all these people have a deformed hand and this provides a clue to their involvement in the experiment in reincarnation and its timeless continuity. Similarly Mrs. Aratounian, Urmila, Tara are the chosen bodies to be entered by

Mangala-bibi, the Goddess. The British scientists are merely a part of the grand scheme of the counter-science group's plan. They play a minor role of being the experimented and not experimenters as they thought of themselves:

He thinks he's doing experiments on the malaria parasite. And all the time it's he who is the experiment on the malaria parasite. But Ronnie never gets it; not to the end of his life.

It is Lutchman who suggests Ross that a particular species of female mosquitoes called anopheles were carriers of malaria. And it is proved true. The lab assistants like Lutchman who played a big role in the scientific research were hardly accorded any credit by the mainstream scientists. Ghosh studied Ross' 'Memoirs' and found that he did not acknowledge the contribution of his servants. So actually the Indian counter science cult leads Ross in the right direction in his research. The indigenous knowledge proved to be significant in the success of his experiment. Thus according to Claire Chambers,

"Science, technology and medicine were not conveyed to India by the British in one-way process of transfer, but were infact involved in a complex series of cross-cultural exchanges, translations and mutations."

By juxtaposing the official history of Ross' discovery with counter science cult, Ghosh dismantles the boundaries between mystery and knowledge, silence and language, spirit and matter and also realism and fantasy.

References

*All references to the text are from the novel by Ghosh, Amitav, **The Calcutta Chromosome**, Ravi Dayal and Permanent Black: New Delhi, 1996.*