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Time as A Literary Device in the Calcutta Chromosome

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Abstract

The Calcutta Chromosome by Amitav Ghosh extends from 1895 (the Ross Research) through 1995 (Murugan's quest) and ultimately into a timeless future with Antar in New York. The novel through its theme of the quest for the malarial parasite has various undertones of occult and mystery spread over the past, present and future dexterously strewn together by the masterly use of time. In this novel Ghosh confronts science with counter science, juxtapositions the conventional science (the name Murugan gives to scientific knowledge) represented by Ronald Ross against the ingenious knowledge with the method of uneducated Indians represented by Mangala. Ross is manipulated by Mangala and her team into the discovery of the malaria-parasite. It is as if it was to divert Ross's attention from something and evidently it's Mangala's occult experimentation. This experimentation needs scientific equipment. So as a sort of favour as well as to keep Ross engaged Mangala with help of Lutchman leads Ross into the discovery of malarial parasite. Mangala's pre-eminence pervades the entire book and in front of her enigmatic knowledge the white skinned scientists appear dull and naïve. Mangala who is the upholder of the cult of secrecy controls with this weapon Ross, Farley, Grigson, Cunningham and all others who claim superiority over the coloured folks. The narrative oscillates to and fro into the past and present woven into a tightly gripped narrative with a palpable mystery element. The time travel is through the fragments of memories, bits of stories and the experiences of the characters, hallucinations embedded throughout the story. The quest for the malaria parasite is what strews the story in one whole. The mystery element is retained dexterously throughout the narrative and has a unifying impact on the novel. This paper is an attempt to trace the pattern of time utilized by Ghosh in The Calcutta Chromosome.

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Introduction

Discussion: The time scheme of a novel depends entirely upon the novelist. As E.M. Forster maintains, a time piece is ticking in each novel. Again to resort to Bergson's theory in Time and Western Man time may be either the clock time which depends upon the moving hands of the clock or the span of time which ultimately depends upon individual state of mind. Bergson stated, "Hence we have to distinguish two ways of assimilating the conscious state of other people: the one dynamic, which consists in experiencing them oneself; the other static, which consists in substituting for the consciousness of these states their image or rather their intellectual idea, their symbol." ^[1] Bergson refers to the reading of a novel as an example of entering into the consciousness of others. When a person is in a jovial state of

mind the time seems to have wings of its own with which it flies away as swift as an eagle. Quite contrary when a person is going through "hard times" the time feels as if it has been constrained into fetters. So a novelist can in his narrative bring into focus the immediate event known or expected time, and in the process the novelist's clock tells different times simultaneously. Time and space are two inseparable entities as is aptly expressed by Virginia Woolf:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? ^[2]

In selecting a time scheme for his novel a writer may either follow the Aristotelian concept of unity of time or make the time encompassed in the novel correspond to the duration of reading the book. On the other hand he may evolve time through the pages of the book mixing in kaleidoscopic manner the memory, perception and speculation. Ghosh in his books uses time in the most unique manner. There are constant shifts between action that is actually happening and that has happened in form of time lived and time remembered. The Calcutta Chromosome embraces time from the end of the nineteenth century to some unnamed future time.

The novel opens with a time which for Antar is the present but for the reader some unnamed future. The narrative does not proceed forward systematically but like atoms keeps on flying off in various directions, from past to present or future and vice versa. The experience the reader feels is that of entering into measureless tunnel with the winds of oblivion adrift amidst the sporadic bits of information. The Calcutta Chromosome is a science fiction with the thrill of a mystery novel. There is a frequent blurring of images which further helps in dissolving the actual distance between the past and the present. These disjointed images and dissolving personal memories coalesce to form vague but strangely beautiful images which interact with the memory patterns of others and the result is the merging of places and time which spans to articulate a new science and philosophy - a philosophy of being.

To produce this pattern Ghosh constantly picks out people whose memories play tricks on them:

He recalled a meeting, a conversation somewhere years ago, sitting across a table. But just as memory was beginning to take on an outline, it dissolved. ^[3]

We reach Sonali and Urmila and then Romen Haldar through Antar and Murugan, Murgan being the link that leads us through backward passage of time to Ross and Lutchman, to Secunderabad and Calcutta and Austria, all these are wielded into one whole by the 'malaria quest'. The issue of the malaria fever is coloured with various shades of mysticism and mystery to which supernatural element has been engrafted ingeniously giving the whole structure a cumulative colouring of its own.

Let me put it like this,' Murugan said: you know all about matter and anti-matter right? And rooms and anterooms and Christ and anti-Christ and so on?

Now let's say there was something like science and counter-science? Thinking of it in the abstract, wouldn't you say that the first principle of a functioning counter-science would have to be secrecy? The way I see it, it wouldn't just have to be secretive about what it did (it couldn't hope to beat the scientists at that game anyway): it would have to be secretive in what it did; it would also have to use secrecy as a technique or procedure. It would in principle have to refuse all direct communication, straight off the bat, because to communicate, to put ideas into language would be to establish a claim to know which is the first thing that a counter-science would dispute. (CC 88).

In this novel Ghosh confronts science with counter science, by the juxtaposition of the conventional science (the name Murugan gives to scientific knowledge) represented by Ronald Ross against the ingenious knowledge with the method of uneducated Indians represented by Mangala. There is an artistic blending of the world of science and counter science, European rationality and Indian beliefs projected against the realistic etching out of the topography of the Calcutta milieu with its streets, markets and monuments. The

supernatural events intensify the veracity of the devices and technique used giving it a sort of microscopic structural unity. The Indian scientist Murugan (who narrates the story to Antar), works in New York's Life-Watch and is an expert on Ross, the man who researched on malaria-fever and discovered the malarial parasite. Antar who is the solitary survivor of malaria in his village located in Egypt, works in New York with his computer Ava. Through the story narrated to him by Murugan, Antar retracts the steps of time and moves backwards where he encounters Ronald Ross. Thus, The Calcutta Chromosome has a dynamic field. The dynamic field as described by Kestner is the field "through which the reader may temporarily be the character, be the author of his own text, and be an interpreter. The dynamic field of the novel, common to the work, to the author, and to its interpreter, is language, by nature dynamic."

Against the historical background of Ross's discovery about malarial parasite is Mangala, overtly assistant to D.D. Cunningham, but in reality a woman possessing supernatural powers. Mangala is described like an enshrined goddess:

Mangala was seated at the far end of the room on a low divan, but alone in an attitude of command, as through enthroned. By her side at the far end of the room were several bamboo cages, each containing a pigeon They were all slumped on the floors of their cages, shivering, evidently near death on the floor by the divan, clustered around the woman's feet, were some half dozen people in various attitudes of supplication, some touching her feet, others lying prostrate. Two or three others were huddled against the wall, wrapped in blankets They were syphilitics, in final stages of the terrible disease (CC 125-126).

The written space of the novel is divided into two sections. The first section is named "August 20: Mosquito Day" and consists of 23 chapters covering a written space of 40 pages. The second section entitled "The Day After" covers 113 pages. Both the sections carry forward the quest theme and end on a note of mystery. The first section ends with a dense aura of mystery:

Raising her voice, the woman said to the crowd in archaic Bengali; 'The time is here, pray that all goes well for our Laakhan, once again.'

The drumming rose to a crescendo: there was a flash of bright metal and a necklace of blood flowed up and fell sizzling on the fire (CC140).

The second section entitled "The Day After" ends with:

There were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people were in the room with him. They were saying: 'we're with you; you're not alone; well help you across.'

He sat back and sighed as he hadn't sighed in years (CC 256).

Through the "chromosome" perpetuated via the "counter-science" the past, present and future are one and flow in one on-going experiment. It is a world in which the internal relations across space and time are brought together with appropriating one to another. Thus the spaces of the Egyptian Antar, the Cosmopolitan babu, Murugan, the indigenous worker Urmila, the Europeanised Mrs. Aratounian and the unlettered people such as Mangla and Lakhan are brought together. Yet the modulation of tone of these disparate entities is done by several indicators without any device of staging.

These spaces generated by the gaps in between the known and unknown are what Murugan aims to fill up. Murugan's striving after the facts generate more and more space as there is the gradual unfolding of the layers of time backward. We are first a witness of the events unfolding in 1889 then 1885

and 1840 and such similar with a careful co-relation between the past and present. The fluidity of space is further attained by the interpenetration of time attained by the repetition of the events of the past in those of present. Elements of occult, suspense and witchcraft are superimposed on the narrative of Murugan's quest. It takes Antar only a few hours to see Murugan's two days experiences in Calcutta and Murugan, in turn, takes only a few hours to narrate the experiences of Ronald Ross and others in the nineteenth century. This nutshell has quite a reverse impact as we see the virtual space operating itself. This creates a sense of infinity, which is perhaps what the writer wants to attain by an insight in the oriental sense of spiritualism, belief in birth and rebirth.

The concept of birth and rebirth, of the similarity as well as unity between past and present is in continuum through the repetitive rituals. After arriving in Calcutta and leaving his luggage at the Robinson street guesthouse and visiting the memorial of the British scientist Ronald Ross, Murugan is coerced to seek shelter under the gates of Rabindra Sadan auditorium where he meets two women Urmila Roy and Sonali Das, reporters of the Calcutta magazine who are there to cover the award ceremony of the writer Phulboni. Phulboni is the pseudonym of Saiyad Murad Hussain who turns out to be Sonali's father later. Though the narrative of this time frame on the surface concentrates on the life of these Urmila and Sonali, a miasma of mystery of the past is palpable. Urmila, a middle class woman who is unmarried for the sake of her family, is dependant on her Calcutta job completely. Sonali on the other hand is married to Romen Haldar, a prosperous builder and hotelier.

The use of archaic Bengali is one of the many methods deployed by Ghosh to work as a bridge over the gap of space of over hundred years between the events of 19th and 20th century. Another of these strategies employed is hallucination. Murugan through mysterious hallucinations comes to know about the hidden facts during his stay in Mrs. Aratounian's guesthouse. However, the events and people that he envisions in his delirium include both past and present. Murugan can be compared to stationary revolving focus light that revolves so fast that the "spots of time" illuminated coalesce into one uniform circle just like the blades of a moving fan.

To envelope Urmila in this space of over a century the device employed is newspaper. Urmila amidst the hubbub of her morning routine is surprised as well as relieved to see a fish-seller. This fish-seller has semblance with the boy in the hotel of Robinson Street, the boy in Sonali's house, the boy who was chasing Murugan and also Laakhan. The fish that he hands over to Urmila is wrapped in a newspaper entitled "The Colonial services Gazette" and is dated "Calcutta, the twelfth of January, 1893." This newspaper contains routine announcement one of it being "The public is notified that surgeon Colonel D.D. Cunningham is currently on leave pending his retirement. He will be replaced by surgeon major Ronald Ross of the Indian Medical Services" (CC 149). The next page also contains a handwritten message with an elaborate and unfamiliar logo "South-Western Railways" and also a list of the passengers in compartment no. 8 on January 10, 1898 with the underlined name of 'C.C. Dunn.' On finding the fish not fit to eat, Urmila, in a fury, sets out to get hold of the boy and finds herself at Romen Haldar's house where she comes to know that Romen is away for a meeting in Bombay.

From here she is led by Murugan to P.G. Hospital where he shows her the inscription of Ross's memorial - "In the small laboratory seventy yards to the south of this gate surgeon-major Ronald Ross I.M.S. in 1898 discovered the manner in which malaria is conveyed by mosquitoes" (CC 121). She is also shown Laakhan's house where he performed his experiments. Murugan also informs her that D.D. Cunningham travelled under the pseudonym of C.C. Dunn. Even Egypt is brought into view by Murugan's mention of the message sent anonymously to Egypt about malaria. This message contains a surrealistic story about a C.C. Dunn. In this story Mr. Dunn is found stark naked in the end. Soon the role of the speaker and listener gets reversed as Urmila relates a story to Murugan narrated to Sonali Das by Phulboni. From here Urmila and Murugan go to Kalighat where they see plenty of images that resemble the woman in Phulboni's story. A small girl reveals to them that "Today is the last day of the Puja of Mangala-Bibi. Baba says that tonight Mangala - Bibi is going to enter a new body" (CC 194).

This at once vindicates Murugan's theory of "Calcutta Chromosome" and also enshrines Mangala as a goddess. There are things science cannot explain and there are hidden truths which simple people due to their credulousness can understand and which the people obsessed with science and scientific theory cannot understand due to their excessive reliance on logic. In order to present his novel of "Fever, Delirium and Discovery" Ghosh flouts the story line to generate time creating a magical pattern of mystery and thriller.

Conclusion

The time travel in this novel operates in the demonstration of the occult tradition of India. The story line in particular is constructed in such a way so as to subvert the supremacy of western rational approach and uphold the eastern occult tradition. This can be taken to be symbolic of the victory of the east over west. However, contrary to the theory of salvation or moksha, the "Calcutta Chromosome" helps in the transmission of the soul rather than setting the soul free. Thus we see the flowing of the space through the souls of people. There is a quest for immortality through two major characters: Mangala-Aratounian-Urmila-Tara and Lakhan-Lutchman-The mysterious Nepali boy-Romen Haldar-Lucky. Wreathed into these two intertwined strings are various characters such as Murugan, Phulboni, Ronald Ross, Farley, Antar, Sonali Das and numerous others. Although it is regarded by many as a "spine chiller" but it is in reality a novel about man's deepest desires and the many mysteries of life fencing immense time as it asserts these points through suggestions.

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