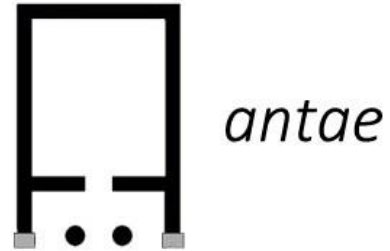


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‘Borne again in repetition’: Reincarnation, Afterlives and Cultural Memory in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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I am where I was:
I walk behind the murmur,
Footsteps within me, heard with my eyes,
The murmur is in the mind, I am my footsteps [...]
I am the shadow my words cast
[...]
The sun in my writing drinks the shadows.
Between the walls—not of stone,
But raised by memory.
—Octavio Paz, *A Draft of Shadows*

Memory is built with words, images and signs whose shadows are the reflections of the past. Memory calls up scenes and images, dramatising and connecting them to bodily sensations, reconstructing our afterlives. Memory connects the two states ‘I am’ and ‘I was’, as described in the above-mentioned lines by the great Mexican poet Octavio Paz; it sets in a journey (‘walk’) beyond the present ‘murmur’ which is ‘in the mind’. Memory revives the pre-lives of persons or of events, adding new or different meanings by connecting them to the present contexts or needs and creates new ‘footsteps’ or after-lives of the events which are apparently absent in the present timeframe of narration. This present essay seeks to understand how these afterlives are ‘raised by memory’ and how it is linked with the concept of reincarnation.¹

The focus of this study is mainly twofold—firstly, to locate the “after-lives” in Amitav Ghosh’s fourth novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), and how it is linked with the ancient Indian philosophy of rebirth and reincarnation; secondly, to address the role of cultural memory in representing these after-lives. This article seeks to analyse how the afterlives of a particular marginalised group in colonial Calcutta can challenge and deconstruct the grand official voices of Western science by opening up gaps or *aporias* hidden between them. This paper seeks to interrogate the inter-relation between body and memory—that is, the carrying of “memories through bodies” and the carrying of “bodies through memories” across lives and afterlives in Indian culture.

The main narrative of the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* involves a re-examination of the history of late-nineteenth century malaria research carried out by deranged Calcutta-born man named Murugan, who works for the international public health company called LifeWatch. Murugan has had a life-long obsession with the history of malaria research, which led him to the curious conclusion that Ronald Ross, the British scientist who was awarded the Nobel prize for medicine in 1902 for his ‘work on the life-cycle of the malaria parasite’ and study of ‘how the disease is transmitted’, was in fact not the only person active in that research, even

¹ For the entire poem, see Octavio Paz, ‘A Draft of Shadows’, in *A Draft of Shadows and the Other Poems*, trans. and ed. by Eliot Weinberger (New York, NY: New Directions Pub. Corporation, 1980, pp. 122-155. Originally published as *Pasado En Claro* in 1975.

if it is claimed that he ‘outstripped all of the contemporary scientists in the field’.² During his research, Murugan notices that there were several references to Ross’s household, in particular to his servant Latchman, and that most of the connections came from his servants. Murugan believes that there is ‘a secret history that has been erased from the scribal records of the colonial society and from medical historiography more generally’.³ The novel reverses the direction of scientific knowledge and challenges the narrative of scientific discovery where knowledge travels out of the Western centre to the non-Western periphery. The novel thus engages itself with a number of ‘parallel quest stories which range from those of Ross and his late nineteenth-century medical contemporary through to Antar’s pursuit of Murugan through the resources of the Internet’.⁴ The discoveries described in the novel are concerned with ‘far more than malaria cure’ as they involve ‘a counter-epistemology, which promises a form of immortality through the erosion of Western conceptions of discrete subjectivity’.⁵

In his essay ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, Michel Foucault defines genealogy as an analysis of dissent opposed to the evolutionary model of history whose main force is in the search for origin: genealogy liberates what has been forgotten or lost in the continuum of history and what has been set aside as accidents or errors in the imposed order of historical necessity. The genealogical approach, with its task of tracing the ‘passing events in their dispersions’, questions a ‘suprahistorical perspective’ that assumes a teleological movement of events in the homogenized form of time.⁶ This study understands that the afterlives of the uneducated “other minds” can oppose and challenge the ‘teleological movement’ of grand Western epistemology. Ghosh’s “other mind” project, in this novel, can be described as an attempt to give shape to the Lyotardian ideal. In Ghosh’s vision of a plethora of *small* stories set in opposition to the *grand mythology* promoted by the West, there is an echo of Lyotard’s famous distinction between *petites recits* and *metanarratives*.⁷ Whereas Lyotard’s vision of competing narratives remains at the level of metaphysical generality, Ghosh’s allegorical revision of Lyotard’s attack on the Platonic tradition has a more specific focus, as Ghosh’s aim is to *reimagine* a form of social and communal interaction in order to represent the lost and forgotten vernacular knowledge. The social after-lives of this oriental “other mind” act as the form of Lyotardian *petit-recits* that can destabilise the given concept of Western science as described in this novel. Ghosh’s symbolic maneuvering of ghosts and specters (especially in the descriptions of the deserted and haunted railway station, named Renupukur) is quite significant. His constant switching off between the pre-lives and the after-lives of the living and the dead helps the novel to achieve its polyphonic voices that can open up possibilities of many worlds, both fantastic and real.

In an e-mail correspondence, Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarty agree that forgetting brings an epistemological perplexity, engendering a number of fraught misrecognitions.⁸ Hence, Ghosh’s return to afterlives through the means of memory and micro-history allows him to restore the oppositional narratives of the subaltern people, conveniently forgotten and

² John Thieme, ‘The Discoverer Discovered,’ in *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, ed. by Tabish Khair (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), pp. 128-141, p. 132.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 76-100, p. 81.

⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 82.

⁸ See Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarti, ‘A Correspondence on Provincializing Europe’, *Radical History Review*, 83 (2002), 146-72.

appropriated by the dominant discourse of Western science. *The Calcutta Chromosome*, a postcolonial science fiction that 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. Through his project of retelling and reinvention, Ghosh recreates this 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 blood/brain barrier. 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 high priestess of a secret *counter-science* cult, which deals in transference of the mind; and the twentieth century American lady resident in Calcutta, Mrs Aratounian, the sophisticated 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.⁹ Ghosh explains that:

If all of that information could be transmitted chromosomally, from body to body [...] when your body fails you, you leave it, you migrate [...] You *begin all over again* [...] another body, *another beginning* [...] *a fresh start* [...]. A technology that lets you improve on yourself in your next incarnation. (C, 94-5)¹⁰

Amitav Ghosh, therefore, here dramatises the possibility of 'another beginning'—the possibility of the existence of lives even after the physical death of the body. In this high-suspense novel, Ghosh theatricalises the recurrent themes of disappearance, discovery and differential identities which actually opens up discursive spaces for multiple invisible pre-lives and after-lives. This concept of *interpersonal transference*, of course, also has a strong resemblance with the Hindu philosophy of reincarnation.

Reincarnation (the word 're-incarnation' derives from Latin, literally meaning, 'again, embodied in flesh') is the philosophical or religious concept that a living being can begin a new life in a different body after biological death.¹¹ This is also called rebirth or transmigration, and is a central tenet of all major Indian religions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Reincarnation refers to the belief that an aspect of every human being (or all living beings, in some cultures) continues to exist even after death. This aspect may be the soul or mind or consciousness or a transcendent aspect which is reborn in an interconnected cycle of existence. A soul, according to Hindu philosophy, reincarnates again and again on Earth until it mingles with the divine source, and, during this process, the soul enters into many bodies and goes through multiple deaths, births and rebirths. Hence, this concept in Hindu philosophy directly challenges the Western notion of one birth (and one death); it questions the concept of a *transcendental signified* of Western philosophy and refers to endless series of signs (here, with every new birth) which act as both *necessity* and

⁹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 93. Henceforth cited in text as (C, page number).

¹⁰ My emphasis.

¹¹ *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, ed. by Robert K. Barnhart (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1988), p. 517.

extra in the Derridean sense.¹² Ghosh glorifies this notion by voicing: ‘Silence herself. I see signs of her presence everywhere I go, in images, words, glances, but only signs, nothing more’ (C, 108).

The image of Murugan’s decaying body comes to life around ‘cybernetic states of fantasy and aversion’, and it is the malaria virus and the disease of syphilis that have allegedly generated this strange perversity in Murugan’s body, allowing him to mutate and merge into a newly perfect body by means of Ava’s complex digitised manipulations.¹³ Now his body becomes ready for mutation in the last stages of syphilitic paresis; his brain softens, becoming ‘ripe’ for its next biological transformation. The theory of the Calcutta chromosome builds on the extent to which the process of embodied reaction can be technologised. With enough genetic information about how the body has been naturally programmed, and with medical technology to mutate and transport this information, a person can theoretically move from body to body. All the characters in this novel thus become sources of multiple ‘host bodies’ as well as ‘ghost bodies’. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin, in their introduction ‘Believing the Body’, write of ‘the possibility of embodied memory—of memories that are carried in the body and that may be transmitted between bodies even across generations’.¹⁴ Tony Bennet further theorises about the transcendentalism of body into the ‘reach of memory beyond writing and effective tradition’:

Like the personal, the body was now fashioned as a thoroughly archaeologised entity, with a series of sequentially, layered pasts-stored up within it for retrieval by way of a bodily or psychoanalytic mnemonics that stretched the reach of memory beyond writing and effective tradition into the depths of prehistory.¹⁵

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the narrative sets up several challenges to the idea of linear time and to the significance of memory and fancy. The ways in which the narrative challenges and even disrupts the norms of space and time are manifold. The narrative trajectory elides and juxtaposes different time and space, as it follows the pursuit of different characters in the past, present, and in different parts of the world, ranging from Renupukur, a remote, almost ghost village in Bengal, to the virtually ghost town of digitised New York. There are equally ghostly presences in the story that seem to elude the normal exigencies of time and space. Bishnupriya Ghosh, in her essay ‘On Grafting the Vernacular: The consequences of Postcolonial Spectrology’, points out that ‘only now the progressive intellectual must guard against a “forgetting” facilitated by the current global hierarchies of

¹² Jacques Derrida uses the term *logocentrism* to describe the assumption and quest for a core, an essence, truth and center. God functions, he argues, as a sort of core truth which is the *logos* or a final meaning, a transcendental signified. Signs, according to Derrida, are incomplete, and require something else to complete its sense. *Supplement* is this necessary completion. It is the signifier that is *extra*. It is *necessity* and *excess* and Derrida plays with this double meaning of *excess* and *necessity* to show how supplement is unstable, fluid and undecidable. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976). See also Jacques Derrida, ‘Difference’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 11.

¹³ Christopher A. Shinn, ‘On Machines and Mosquitoes: Neuroscience, Bodies, and Cyborgs in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*’, *MELUS*, 33.4 (2008), 145-66, (p. 148).

¹⁴ Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin, ‘Believing the Body: Introduction’, in *Regimes of Memory*, ed. by Radstone and Hodgkin (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 23-39, p. 23.

¹⁵ Tony Bennet, ‘Stored Virtue: Memory, the body and the evolutionary museum’, in *Regimes of Memory*, pp. 40-54, p. 51.

knowledge'.¹⁶ Ghosh can here be read as warning of the dangers of forgetting, where we encounter multiple levels of lost epistemologies (counter-scientific discourse, folk medicine practices, spiritualism, and Hindu popular religion, such as *tantra*) owned by the phantom presences in the novel represented by local illiterate characters of Calcutta such as Mangala or Lakhaan.

At the metatextual level, the writer Phulboni's struggle over representation and the "Lakhaan stories" warn the readers against forgetting. Ghosh's symbolical use of the ghosts and corpses are quite noteworthy. The Lakhaan stories appear three times in the novel, as events experienced by the linguist Grigson, the missionary Farley, and the writer Phulboni (who narrowly escapes the ghosts); and the details of these fragments densely encrypt specific vernacular ghost fiction. The ghosts bear witness to the afterlives of a past life that is now not present and is directly linked with the significance of cultural memory. The "ghosts", for Ghosh, stand for the polyphonic voice that can disrupt the authoritative voice of the living; they can occupy 'a more redemptive place', and are 'intangible sites for imagining a future beyond discredited modernist narratives of progress'.¹⁷ Each major or minor character more or less is haunted by a differential identity—supplement identity, a secret which they try to rediscover, reinvent and reconstruct in his/her after-life. Mangala is glimpsed only twice: once by Farley in the anteroom next to the lab where he is working, and in her next incarnation, by Sonali in a scaffolded house undergoing major renovation. Both times the woman is seen holding scalpels that she uses to draw blood from birds which are then placed on glass slides. Suchitra Mathur posits, in her essay 'Caught between the Goddess and the Cyborg', that 'the shedding of blood, an image that is associated not just with ritual sacrifice, but also with women and fertility, is as necessary as the "scientific" knowledge of malaria in its myriad manifestations to enable the project of overcoming death'.¹⁸ Mathur believes in the possibility of 'postcolonial new human', 'a new life, a new existence', and this afterlife combines 'past, present and future, male and female, goddess, human and machine, first and third world in a single hybrid identity'.¹⁹ The repeated performances, described here in this novel, refer to the old Indian Hindu tradition of *tantra*, which works against the 'Brahminical imperative to control and prohibit desire in order to attain *moksha*'²⁰ and the *tantric* cults 'deploy desire, and therefore the body, as a means of freeing the soul'.²¹ Thus, the spectral uncanny presence of the silence comes continuing 'jolting(s) the memory of another specter, another sighting of unrestful spirits'.²² The main narrative force in this novel, to my mind, is achieved by a tension between the 'membrances of lived bodies' and the "remembrances of ghost bodies".²³ Urmila remembers the beautiful passage, written by Phulboni:

I have never known, [...] whether life lies in words or in images, in speech or sight.
Does a story come to be in the words that I conjure out of my mind or does it live

¹⁶ Brishnupriya Ghosh, 'On Grafting the Vernacular: The Consequences of Postcolonial Spectrology', *Boundary* 31.2 (2004): 197-218, (p. 201).

¹⁷ 'On Grafting', pp. 206-7.

¹⁸ Suchitra Mathur, 'Caught Between the Goddess and the Cyborg: Third-World Women and the Politics of Science in Three Works of Indian Science Fiction', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 39(3) (2004), 119- 38, (p. 135).

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ According to Brahminical Hindu philosophy, *moksha* denotes the freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth.

²¹ 'On Grafting', p. 212.

²² *ibid.*, p. 208.

²³ Brishnupriya Ghosh, 'When Speaking with Ghosts: Spectral Ethics in *The Calcutta Chromosome*', in *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspective*, ed. by Brinda Bose (Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003), pp. 117- 138, p. 125.

*already, somewhere enshrined in mud and clay— in an image, that is, in the crafted mimicry of life? (C, 194)*²⁴

The memory of these marginalised and forgotten “other minds” live ‘already, somewhere’ in ‘images, words, glances but only signs’, in the grafted and ‘crafted mimicry of lives’ (C, 108). They carry within them memory of their past generations; in a sense they can be called ‘*jatiswar*’.²⁵ Though they are unable to remember the whole events of the past life, they possess memories of their previous birth within them. Characters like Mangala, Lakhaan, and Tara can be viewed as examples of the living history of lost memories, or the living memory of lost history.

In 1894, an American scientist Elijah Farley, who appears to have discovered that a sinister conspiracy is manipulating the experiments of Ross’s Calcutta predecessors, D.D. Cunningham, has been reported as having vanished after disembarking from a train at Renupukur. What Farley has discovered is that Cunningham’s work on the mosquito parasite is being hampered by assistants he has picked up at Sealdah railway station in Calcutta. These persons are identified as Laakhan and a woman, named Mangala, who ‘appears to be both the high priestess of a secret medical cult offering a cure for syphilis and the brain behind the discoveries that will eventually lead to Ross’s winning the Nobel Prize’.²⁶ Murugan’s research leads him to the conclusion that Mangala and her associates are hindering Cunningham’s research so that he (Cunningham) will be replaced by Ronald Ross, whom they use as vessel for the discoveries. Though Ronald Ross thinks that he is experimenting on the malaria parasite, he is at the point of discovery that the local Indians have been seeking for long. Hence, the discovery of malaria parasite is not closed with Ross’s discovery in 1897. The research and revision of Murugan, Antar with the assistance of Sonali and Urmila are of significant importance to decode the many afterlives of malaria-parasite discovery. The research works done by Farley, Cunningham and Ross; the revisioning of the history of discovery of malaria in late nineteenth-century Calcutta by Murugan and Antar; the age-old cultural memory of the vernacular knowledge (of Mangala and her associates)—all these searches and researches fall into one line to discover and rediscover a number of pre-lives and after-lives of the “discovery of malaria-parasite”. While discussing the relation between history and memory in his book *History at the Limit of World-History*, Ranajit Guha proposes that:

the role assigned to [memory] is protective rather than nurturing. In other words, it is not for memory to hold the past in its womb and let time work on it slowly and creatively until it is ready to be *born again in repetition* [...]. Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, has the doors of her temple open to all that survives time’s ravages.²⁷

The marginalised characters are truly involved in ‘protecting’ as well as preserving their age-old memory of counter-knowledge and interpersonal transference secretly and silently until time is up to be ‘born again in repetition’—that rarest moment of redemption or ‘single perfect moment of discovery’ when discoverer is also discovered. Towards the end of the novel, Murugan beautifully formulates that the only way ‘to escape the tyranny of knowledge is to turn it on itself. But for that work they have to create a single perfect moment of discovery when the person who discovers is also that which is discovered’ (C, 260). An

²⁴ My emphasis.

²⁵ A Bengali term which refers to someone who can recall the memories of their previous birth.

²⁶ Thieme, p. 136.

²⁷ Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 70. My emphasis.

almost similar politics of memory is set forth when in the ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’, Walter Benjamin addresses the relation of our utopian imagination to the redemptive aspect of memory: ‘our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption’.²⁸ The perfect moment of redemption/discovery is possible only when a search/research is complete; as we see here, every character is in search for another character.

The Western colonial master Ronald Ross discovers the malaria parasite in a well-equipped laboratory in colonial Calcutta. Almost one century later, characters like Murugan, Antar, and Sonali discover the hence-silenced stories behind this discovery and want to tell these hidden stories to the world or in a sense carry these forward to the next generations. But my point of concern is how the memories of those lost voices can be disseminated to the marginalised or subaltern people of the next generation (of that aforementioned particular local group of Calcutta of the late nineteenth century) who does not have any access to either library or laboratory. These illiterate or uneducated persons who do not know how to use scientific instruments cannot thus use the library or laboratory to gain insight into the tremendous vernacular intelligence that their foremothers and forefathers possessed. So what would be the afterlife of this age-old indigenous knowledge which once assisted in one of the most prestigious discoveries of the nineteenth century? Will it be remained confined to educated people like Murugan or Sonali?

These marginalised people, who belong neither to the *bhadrasamaj*, nor to what are negatively referred to as *chhotolok*, do not need any kind of institution;²⁹ they continue to carry forward the knowledge of their past-lives to their after-lives through *folk-memory*.³⁰ They hang on to the wisdom of their previous birth through the process of remembering and interpreting the past, through silent communications, through signs and mutation, and reconstruct the fates of their afterlives through ‘an entire micropolitics of desire, of impasses and escapes, of submissions and rectifications’,³¹ as well as through ‘the dynamics of the mutual recognition’ of shared memories.³² Thus their memory’s texts operate tangentially to the recorded and dominant voices of official history, by intersecting it and disrupting it, revealing its gaps and fissures, its fragmentariness, thus serving as *supplements* to the grand Western narrative.³³ To my mind, folk-memory or “cultural memory” plays a vital role in the restoration of memories of the previous generations to the next in the cases of marginalised people. According to Jan Assmann, in fact, human beings have to find an implement to maintain their nature over generations, and cultural memory can indeed serve as such an implement; it is the concept of saving knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in social contexts that last over generations.³⁴ For Mangala and the other people of the community, the memories of age-old secrets and silences serve as this implement (by way of passing knowledge and wisdom) that maintains their nature in their invisible afterlives.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 253-264, p. 254.

²⁹ *Bhadrasamaj* is a Bengali word that denotes high/middle class civil society while *chhotoloks* do not belong to that class and generally assumed to be uncivilised, uneducated and to belong to the lower castes. They are the poor and downtrodden and the wretched of the earth.

³⁰ By “folk memory”, I mean myth, orality, intuition, and several forms of indigenous signs and gestures through which memory of the folk/rustic is carried on.

³¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. by Polan D. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 10.

³² *History at the Limit of World-History*, p. 16.

³³ By “their memory’s text” I mean the oral texts of cultural memory which remain in circulation through gestures, muteness, silences, secret communications, inferences and other occult devices for gaining an insight of local knowledge partially or wholly from within and without their community.

³⁴ See Jan Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 125- 33.

Ghosh’s novel thus appears to be in search of ‘the faintest trace’ of this hidden storehouse of ‘accumulated memories’ that ‘would be enough’ for the ‘fringe people, marginal type’, or ‘Sweeper woman’, or ‘dhooley-bearer’, or those ‘down and out with nowhere to go’, to deconstruct the Western ‘empire’ of Malaria (C, 111, 92, 107, 207).³⁵ While describing the stories of Phulboni, Ghosh informs the readers that there was ‘a message to someone’, the sharing of ‘some kind of shared secret’ (C, 97). If we take the word “secret” as some hidden source of knowledge or information, then we can see that these people who live on ‘dust’ or in ‘mud’ are actually sharing their multiple lives and afterlives, thus gaining in some kind of indigenous power through the means of silence or muteness or through making ‘connections’ (C, 184). As Mathur argues, ‘Ghosh has convinced us that it is the people of Calcutta (non-western, lower-caste, female, and subaltern included) that count’, and that the people will ultimately return to a privileged and honorific place that is actually their ‘right one’.³⁶ Thus, through the shared memories of the subaltern people like Mangala, Lakhaan, and Tara, as well as urbanised Murugan, Antar, Urmila, and Sonali, the author unfolds not only the “other mind” of counter-epistemology, but also the hidden and lost cultural memory of the city. As Ghosh puts it in the novel:

Every city has its secrets [...] but Calcutta, whose vocation is excess, has so many that it has more secrets than any other [...] here in our city where all law, natural and human, is held in capricious suspension, that which is hidden has no need of words to give it life. (C, 22)

Gyanendra Pandey, in his book *Memory, History and the Question of Violence*, succinctly describes ‘memory’ as that which ‘accommodate[s] the malleable, contextual, fuzzy, lived community and to recognize how the community (the subject of history) is forged in the very construction of the past’.³⁷ Hence, in reconstructing the afterlives of a marginalised people, cultural memory is of utmost importance in its ability to house the ‘malleable, fuzzy’ and fluid lives of community. Antar, the sole survivor of a malaria epidemic in a small Egyptian hamlet, now at the end of the novel, gets ready for the incarnation—to cross over into a transcendental time and space, into his afterlife. His promise of ultimate homecoming is similar to the soul’s reunion with the divine source in Hindu Philosophy, or what Walter Benjamin recognizes as the ‘redemptive aspect of memory’.³⁸ Ghosh unearths the moment of redemption—‘the Time of Conversion’—quite ceremoniously:

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; we’ll help you across. (C, 262)

While analysing the relation between human beings and knowledge, Ghosh proposes that ‘knowledge couldn’t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge’ (C, 91). This line emerges as crucial in understanding the relation between life and afterlife in terms of ancient Indian philosophy. I wish to theorise, with some alteration of Ghosh’s thesis, that life couldn’t begin without acknowledging the possibility of another life. Here, I want to draw attention to a Bengali word *abishkar*, which can be translated as both “discovery” and “invention” in English. What do the characters here in this novel succeed in—discovery or invention—by revisiting the pasts and reconstructing the afterlives through their memories?

³⁵ Ghosh reveals that ‘Doc Manson wants to get the malaria prize for Britain, [...] for the Empire.’ *The Calcutta Chromosome*, p. 61.

³⁶ Mathur, p. 56.

³⁷ Gyanendra Pandey, *Memory, History and the Question of Violence* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1999), p. 49.

³⁸ Benjamin, p. 254.

One can say that they discover their fates as invented (and reinvented) by their memory, and invent their fates as discovered (and rediscovered) by their memories. Here, memory is a ‘perpetually actual phenomena’ and always in the process of ‘permanent evolution’;³⁹ and a part of ‘an Undifferentiated eternal present’.⁴⁰ Ghosh’s characters fall in an eternal tension between rediscovery and reinvention in remaking their afterlives; the meaning of their lives and afterlives rests, then, in Ghosh’s apt phrase—‘in the crafted mimicry of life’ (C, 194). Or, perhaps, in the words of eminent subaltern historian Guha: ‘borne again in repetition’.⁴¹

The narrative of *The Calcutta Chromosome* sets up numerous challenges to the notion of the linear time and to the significance of memory and afterlives. The “afterlives project”, in this novel, unites together the past, present and future and different parts of the globe ranging from the ghostly presence of remote village of Bengal, to New York, to old late nineteenth-century colonial Calcutta; it acknowledges the status of the other mind, affording it the necessary space. I am in agreement with Thieme’s argument that, in blurring the line between discoverers and the discovered, Amitav Ghosh erases the ‘rigid distinctions between storytellers and the listeners.’⁴² He succinctly postulates that ‘[n]obody [...] is exempt from history or from playing an active role in the *historiographical* process’.⁴³ Hence, in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, it is not only the cultural memory or the after-lives of the indigenous Indian people, or the (re)searches of Murugan and Antar on the after-lives of the “malaria-parasite discovery” which *play* an active (or passive) role in the ‘historiographical process’, but also the readers, in their reading process, who decode the tyranny/conspiracy of history. Murugan is right when he analyses that Mangala’s counter-science and that of the Western scientists such as Ross is analogous to the relationship between ‘matter and anti-matter [...] rooms and ante-rooms [...] Christ and Antichrist and so on’ (C, 91). Hence, we can conclude this discussion by formulating that the cultural memory and numerous afterlives (social, spectral, oral, and literal) serve an ethical purpose in the novel and open up multiple discursive spaces where East and West notions of afterlife can meet, contest and complement each other.

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³⁹ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire’, *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7-24, (p. 8).

⁴⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), p. 24, as quoted in Pandey.

⁴¹ This titular quote is taken from Ranajit Guha’s discussion of the relation between history and memory in his fourth chapter: ‘Experience, Wonder, and the Pathos of Historicity’, in *History at the Limit of World-History*, pp. 48-74, p. 70.

⁴² Thieme, p. 140.

⁴³ *ibid.*

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