



## Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosome: An Overview

**Dr. Beena Yadav**

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

Sahu Ram Swaroop Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Bareilly,

M. J. P. Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, (U.P.), India

### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is a prolific Indian English writer in English who has produced a continual form of historical novels. His design of catastrophe can move one to tears and his representation of multiplying social ills can arouse one's anger to the point of revolt. He links stories and facts so efficiently that it marks a profound imprint on his reader. His novels are not simply telling stories, but it is a kind of discourse on various social, historical, issues and events. He has globalized the theories of colonial discourse while the practice of a good deal of post-colonial criticism. He turned to the past as much to trace the deepening mod of nationalism as to cherish the memories of bygone days. He represents a radically new phase in the development of Indian Writing in English. He cheerfully bears numerous mantles of responsibility in the world of the bookcase anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, and teacher. Through his imaginative power of re-assessment in fiction, Ghosh provides an essential energizing footnote to the documentation of South Asian history. He has huge talent for innovation and experimentation, which he practices in his fictional and non-fictional works. The basic attraction of his novels is the ideas, which run through them. The present paper aims to highlight Amitav Ghosh's thought-provoking hard work that encouraging and questioning metaphysical milieu and that also encompasses all the narrative levels of his writing.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, The Calcutta Chromosome, metaphysical, milieu.

Through his writing, Amitav Ghosh suggests that, if we unearth cultural, historical, and textual layers, we may approach inner meanings and interact with fate. For instance, if we focus upon the episode of the paper-wrapped fish revealing some clues of the scientific enigma underlying the novel, we can observe the deft author composing some parts of a wider puzzle. Through its large amount of knotted tension, the joining of apparently mundane episodes and facts mirrors the activity of alarming destiny and its mechanisms. The scene operates in the textual architecture as the pertinent combination of sequences of events and could be interpreted as the postmodernist consciousness of casualness. Amitav Ghosh is widely known for his fictional and non-fictional works- *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry*

*Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), *Flood of Fire* (2015), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing in Cambodia and at Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), *Incendiary Circumstances* (2006).

Amitav Ghosh has provided a diverse clarification of ‘time’ and the consciousness of time in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. It is the novel, which has exposed the limitation of the post-colonial theorizing mechanism. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is more of a fictional work, but it also intertwines the history of the late nineteenth-century, malaria research to the theological movements generally meant to be concerned with the religious beliefs of the West and somewhat with information technology. The novel is also a reading of a possible alternative subaltern history, which exists in parallel with colonial history as an equal or possibly more important system and which silently, operates traditionally. It is an anthropological detective narrative. Nearly all of the novels of Amitav Ghosh are experimental works. He has never claimed any of his novels to be fiction or history or fantasy or thriller except *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a combination of confusion, attraction, and grievance. Ghosh has included science, religion, myths, transcendental philosophy superstitions, logic, and rationality in this one novel. He has selected an event and establishes its relevant connections with the present times using symbols of the past only as tools for the communication of his overall message.

The narrative of the novel starts with a central figure Antar, who is an Egyptian programmer and a systems analyst at the International Water Council and his snazzy computer system Ava/Ile in an apartment in New York, where Antar lives, not too far into the future, on August 20, which is “Mosquito Day”. In 1897, on 20th August Sir Ronald Ross had discovered the malaria parasitic in the blood of an Indian named Hussein Khan. Antar plans to return to his home in Egypt, after his retirement, which is due after one year, therefore, he works at some leisure at home with the help of his computer system, Ava. This computer is very well equipped with a powerful search engine. Antar found his company identification card incompletely destroyed so he asked ‘Ava’ to fill in the blanks in the ‘card’. When he was waiting for Ava’s reply, his mind carried him back to his childhood on the western edge of the Nile delta. He remembered the Hungarian-old woman al-Magari an archaeologist stifling through the sands and looking for something. Antar and his brother get some money for their help in her research.

However, Ghosh seems to tell that in this scenario, there is no clear-cut divide between knowledge and ignorance, as there is no strict conflict between Chronos and *kairos*, primordial forces that invade each other’s space through apparently dull coincidences. Probably such a sense of displacement is derived from the catharsis of the contemporary over-connected world. In the novel, the Rhizomatic chain of events and references appears to link the characters not so much through narrative digressions, but rather by activating intertextual structures, from mundane episodes in a frozen present to a sleepy future, and then back again towards a crystallised Victorian/Edwardian past.

Furthermore, we may tackle the sphere of knowledge from another viewpoint. In an era obsessed with technological developments like ours, the notion of knowledge and the act of passing it on constitute two orienting points, and Ghosh appropriates this intense preoccupation of the contemporary world to speculate about the nervous condition of the culture. He craftily anticipates the Internet revolution by creating Ava, a futuristic machine that textually works as an active character within the story structure. However, despite its hyperbolic powers and access to worldwide databanks – becoming almost a sacrilegious substitute for a modern deity – Ava cannot solve all the mysteries that cluster around the figure of Ronald Ross, and therefore some limits seem to slow the progress of man and his thirst for knowledge.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is an anthological deadlock. This is a novel of ideas and works like a brainteaser undermining conceptual certainties and showing the world as a mighty riddle where questions, as well as answers, are often quizzical. This is a work of a prolonged moment of interrogation and readjustment in thought from where the writer may come up with new beliefs and faiths of his earlier commitments, which have determined his narrative choices. Ghosh has made a social and philosophical statement through his choice of the form itself, which suggests danger and destabilization of existing modes of thought as the essence of living. The narrative becomes increasingly heavy, loaded with complications working at cross-purposes. We will find the politically correct and gender-friendly slant, which fits in ever so nicely with the subaltern perspective. Ghosh has made elaborate ease for those forgotten underprivileged individuals who do all the rough work for the grand discoveries and the credit goes to their masters or superiors. The novelist has explored the details of medical history to create a credible case for the illiterate. Mangala, for example, helps in achieving results from a near-impossible task.

In this way, Ghosh is trying to say that the people who were born and brought up there because only they can understand the local needs of their soil should control the field of social medicines. The author goes ahead to argue against all scientific conceptualization. The theory itself becomes the main stumbling block to knowledge, “she was not carrying a shit load in her head, she didn’t have to write papers or construct proofs” (203). Ghosh very well knows that this world is full of mysteries rather than rationality and Mangala is more of an artisan than a mere magician is. Indeed, counter sciences can extra-ordinarily overturn science and motives are self-seeking rather than humane. In a novel, Ghosh has worked on the complicity of the two different kinds of quests which have the same motives, a quest for power, self-aggrandizement, and ironically, for a permanent mark on the uncertain world. Mangala and Laakhan represent the diabolic secret aspirations for a kind of immortality acquired through a technology of interpersonal transference of intelligence through the chosen people. Mangala had traced

out the unique combination of genetic chromosomes and had special knowledge, which produced the rare Calcutta chromosome.

Ghosh has forced us to think that the world is lacking in something. It has created an atmosphere of mystery in the novel. The author says that mankind may have developed its abilities to change the outer layers of reality and truth but inwardly it remains a group of the same primitive being, self-seeking in its brutal ways. It can be possible that instead of a linear advance towards a progressively higher stage of development we are moving in circles ending up where we began years ago. Earlier, we know Ghosh as a writer of secular humanist values who has defined his commitment in his novels, but this novel has come as a reversal of our expectations because it indicates a shift towards an uncertain non-rationalistic view of life confusing one between nihilism and mystical beliefs. Ghosh has a habit of perplexing the readers with unresolved mysteries and subversive questioning of the western institutions of learning and charity. We see Ghosh as a brilliant designer of the characters who convey his viewpoint very clearly.

In the novel, Ghosh has shifted away from the exploration of personal memories moreover, moves towards a metaphysical exploration of identity itself, at the same time suggesting that history, as conceived of in the world, is far less tamed than one might think. R.K. Dhawan accurately notes, “Ghost makes a unique experiment in *The Calcutta Chromosome* by combining various themes and techniques. He amalgamates literature, science, philosophy, history, psychology and sociology in *Calcutta Chromosome*” (28). In this novel, we can see that Ghosh wants to give recognition to the less known, less fortunate people. He knows very well that the world worships success and most of the time the deserving go unnoticed. Murugan’s crime was that he doubted the set belief and had dared to disagree. The fantasy continues. It is believed that in counter science, secrecy is used as a technique of procedure and for this group of researchers, silence is the only religion.

Ghosh uses the screen of the computer – Ava to depict the stories in various episodes and sometimes Ghosh writes, “Abruptly Ava began to beep: rest indecipherably unable to continue” (31). The total plot structure is divided into forty-five chapters, each chapter very short and creating a disturbance in time or space. Besides chapter ends abruptly just to move on to other episodes. Ghosh, however, tries to synthesis various stories in the end. The novel moves around the thematic occupation of science and Indian belief of reincarnation, trans-movement of soul, etc. belief, which Ghosh calls counter science. Moreover, all the stories in episodes move in that direction of theme. About the plot, Madhu Malti Adhikari rightly comments as: “Disruption of time and space enables us to visualize and seek the complexities of plot structure and admire a conglomeration of ideas.” (32)

While introducing the man of science in *The Calcutta Chromosome* discussing the knowledge, Ghosh has masterful control over his English in fluent discourse by the character, who is a man of mind, saying as:

Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life, that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice. It is not, indeed the word is to this silence what the shadow is to foreshadowed, what veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life.  
(34)

These are philosophical views in the words of language used in the deliberation of intellectual of life and spirit of the human being with relation to science and scientific methods of reason. Ghosh has thus shown his creativity in form of a novel written in the English language of philosophical terms. This is how language is used to its fullest success of expression in the way, as it should be, so far writing in the English language is concerned. Whether it is socio-political events or post-colonial riots in Indian or languages used by India during British rule, Ghosh knows his way, confidently and in a commanding way as to how language of English should be used to absolute perfection. Indian writers, writing in English novels have established their undisputable position in English literature and Ghosh's novels are not solitary examples.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* the novel by Ghosh relates to the advanced science and intellectual projection of Indian myth compared to science concerning transfusion of malaria parasite. The language of the novel is such that it infects the reader with imagination, emotion, and thrilling experience. Ghosh's intellectual insight and creativity are revealed and it has attained global critical attention and praise from literary circles. In handling certain issues of science and fiction – *The Calcutta Chromosome* has come out as substantial prose in Indian English literature. About the construction and style of a language, Sandeep Sen of Aark Arts of Books London opines as “By training Ghosh is a social anthropologist and therefore it is not surprising that he brings to his art of writing exactitude of construction and clarity of language.”(35)

Apart from the above, while describing Phulboni's visit to Renupur and resultant events of thriller, language used to show the details of station and surrounding places, cabin, lamp and dialogue with station master is exceeding to the point and the language of the station master is such as the type of language, the station master used to practice. Here Ghosh projects stationmaster saying, “The station is a terrible place. No one in any of the villages around here comes within a mile of this station after dark. You could not make them come if you gave them all the gold that is hoarded in the heavens. I tried to tell you but you would not listen.” (36)

Amitav Ghosh's novels are a delight for the reader. They present a new look and open new dimensions. He has never repeated his themes and the variety contained in his writings is unimaginably rich. He clears his perspectives and thoughts very effectively. His novels create a new world of the immense capacity of man, which has given Indian English Writing a new dimension. Ghosh claims that his novels ‘Shape the world as they relate it. His novels do not conform to any single ideological or literary

perspective. However, in the novel, we find Ghosh moving from the exploration of personal memories towards a metaphysical exploration of identity itself. This novel suggests that the defined history by educated elites of the world can be far or less tamed more than one might have thought. It is loaded with the characteristics of science fiction, crime detection, historical explorations, and even spiritual meditation. The social anthropologist in Amitav Ghosh has dominated this novel and has rekindled our appreciation of the rich Indian heritage to make our future better and more progressive. Amitav Ghosh has colored the issue of malarial fever with mysticism, superstitions and called it the theory of science and counter science. The book has become a literary touchstone for its contents and special techniques. The novel is the narrator's journey forward and backward in space and time to discover, a more decipher the intense meaning of life.

To sum up such articulated issues, Ghosh's bracing narrative generates human labyrinths, viruses, flesh, chromosomes, and bodies constructed as self-contained structures and interstices. Bodies, in particular, in their various conditions – hit by diseases (malaria, syphilis), treated in laboratories, substituted by 'intelligent' computers, or evoked as ghosts through the aide of séances – represent multilayered, changeable agencies at work in a Fate-governed world. The unraveling of stories parallels the multitude of their actions, efforts, and feelings. The novel includes themes like history, the politics of scientific research, psychological afflictions, technology, and memory among others. The central theme of the novel is the subjugation of Indian scientific Knowledge on way to pave a smooth history of British and European Sciences. They brandished Western sciences as a symbol of modernization and always assumed its sun to shine brightly over the esoteric and non-modern East. This is the technique of subjectivity through 'negation' calling the other either absent or below and inferior. As he scans world history, he finds that modernity has often come in a barbaric way, by inscribing oneself over all others.

### References:

1. Dhawan, R.K., ed. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999. Print.
2. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Calcutta Chromosome*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1996. Print.
3. Khair, Tabish. *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003. Print.
4. Kich, Martin. *Mosquito Bites and Computer Bytes: Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosome, Notes on Contemporary Literature* Carrollton, GA, 20, 4 Sept. 2000. Print.
5. Kumar, Gajendra. *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Strange Odyssey of Time and Mystery, in Indian Writings in English*. Vol. IX, eds Manmohan K. Bhatnagar and M. Rajeshwar, New Delhi: Atlantic, 2000. Print.
6. Pathak, R.S. *Modern Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999. Print.
7. Sen, Sundeeep. *The Calcutta Chromosome: World Literature Today*. New Delhi. Prestige Books, 1997, Print.
8. Tiwari, Shabha. *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. Print.

\*\*\*\*\*