

# The portrayal of Silence in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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Like Ghosh's other novels, *The Calcutta Chromosome* is merging different genres—science, history, magic, realism, thriller, detective and ghost story. This novel also stresses more on science; it is, indeed, a science fiction. On the surface of the narrative, it indulges in the historical discovery of Roland Ross's record of his experimentations in Calcutta. Ross acquired the Nobel-Prize for his discovery of the life-cycle of malaria. However, Ghosh refutes the colonial narrative; he, therefore, re-writes the history of malaria research, as he gives the subalterns more value in his narrative. All his central characters are ordinary people, not noble ones, as Alu, the orphan in *The Circle of Reason*, the Indian slave Bomma in *In an Antique Land*, the orphan Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace*, the fisherman Fokir in *The Hungry Tide*, and the sweeper Mangala in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. It is a real postcolonial discourse, which is unlike the Eurocentric paradigm; it is also a reversal of the roles, since the novelist focuses more on the oppressed rather than on their oppressors. In this sense, Ghosh says: "It follows then that the reason why I- and many others who have written of such events- are compelled to look back in sorrow because we cannot look ahead" (*The Imam and the Indian*, 317). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Mangala is a sweeper- here at the bottom of the social pyramid; and Latchman is a *dolly*-bearer. Both of them come at the lowest ladder of Hindu caste system. It is, however, that the two characters have been pushed to the centre-stage of narrative. It is, in fact, a post-colonial novel in its framework. Tabish Khair writes: "What Ghosh does seek to do- and largely succeeds in doing- is to depict the *Coolies* (the subaltern, in general term) as occupying a space" (160).

*The Calcutta Chromosome* constitutes as Ghosh's scientific travelogue in which he writes back to the hegemonic discourse of science from the margins of his postcolonial status. In this work he particularly probes deep into the scientific archives, navigating through memories, newspapers, and letters in order to shed light on the marginal figures who have been contributing to the scientific discovery and yet have been excluded from the records. In pushing the silenced towards the centre and giving them main concern over the conventional, Ghosh's postcolonial fiction unsettles the authority of the metropole. He achieves his goal by using the journey-motif which becomes an essential part in almost all his fictional and non-fictional works. In this regard, Rukmini Bhaya Nair

remarks: "Postcolonial criticism has been called travelling theory. . . . The very logic of its name seems to commit the postcolonial novel to reviewing the 'fact' presented through the lens of a colonial history by bringing them into the ambit of fiction" (164).

Ghosh's earlier works, *The Circle of Reason* and *In an Antique Land*, rotate around places between India and the Middle Eastern countries. However, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, goes further ahead to include also Europe and the United States. Born in Calcutta, Murugan has grown up in the Western capitals of London and New York. He attains a part-time job with Life Watch in New York in order to pursue "the early history of malaria research" (30). Therefore, he embarks on a journey from the United States to India. He becomes so determined to travel back home to do something special in his life. While reaching Calcutta, he is caught up running in front of the Presidency General Hospital on August 20, 1995, looking for the memorial of the British scientist, Roland Ross.

Ghosh subverts the traditional medical history by giving an alternative narrative of Ross's medical discovery. He presents the alternative through Murugan, who is a specialist in Roland Ross. Murugan says to Antar, "you won't find another person alive who knows more than I do about the subject I specialize in . . . as far as the subject of Ronnie Ross goes, I'm the only show in town" (43). While in America, Murugan writes an article, "Certain Systematic Discrepancies in Roland Ross's account of Plasmodium B", which receives negative reports in all journals (31). The second paper, entitled "An Alternative Interpretation of Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Malaria Research: is there a Secret History?" proves no better than the first one. His hypothesis of "Other Mind: a theory that some person or persons had systematically interfered with Roland Ross's experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from other" (31) estranges him more from his associates. Through Murugan, Ghosh confronts the official history of Ross's discovery. Therefore, Ghosh re-writes the colonial medical history from the postcolonial perspective.

The first principle of counter-science, according to Murugan, is secrecy. In his meeting with Antar, he explains, "It would 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" (88). The essential element of secrecy of counter-science adds to Ghosh's detective narrativisation the flavour of mystery, rendering it a version of the thriller and ghost story. This mystery is deeply rooted in Indian land as well as philosophy, and it is only Indians who can decode this conundrum.

The portrayal of some symbols, like pigeon, smoke, lantern and fire, draws attention to the significance of magic realism in Indian philosophy. Farley observes some people on the floor touching Mangala's feet to their heads. Besides, he sees: "a scalpel appeared in her [Mangala's] right hand; she held the bird a way from her and with a single flick of her wrist beheaded the dying pigeon. Once the flow of blood had lessened, she picked

up the clean slides, smeared them across the severed neck, and handed them to the assistant” (127). This shows that Mangala has developed a particular strain of malaria that can be cultivated in pigeons. She has found some way of making the bug cross over the patient from the bird. She has successfully utilised this method to treat syphilitic patients. In another occurrence, the same story reiterates to Sonali when she rushes to Robinson Street to look for Romen Haldar. She finds a lot of people assembling around somebody; the woman in the centre raising her voice, saying: “The time is here, pray that all goes well for our Laakhan, once again” (140). In this regard, Madhumalati Adhikari considers that magic realism “dissolves the boundaries between the physical and spiritual truths and explores the possibilities of existence of various levels of consciousness” (233). Further more, the novelist intentionally presents Muslim, Christian and Hindu characters interacting with Murugan’s hypothesis, and also some of them involve in doing the rituals. That means Ghosh seems to universalise the Indian philosophy of the transmigration of the souls.

Mangala’s assistant in her counter-scientific activity is Lutchman. In Murugan’s account, it is Lutchman who directs Ross’s attention to mosquitoes, while the scientist knows nothing about them (64-66). In conspiracy with his crew, Lutchman provides Ross with the mosquitoes and when Ross asks from where he has got them, he does not reply. Furthermore, the weird presence of this man all through the novel adds up to its colour of mystery, resembling it to ghost stories, and detective narratives. This marginal figure is present all over the novel, and he is truly the representative of silenced people.

Phulboni, the fictional character, is a great Bengali writer, who writes about this culture of silence in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. He has won the national award of representing marginalized people in his literary works. To Sonali, Urmila says: “Phulboni was a young man, he wrote a set of stories called *The Laakhan Stories*. They were published in an obscure little magazine and have never been reprinted” (39). Indeed, Phulboni has undergone a mysterious incident in his early life in 1933. When he gets a job with the British firm, Palmer Brothers, this post requires travelling to remote areas in order to mingle with local people to show them the quality of products. The company, then, sends him to Renupure, which is 300 miles away from Calcutta. It takes eight hours journey by train from Darbhanga to Renupur. When Phulboni gets off from the train at mid-night, he sees nobody in the station. Suddenly, he sees the station-master, who invites him to his home, but Phulboni insists only to stay in the signal-room. Unexpectedly he realizes many unusual things happening around him, like the disappearance of the lantern as well as “the imprint of the left hand” moving behind the lantern with no face (220). He is terrified by the two actions and leaves the room rapidly towards the station. He escapes death from a train accident. A strange scream is heard in the darkness, and it turns to be, “a single word into the wind- ‘Laakhan’- and then it was silenced by the thunder of the speeding train” (227). Phulboni, Later on, has been informed that the station-master is no longer alive, and the person he has met in the station is a phantom; thus such experience plays a fundamental role to mould his personality as a writer.

Phulboni says: “Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life; that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice” (24).

To conclude, Ghosh successfully de-constructs the Eurocentric discourse of hegemony by means of replacing the noble characters by silenced ones. Such characters, like Murugan, Mangala, Laakhan, and Phulboni come to the centre of the narrative. It is not only that, but the novel is also a celebration of the victory of the East over the West, dismantling Western sense of superiority. Therefore, *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a postcolonial novel that challenges and resists the colonial voice through the voiceless characters.

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