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THE WORKING OF POWER/KNOWLEDGE AND DISCOURSE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S  
"THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME"

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ABSTRACT

The present paper traces the working of power, knowledge and discourse and how knowledge is saturated with innumerable manipulations to maintain this power equation in the society.

Keywords: Gendering, power-discourse, counter-discourse, Bottom-Up model of power, magisterial approach, episteme, 'space of dispersion,' 'regimes of power,' Eros, Thanatos, taboo, rarefaction, subaltern, 'will to know,' master-gaze, counter-gaze.

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Destabilising the Empirical certainty of colonial science, *The Calcutta Chromosome* takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride to where the ordinary and the believable get overtaken by the spine-chilling and the bizarre. Amitav Ghosh's fourth book—a kind of mystery thriller—seems at first to be a radical departure from what he has written so far, but slowly the links begin to be visible. The ability to let research and fiction breathe life into each other, the jumbling up of time and space until the discontinuity itself becomes meaningful. (Mukherjee 163)

*The Calcutta Chromosome* was published in 1996. It is generally considered as a science fiction, a medical thriller that has won the prestigious Arthur C. Clark Award in 1996. Gabriele Salvatores, director of *Mediterraneo* has made a movie on it. The novel has two parts 'August 20: Mosquito Day' and 'The Day After.' It revolves around Ronald Ross's discovery of the life cycle of malaria mosquito—Anopheles, and the mysterious background events that led Ross to the final conclusion. "It has science, religion, myth, nihilism, transcendental philosophy, Indian superstitions, logic, rationality and what not" (Tiwari 51). "The literary assets of the book lie in its delving deep into the mysteries created by bio-physical, meta-physical, geo-physical and trans-temporal images and Ghosh gives credibility to our world that contains the voice of logic and illogic, matter and anti-matter, science and anti-science" (Banerjee 125).

Martin Kich finds the striking similarity between Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* and Dan Simmons' first novel *The Song of Kali*. Simmons' novel tells us the story of American poet who comes to Calcutta with his wife and baby in the search of Indian writer's epic poem cycle about the Goddess Kali. When he arrives, he finds that the poet has disappeared under mysterious circumstances involving a cult that worships the Goddess Kali. Kich strongly believes that Ghosh has borrowed from this novel. For Kich, *The*

*Calcutta Chromosome* is something between Gothic novel and cyberpunk. In the novel, it may be observed that:

The 'native' Indians practicing the 'counter-science . . . represent a terrible manifestation of the 'Other'—perhaps *the* most terrible manifestation imaginable. For their sinister discovery would enable them to sustain themselves by parasitically insinuating themselves into not just the bodies but into the cells, into the identities, of their hosts. From a western perspective, they have diabolically made the concept of identity as uncertain as mortality makes it transitory. (Dwivedi 114)

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is the best example of what may be called the dismantling of the gendering of 'Knowledge.' Knowledge has never been unbiased, as someone who is in power always controls it. West has ruled the world for long. That is why we have 'magisterial approach' towards knowledge (as Amartya Sen illustrates in his book *The Argumentative Indian*), where West is taken as superior or guardian leading actor or active agent and 'Others' are reduced to followers or passive takers. Edward Said rightly depicted this in a clash between Orientals and Occidentals. In the novel, Ghosh fearlessly puts Western leadership in embarrassing situation. It is really amazing to see Westerners outwitted by ordinary Indians. At the end, it is the indigenous knowledge that proves triumphant, while Westerners merely act like puppets without even knowing: "But the big question is did Cunningham find her or did she find him?" (Ghosh 208). Breaking this gendering of knowledge is the best way to fight against the myth that goes against those who are marginalised (women, Black, Asians, Dalits) under the discursive manipulation of knowledge. Brain is the real vector of suppression.

In the case of Mangala, we find that she is not in circulation, as she is not acknowledged by authority. That is why, she leads Ross to a certain direction, as he represents the authority. So, Mangala tries to authenticate her knowledge through Ross. As Foucault puts it that truth is not self-evident and it needs power's approval to establish itself as true. Mangala represents feminine intelligence (side-stream), whereas Ross represents masculine intelligence (mainstream). As a result, Mangala's wisdom is marked by secrecy, because it is beyond symbolization (as Lacan and French feminists believe). She uses Ross or patriarchal means to establish her learning. Mangala's parallel research or we can say Ghosh's parallel research represents the episteme of nineties, which Foucault clearly defines as "space of dispersion" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 55).

Knowledge is an important tool to rule body and mind. Foucault rightly says that "it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge," at the same time "it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 52). That is why the first thing that a ruler wants to grab is the production of knowledge, which in turn is related to economy as viewed by Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist political theorist, that the one who had power over economic means has a power over other means. With time, we have realised that to have power over economy, one must have power over mental reproduction of knowledge. In modern times, we are included or excluded from power structures by the game of mind, as knowledge is power and power is knowledge. Foucault rightly linked knowledge with power and vice versa. Marx believes that "the ideas of ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas . . . the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production" (McLellan 176).

Particular 'regimes of power' decide the position of particular group or area in power structure. For example, for a long time the 'regime of power' favoured Europe, Whites, Man, Capitalist and traditionalist. With the passage of time, the counter-discourse set in and the marginalized, peripheral started claiming the centre position. Thus, "this drama of corporeal restoration in the story is homologous to Ghosh's (hypothetical) restoration of a corpus/corps of indigenous knowledge about corporeal immortality, a knowledge that troubles the colonial medical gaze" (Bose 125).

In the novel, power does not percolate from top to bottom; on the contrary, bottom to top. It represents Foucault's 'Bottom-Up Model of Power.' It is not Ross, the imperial authority, who gives directions to his subordinate. On the contrary, it is his subordinates— Mangala and Lutchman—who lead Ross to a certain direction, certainly in the secret ways, as Scott Gordon avers "alternative knowledge reacts with

silence" (qtd. in Choudhury 71). It simultaneously deals with the mystery of life, one's incapability of defining it. It represents "the void or abyss at the core of our being that we constantly try to fill out" (Homer 87-88). Life is marked by the absence of final definitions. Life cannot be defined through language, as Lacan believes that it is not an absolute medium. Life is beyond language like the 'real' in Lacanian terms.

The novel swings between 'Eros' (a basic force for life) and 'Thanatos' ('death drive'). It is basically an odyssey to eternity. The mysterious character, Mangala keeps experimenting to attain eternity. 'Eros' is the power that facilitate this eternity. According to Freud, the function of 'Eros' is "to form living substance into ever greater unities so that life may be prolonged and brought to higher development" (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 134, qtd. in Lear 83). This is the main theme of the novel, which is finely balanced with the 'death drive'—a fundamental force for death, destruction and decomposition. The four main characteristics of drive—its pressure, its aim, its object, and its source—are present in the novel. The pressure is ubiquitous, its aim is eternity, its object is overcoming death and its source is syphilis.

Apart from this mystery, *The Calcutta Chromosome* also raises an important question of deliberate exclusion of particular knowledge from discourse and circulation. This exclusion of Eastern learning by West is a central issue of post-colonial studies. Similarly, women and their learning are deliberately excluded from history under patriarchal set-up. All our major sources of learning and knowledge—the *Rig-Veda*, the *Sama-Veda*, the *Yajur-Veda*, the *Atharva-Veda*, the eighteen Puranas, Gita, Bible, Kuran, Guru Granth Sahib, etc. are written by male authors. As Simone de Beauvoir states that women's viewpoint is deliberately excluded, particularly by 'taboo' and 'rarefaction.' In the past women were not given an opportunity to acquire knowledge. They were meant to do household work, like slave they render their services without any authority or say in the family or society.

This exclusion led to the vacuum or gap created by the absence of their voices. That is why Freud finds femininity as 'a dark continent,' and Lacan says that 'woman does not exist.' It is not that woman really does not exist or femininity is obscure, but the fact is that one who wears the shoe only knows where it pinches. That is why, Gayatri Spivak vehemently urges—"let the subaltern speak." For woman, femininity is not an enigma; she can feel her existence. But she was deliberately made mysterious and forced to disappear from the scene because she is delineated by the man. Discourse deliberately erased women, their voices and experiences from the history. In the novel, Ghosh emphatically challenges this exclusion, which is very well expressed by Antar's chiding to AVA/Ile "You don't have to show me you know everything there is to know" (Ghosh 6). Feminism also relies on this same strategy to reassert their claim. One of the biggest challenges that we face today is how to redefine 'silence.' Ghosh rightly says through the mouthpiece of Phulboni:

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 the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life. (25)

The 'silence' of suppressed, subaltern, women, Dalits and Blacks is often mistaken as the acceptance of status quo, that is, their weakness. It is generally believed that if you cannot rule, you must be ruled; if one cannot subjugate, one must be subjugated; if one cannot suppress, one must be suppressed. One must be either one category or the other. This bifurcation, which Marx often talks about, has the grey area too. There is always 'something more' to this either and or. This 'something more' is not negative all the time.

Joydeep Baneerjee rightly points out in his book *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study* that "woman throughout the ages have been associated with silence, secrecy, mystery and also discredited for these attributes. Ghosh has made secrecy the hallmark of power" (125). In the novel, all female characters exist independently; males do not serve as their emotional or financial anchor. Mangala, Mrs Aratounian, Urmila Roy, Sonali Das, Tara, Maria, Countess are all independent women whose existence hardly depends on men.

Mangala represents the matriarchal power, whose efficiency no one can doubt. One illiterate woman outshines many medicians and scientists—Ronald Ross, J. W. D. Grigson, Elijah Monroe Farley and D. D. Cunningham. "Mangala is a specific instance of a powerful presence whose cosmic knowledge enables her to

enjoy a commanding position over others" (*Ibid.*). It is interesting to see woman as an active agent of power. "Ghosh has unbarred the floodgates of power and knowledge to woman. Mangala bibi is empowered by knowledge to control, dominate and influence Ross, Farley and Cunningham, the white master" (Adhikari 195). "A woman's voice is constantly heard in *The Calcutta Chromosome* as she moves towards self-actualization and empowerment" (*Ibid.*).

In the novel, Murugan represents the 'will to know.' His restless inquiry about malaria research symbolically represents the empirical attitude. Ghosh has touched the gist of civilization. He avers that knowledge is an everlasting process, which cannot be limited to any particular framework. It continuously keeps changing; it is pragmatic. "To know something is to change it" and "to make something known would be one way of effecting a change?" (Gosh 184). "If you want to create a specific kind of change, or mutation, one of the ways in which you could get there, is by allowing certain things to be known" (185).

We have no idea what purpose we fulfil. We are part of the game without having the least awareness of that. We are all part of the experiment like 'guinea pigs' or else "*Addad al-Turab*" (dust counter). Urmila rightly says to Murugan, "you and I are trapped in an experiment, and we don't know what it's for or why?" (*Ibid.*). "We don't even know what we don't know" (*Ibid.*). The working of power is so subtle and intricate that it is never been easy to escape it. Freedom is an illusion as Althusser rightly puts it with his concept of 'interpellation.'

John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing* propounded the theory of gaze, which is very important tool in analysing post-colonial text. The present novel is a good example of it. In the novel, Farley represents colonial gaze, immersed in superiority complex, whereas Mangala represents the counter-gaze of subaltern. Farley smells a rat and becomes suspicious about Lutchman and Mangala in Dr Cunningham's laboratory. Being a Westerner, he thinks that he can divulge the secret objective of Mangala's mysterious research. Farley comes to the laboratory despite effusive excuses given by Lutchman. He unabashedly remains in the laboratory despite knowing the undergoing magical rituals. Flecked in the proud of being a Westerner, he thinks that he can overcome the present crisis. However, Ghosh succeeds in turning the table turtle. He presents Mangala, an Asian woman as superior to a European man, Farley. Here Mangala represents subaltern counter-gaze to European master-gaze:

His gaze strayed to the window, and discovered a row of faces lined up against the glass, watching him, as he squirmed in his seat, mopping his brow. His eyes locked with Mangala's; she was standing in front of all the others, staring at him, smiling to herself. Clutched in her hand, in full view, was the body of the decapitated bird, the blood still oozing from its macabre wound. (132-33)

Thus, the novel successfully reveals the working of the intricacies of knowledge, power and discourse. Everything around us including knowledge is the subtle work of discourse that operates in accordance with the interest of few.

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