

POST COLONIAL INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Ashish Gupta
PRINCIPAL
RAMNIRANJAN JHUNJHUNWALA COLLEGE
OF ARTS, SCIENCE & COMMERCE (AUTONOMOUS)
Ghatkopar (W), Mumbai-400 086, Maharashtra, INDIA

Edited by

Dr. Ashish Gupta

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Ashish Gupta
Principal
Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College,
Ghatkopar (W), Mumbai-400086.



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ISBN: 978-81-934540-1-5

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Second Edition: July 2018

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Printed at India Printing Press, Mumbai.

Published by Mahatma Gandhi Education & Welfare Society,
Parbhani- 431401.

Mob. + 91 9730721393, +91 9420079975

Email: nmpublication@gmail.com

www.newmanpublication.com

Typesetting and Cover Designing: Seema Zade

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16.

Amitav Ghosh's *Calcutta Chromosome*: Prescription of Experience for Eternity?

Dr. Neeta Chakravarty
Associate Prof. & HOD (English),
R.J.College, Ghatkopar (W)

Amitav Ghosh is a prolific writer with an eye for details. Besides, he is sensitive to the social ills prevalent in society. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, he rightly throws light on the woes of the aged, their illnesses and most importantly, their need for care.

The available literature in a postmodern deconstructive reading reveals gaps of non-representation of the old and the infirm. Representation of their concerns hence forms micro narratives within the novel. Amitav Ghosh narrates the mini history of the occupancy of the building in which one of his characters, Antar resides. He draws attention to the interrelation between the social dynamics of the occupants of the building and the politics of governance. While earlier one wave of migrants would replace the previous lot, consequent to a change in the zoning regulations, the owners preferred to now convert empty apartments into commercial properties. Ghosh tells the readers how this change in the demand of the building impacts the profile of its few inhabitants for with the building growing emptier of people, the storage spaces expanded and only a few aging neighbours remained. Ghosh thus introduces a very relevant social problem reflected in gerontological historiography. He points out the advent of loneliness in aged beings and how it impacts their lives in the face of various considerations like lack of finance or jobs in the vicinity. However, he proceeds to show in the novel that the qualities of life are transmitted by making use of the mutation in the malaria parasite and life is remanifested in different ways. This nature of time is in line with Cameron's eternalism. According to Cameron, the present is enriched as a result of the past. Thus, he claims that the past, present and future concurrently coexist.

He also draws attention to *temporal distributional properties*, which he feels are intrinsic properties that describe how an object is was or will be at every age the object has. Objects age and the world changes how things are intrinsically.

Keywords: postmodern, deconstruction, micro narratives, gerontological historiography, nature of time

W. B. Yeats in *Sailing to Byzantium* describes an old man as a "paltry thing," merely a tattered coat upon a stick, unless his soul can clap its hands and sing. Amitav Ghosh does just that in his fictional work *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Amitav Ghosh is a prolific writer with an eye for details. Besides, he is sensitive to the social ills prevalent in society. Insensitive behaviour arouses the hackles of sensitive writers like Ghosh who are observant and are quick to note the apathy of the society towards the more unfortunate members within them. The elderly is one such strata of society which is straddling between their responsibilities, social norms and expectations. Ghosh uses Science to enable them to metamorphose into forms which will afford both physical peace and the joy of creation of knowledge.

The plight of the old is indeed very pathetic. On the one hand, their maturity level persuades them to lead independent lives while on the other hand, their needs being varied, their lives are difficult. Added to this are social stigmas. For instance, if one's offspring fails to care for one, it is considered one's own failure in upbringing the child. Naturally then, one tries to withhold one's complaints and continue to lead a quiet life with as much dignity as one can muster. However, their situation is far from healthy and urgently needs intervention.

Intricately connected to power structures ruling over the distribution of such social texts, are history and fiction. While history is a form of expression that is conditioned by the ideology, expectations and economy of the society into which it is introduced, novels can be considered as cultural material or the material referents of certain historical or social contexts. If one takes a psychological perspective on this situation, history as a narrative could be perceived as the repressed unconscious of literature. For instance Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, though presented through the consciousness of individualised narrators,

throws light on the contemporary social scene. Since, the *Canterbury Tales* carries a social commentary, it could also be considered as a piece of social history, though not strictly written in the empirical objectivity of conventional history. Similarly, Daniel Defoe's novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton* of the early eighteenth century were historically important as they depicted the complex historical frame of the early imperialism though through imaginative situations and characters. Henry Fielding, later depicted in his novels such as *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, characters representing different social classes. He, too, created a fragment of British social history in his novels.

Thus, we find that, the novelist has to don the cap of a thinker and social reformer. He has to work on the fragile threads holding society together and uphold the need for creating social awareness and indulge in social manoeuvring. Thus, the writer often takes recourse to such narratives that are both political and factual. In this context, Shah has some interesting observations to make about the role of the writer. She says:

The narrative thus often becomes a critique of the existing socio-political system. However, the novelists too, are human beings and their 'collective conscious' may find a way in the narrative. But, that again provides valuable insights into the consciousness of his/ her social class. The novelist is supposed to be more sensitive than public, in general. He/she reflects the despair and hopes of the moment, thus, enhancing the reader's understanding of that particular interpretation of the past, the present and a future. Especially during the nodal periods of momentous changes, the writers tend to create a literature of crisis (Shah 2003, 19).

So, works of the writers enable the readers to perceive the truth from the character's social, political and cultural locations. Such novels locate the cause for the present plight of the excluded people by themselves becoming sites of exchange between the individual and culture. In this context, Nila Shah explains:

From a different perspective, it can be said that, these novels, are not so much a mirror but small lasers with a

focusing beam, penetrating to the core of the past events in an unhistorical way by their use of the literary form. They demonstrate the power of the novelists' imagination to link up into a narrative unity the elements of psychology, history and sociology and enhance our understanding of the complex transactions between the self and its culture in a historical moment. Evidently, these novelists' engagement with history in their fictional works, in as many different ways as they themselves are, speak volumes about their consciousness of history and historical process, that played major role in the lives of their ancestors and also that of their generations (Shah 2003, 33).

The historical consciousness of the writers helps them to turn a story, novel or narrative into an unconventional form of history or a literary history. The narrative becomes the means for writers to give voice to the social concerns that touch them. Geriatric issues are of relevance today for if one were to make a postmodern deconstructive reading of the available literature, then one would find gaps of non representation of the old and the infirm. Naturally then, a number of writers began to represent the problems of this group in their novels. Geriatric concerns, therefore, took the form of micro narratives within the novel.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Amitav Ghosh throws light on the woes of the aged, their illnesses and most importantly, their need for care when he narrates the mini history of the occupancy of the building in which one of his characters, Antar resides. Having drawn up an imagery of people and children all over the building, Ghosh draws attention to the interrelation between the social dynamics of the occupants of the building and the politics of governance. Consequent to a change in the zoning regulations, a new page starts being written in the mini history of the tenancy of the building. While earlier one wave of migrants would replace the previous lot, now the trend got changed and the owners preferred to now convert empty apartments into commercial properties. Antar resorts to interiority to bring into perspective the various historical frames that explain this trend. He recalls:

They were all gone now, all those noisy, festive families that had so attracted Tayseer. They had been siphoned slowly

away into small-towns and suburbs by the demands of their expanding businesses and their ever-growing families (Ghosh 1996, 14).

Ghosh tells the readers how this change in the demand of the building impacts the profile of its few inhabitants for with the building growing emptier of people, the storage spaces expanded and only a few aging neighbours remained. At this point, Ghosh introduces a very relevant social problem reflected in gerontological historiography. Ghosh points out the advent of loneliness in aged beings and how it impacts their lives. He provides instances of the group living lifestyle of occupants being replaced by solitary lives for the old in the face of various considerations like lack of finance or jobs in the vicinity. He tells us how his chess player neighbour from the next apartment was afflicted by geriatrics and ultimately taken away by his nephews when he began to waste away and how an old woman living in the apartment below was murdered by the delivery boy who brought in her grocery.

Ghosh also uses the example of Antar who lives all alone although he was approaching old age. Often, Antar suffers from fevers due to relapse of malaria, but he has to battle these on his own for the building now bears an almost vacant look in contrast to the racket of the past when the building was teeming with tenants. What remains in his life is a vacancy very similar to that of the building and all he can do is dream of a happier future:

For years he'd been dreaming of leaving New York and going back to Egypt: of getting out of this musty apartment where all he could see when he looked down the street were boarded-up windows stretching across the fronts of buildings that were almost as empty as his own (Ghosh 1996, 5).

Thus, Ghosh has used fiction in his novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* to cross the formal barriers of traditional history to use fiction as unconventional history and to emphasize on new ways of looking at the text in an attempt to generate awareness and understanding about geriatric problems.

Further, by making use of fluidity of Time which is shown to be a mutating entity in the novel, Ghosh allows interaction

between characters existing in different periods of time. So, when a character makes a lot of contribution to the progress of knowledge, his/her age therefore becomes a passport for him to get transposed to another age and time. Such individuals are thus able to continue their quest for knowledge. Most importantly, the caste and class refuses to have any impact in this matter. So while on one hand, Ghosh does not provide any relief from geriatric concerns, he gives a continuity to the thirst for knowledge. Ghosh thus uses twists and turns to correlate the lives of Antar, Murugan, Urmila, Sonali, Ronald Ross, Phulboni, Laakhan and Mangala through different stories. The chosen ones are granted immortality through incarnations and these people criss-cross into each other's lives to enable the same. The novel is woven together by Ghosh's superb story telling ability. Many of the characters have a vivid memory, which seems to offer respite from the pains of the aged. The story seems to be based on science but also gives way to mythic processes like reincarnation, rebirth etc impacting the lives of the characters. The thin line between science and mysticism is thus fudged. While the author tells the story, he also seems to be echoing the centuries old belief that silence is necessary to create life. The story suggests that age brings untold suffering and misery but meaning and worthiness of people are hidden in the silences of life.

The qualities of life are transmitted by making use of the mutation in the malaria parasite and life is remanifested in different ways. This nature of time is in line with Cameron's eternalism. According to him, the present is enriched as a result of the past. Thus, he claims that the past, present and future concurrently coexist. He also draws attention to *temporal distributional properties*, which he feels are intrinsic properties that describe how an object is, was or will be at every age that the object has.

Both Ghosh and Cameron have therefore pointed towards the aging of knowledge or objects and convincingly show that the world changes how things are intrinsically. They thus 'superimpose the experience of the elderly over the present in order to generate a permanent gift for eternity.

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