

Memory to Merge Space and Time in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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ABSTRACT

In the latter half of the 20th century Indian English literature became a matter of serious attention for the lovers of English literature. Amitav Ghosh is one of the authors who made people realise the importance of Indian writings in English. Ghosh is the only writer who reflects truth of Indian reality and bears many responsibility of a veteran author who created sensation in the world English literature. Ghosh is a master author who uses history, migration and memory to develop his plots in most of his novels. The way Ghosh uses his private memory to construct his novels is unique in every sense. It is seen that there is no barriers of time and space in his fiction. Ghosh's use of time presents an interesting innovation. Ghosh intermingles present, past and future into one and does not arrange historical events in a chronological order. Time and Space are important elements of the novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*. In this novel Time has been used as an important element but the constant time shift leave the reader confused. We often get the impression that events lie outside the normal dimensions of time. By using his memory, Ghosh tries to merge time and space in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Ghosh's memory connects the past to the present and many of the characters live more in the past than in the present. My objective in this paper would be to show how Ghosh uses his memory to merge space and time.

Keywords: Memory, Time, Space

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most noticed contemporary authors of Indian writing in English who is the touchstone of genius, versatility and an incessant source of inspiration for

future generations. The very first novel of Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) places him as a master author in the field of English literature. Use of personal memory is an integral part of his novel writing. He uses memory such a way that it does not leave barriers of time and space in his fictions. His use of memory and time presents an interesting innovation from the traditional novels. He mingles past memories, present circumstances and future perspective into one. His novels are not limited by clock-time as they do not deal merely with externals. In fact, we often get the impression that events lie outside the normal dimensions of time and memory as in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

Amitav Ghosh has credit to write novels of different themes based on history, migration and memory. But the way he uses his personal memory to shape his novels places him a veteran author. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a science fiction with thriller which has a wide sweep of both time and space. The entire characters of this novel are from scientists and researchers to ordinary human beings which seem very real. It is centred around Ronald Ross's discovery of the malaria parasite in 1895. With mosquito related research and malaria at the centre, the novel inquire into many layers of experience. On first reading, one is left astonished but a second reading make us to understand the artistic and thematic achievement of Amitav Ghosh. This paper is an attempt to analyse Ghosh's use of memory to merge time and space as tool of narration. John C. Hawley summarises the novelty of *The Calcutta Chromosome* when he writes:

This novel marks something of a shift away from the exploration of personal memories and moves towards a metaphysical of identity itself, suggesting at the same time that history as defined by the intellectuals of the world is far less tamed than one's place in time becomes unhinged as the detective story unfolds. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a great thematic change took place in the writers' attitude towards the use of memory to merge time and space to shape their novels. Many scientists along with philosophers like

Lawrence Sklar, John Anderson, Einstein, Bergson, Samuel Alexander, Herman Minkowsky etc. were main reason for initiating this change.

Amitav Ghosh uses his private memory to merge space and time in a very unique and innovative way. The continuous shifts between present and past events as time passed and time recalled in *The Shadow Lines* are further advanced to maturity in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. This novel is not only a science fiction but it contains all the quality of a perfect kind of fiction. It is interesting to study the use of memory by Amitav Ghosh to merge the time and space shifts in this novel as it proves once again Ghosh's height as a novelist desirous to experiment in narrative techniques.

The novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome* opens with the present for Antar, which for us – the readers – is an unknown future date and the continuously shifts to various periods of time in the past using flash back technique, not chronologically but forwards and backwards. In recalling past events, which are separated by unlimited patches of reminiscences, man is constantly liberated from the chronological order of time. Many of the characters often try not to remember the immediate past but feel a strong desire to remember a more ancient past. From 'Mosquito Day' – August 20th – of some unnoticed and unspecified year in the future – we impel to move with Ghosh's characters to years earlier when Antar was a little boy in Egypt, to a different time and place in a different continent. The memory plays a vital role in the entire novel because the tone of the novel has been set before many years ago – events are often remembered to the minutest detail.

As Mukherjee says,

If Ghosh ever drew his storyline on a blackboard he would end up with real granny's knot of a plot-each character's life intertwined with the others in some way or the other. As for direction, he proceeds in ever decreasing circles until he comes to the centre which is where he started in the first place. (38)

On contrary to the naturalist writers who had thought of Time and Space as separate entities as the classical physicists too had done but Amitav Ghosh has some different notion to use space and time by merging the with his acute memory. The Bloomsbury Group, especially Virginia Woolf first rejected this notion. The time taken to remember events is very short in comparison to the time taken for the events to happen outside the mind, i.e. in space. Space, some later philosophers argued, is just a shallow foil to time. Ghosh's novel illustrates this dichotomy in the novelist's use of memory, "He recalled a meeting, a conversation somewhere, years ago sitting sitting across a table. But as memory was beginning to take on an outline, it dissolved" the actual distances between past and present and future. This leads us to a space-time continuum where many of impressions from different periods of individual life and experience come together to form sometimes even those images which are not connected. From Antar through Murugan we reach Sonali and Urmila and then Romen Haldar. Amitav Ghosh constantly seeks out those people whose memory reflect trick. It is through Murugan again that we lead to flash back in time to the late nineteenth century and Ross and Lutchman, to Secunderabad and Calcutta and Austria. We notice that throughout the entire novel, memories of the past, contemplation about the future and anxiety of the present always mix together by the author.

When we read the novel, it is noticed that the novel starts in the future but very soon we are led to a date in the past – 21st August, 1995 and to Murugan's first day in Calcutta which happens to be 20th August, 1995. Surprisingly, in 1996, the novel was published. If we could look at 'time remembered' or the past in terms of 'recent past' and 'distant past', we noticed that Ghosh mix up the two masterfully as a veteran author. From 1995, we move, through Murugan's summing up of the details of Ross's research, into an earlier century – almost a hundred years ago to 1895-98. A method often used by novelists to vary time is to vary

the proportion of time related to particular incidents. Hence, an important single event and hence time span may be described in great detail while an entire century may be dismissed off in a single paragraph. By this handling of 'pace of time' Ghosh is able to draw the readers' attention to the relative importance or non-importance of events. Hence, Farley's visit to Cunningham's laboratory and his unexpected experiences there (though lasting only a couple of days) are dealt with in great detail. This could be also because the sweeper woman Mangala and the yet-to-named assistant are to play a major role in Ghosh's theory of science and counter-science. At this stage in the novel, however, there is no sign of all that is to follow! Specific dates seem to appeal to Ghosh. This could even be interpreted as a personal foible rather than an artistic or even technical necessity. Raban has called historical dates the "documentary decor" (59) of a novel.

When we analyse a novel, it is usually seen that place or location receives less importance in comparison to plot, theme, technique, style, character, language, etc. It may be noticed slightly different when we come to the Wessex of Hardy's novels or the Malgudi of R.K. Narayan's novels. Eudora Welty argues that it is place, "the named, identified, concrete, exacting.... gathering spot of all that has been felt" (57) that form the real substance of a story. Place reflects experience and helps the author to see day-to-day experiences from a distinct point of view. This place or location seems to give the entire work a sense of direction. This is in no way to take an extreme stand that every novel should be regional. Instead, by being rooted in a particular place, the novel gets a clear and direct location from where events and characters are firmly and directly rooted. In this novel of Ghosh, we find this place is not a single one but is a constantly shifting one-as much in place as it does in time. In most of Ghosh's novels, the sweep is not of towns and countries but to continents and sub-continents. Further, we see that *The Calcutta Chromosome* begins in Egypt, or to Murugan's "global

childhood spent wandering between the world's capitals with his technocrat father....old American serials – the only constant – as for so many, in a peripatetic, internationalised coming-of-age” (30).

In this constant changes to different places and parts of the world, Ghosh always remember to provide a listing of places – whether known or unknown. With a traveler's tendency for the new or the untrodden, Ghosh writes of “...all the vast Unknown: Africa, Asia, Australia, the Americas, even uncolonised parts of herself” (Europe) (47). Occasionally, it could even be the often trodden like “the swamps around Rome, or in Algeria...in France, in Italy and the U.S....” (47-48). Later we are led in “....South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Kenya” (75) – a virtual world-tour that this novel takes to the reader on. With Ava being the best store house of memory, space and time blend superbly in cyberspace as Ava searches for Murugan's mail posted to Antar: “It was simply a question of matching the electronic fingerprints of Murugna's e-mail to every electronic signal that was still alive in the *ionosphere*” (107).

In this novel, we find that places keep coming with different characters having visited the same place in different time and periods. The best example of this is the distant town of Renupur: Elijah Farley landed there and vanished without a trace, mangala brought Cunningham's young assistant (later – Lakhan) from there, Phulboni had his fearful experience there and it is this that makes him believe that the villagers have their heads full of fantasies and superstition. It is again seen there in Renupur that Lakhan “had drifted in from somewhere up the line” (232) and from where he later went to Sealdah. Calcutta, of course, is present all through the novel. *The Calcutta Chromosome* of the title is, according to Murugan, and artificially induced malarial parasite, which could cure or at least lessen the dreaded ‘syphilitic paresis’. Amitav Ghosh shows a keen and vigilant sense of observation of the shapes, sounds and minute details of

places. Each and every place has been thus given treatment invested with a local flavour. The fresh and local fish which is the desire of every Bengali and station, the shops in new market, the mosquito-ridden areas, traffic build-up in Loudon Road – Ghosh reflects a fondness and a matchless eye for detail.

Ghosh has used his excellent memory to merge this continuous time and place shifts which provide extra dimension to the novel. The use of the blurring past, present and future provides unique, innovative and experimental touch to the novel. It is the memory of Ghosh which helps him to constitute this novel.

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