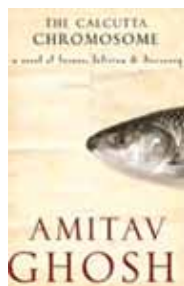


The Calcutta Chromosome



A Novel Of Fevers, Delirium And Discovery

Amitav Ghosh

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Reviewed by Kritika Goyal

Set in an unspecified time in the future, this medical thriller takes the readers through a wondrous journey of time. The narrative is suffused with science, myth, nihilism, philosophy and superstition. The book is based on the life of the Nobel Prize winning scientist, Sir Ronald Ross, who did a breakthrough research on malaria in 1899. It is an attempt to rewrite the story of Ronald Ross's discovery of the malarial parasite. Apart from the fact that Ross discovered the malarial parasite on 20th August, 1897; all the other events promulgated in the narrative are fabricated by the author himself. It is his own creation. The book bagged the Arthur C Clarke Award in 1997.

The book tells a unique tale which is quite complicated to comprehend as it oscillates briskly back and forth in time. There are three mysteries which seem to be parallel to each other but actually are intertwined. The first is of the Egyptian clerk, Antar in New York, who works for 'Life technologies'. He works from home on his future generation supercomputer 'Ava'. He wants to find out about the disappearance of his co worker Murugan in Calcutta. The second one is of Murugan himself, who is passionate about unfolding the story, how Sir Ronald Ross concluded the malaria research. In the third one there is journalist Urmila Roy of 'Calcutta' magazine. She is intrigued by a series 'Laakhan Stories' produced by a renowned Bengali author Phulboni.

It would be more pertinent to say that the fictive revolves around Murugan's inquisitiveness to find out the discrepancies in the history of malaria research. He wrote a summary of his research in an article entitled "*Certain Systematic Discrepancies in Ronald Ross's Account of Plasmodium B.*" The article was denigrated by every journal in which he tried to publish his article. This made Murugan obstinate and he decided to go to India to look for the actual malaria story. He speculated that 'some people' had systematically interfered with Ross's

experiment and pushed the malaria research towards him. He arrived in Calcutta on August 20: The mosquito day. Being a science freak, he was curious about the unique 'Calcutta Chromosome', a factor which he christened so by himself. This chromosome was unusual because it could not be isolated or detected by the conventional techniques. It was not even present in every cell because unlike the other chromosomes it was not symmetrically paired. And the reason why it was not symmetrically paired was; it was not bifurcated into egg and sperm. The author imagined it to be developed from a process of recombination which was particular to every individual. It could not be transferred from one generation to another. It was only present in the non regenerative tissue, in other words; the brain and could be transmitted through malaria.

He discovered that 'some people' who had served the malaria research to Ross on plate were, a sweeper women called Mangla and a cleaner called Lutchman. Later on they turned out to be demi-gods. Urmila the journalist was just a connecting wire between the broken ends of the story. At the end, in an unspecified time in future, Murugan was spotted in Antar's (his colleague) living room. With the occult characters of Mangla and Lutchman, the author has denied the caste bars of the Indian society, portraying that knowledge and power can reside with the people who by caste are considered to be weak and downtrodden. The occult characters and the mystic group of Pongrácz counter-strike the western scientific principles which somehow represent India's superiority in knowledge and science. The politics and power of the west have also been covered pertinently.

The main idea behind the whole story is "if you know something that means you have changed it". Silence is the religion for the occult group behind the whole mystery. Enigma is the theme, on which the author has woven his entire narrative. The readers are put in a state of enigma and are forced to keep thinking about the journey even after reading the last page of the book. The mystery remains unresolved and is left to the readers' interpretation and thought process.

Although the story has been woven cleverly but it disappoints the reader who wants to read a comparatively simpler and straight novel as many things were unattended and the mystery remained unresolved.

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Kritika Goyal

M.Tech

Department of Biotechnology

Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science and Technology