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‘In the crafted mimicry of life’: The Em‘body’ment of Cultural Memory in AmitavGhosh’s*The Calcutta Chromosome*

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> “Just as a man discards worn out clothes and puts on new clothes,
> the soul discards worn out bodies and wears new ones.”
> (*Bhagavad Gita*, 2.22)

The focus of this study is mainly twofold – firstly to locate the ‘other archive’ in AmitavGhosh’s fourth novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*(1995); and secondly to address the role of cultural memory in representing these ‘other minds’, and to analyse the metaphor of body in that very process of memorising. This article seeks to analyse how the shared-memories of a particular marginalised group in colonial Calcutta in the form of ‘mini-narrative’ can challenge and deconstruct the grand official voices of the western science by opening up gaps or aporias hidden under them. The significant focus of this paper will be on the inter-relation between body and memory; the carrying of ‘memories through bodies’ and the carrying of ‘bodies through memories’ across generations in terms of Indian culture. This study seeks to examine how the rediscovery and reconstruction of pre-lives and after-lives are linked with the ancient Indian philosophy of rebirth and reincarnation.

In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, Michel Foucault defines genealogy as an analysis of dissent opposed to the evolutionary model of history whose main force is in the search for origin: genealogy liberates what has been forgotten or lost in the continuum of history and what has been set aside as accidents or errors in the imposed order of historical necessity. The genealogical approach with its task of tracing

"passing events in their dispersions" questions a "suprahistorical perspective" that assumes a "teleological movement of events in the homogenized form of time" (Rabinow, 1984, 76-100). In this study I will seek to understand how the counter-epistemology of the vernacular, represented by the 'other mind' can oppose and challenge the 'teleological movement' of grand western epistemology. Ghosh's 'other mind' project here in this novel can be described as an attempt to give shape to the Lyotardian ideal. In Ghosh's vision of a plethora of 'small' stories set in opposition to the 'grand mythology' promoted by the western science/knowledge there is an echo of Lyotard's famous distinction between *petites recits* and *metanarratives* in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984, 82). Whereas Lyotard's vision of competing narratives remains at the level of metaphysical generality, Ghosh's allegorical revision of Lyotard's attack on the Platonic tradition has a more specific focus, for, Ghosh's aim is to 'reimagine' a form of social and communal interaction in order to represent the lost and forgotten vernacular knowledge. The 'other mind' here in this novel acts as the form of Lyotardian*petit-recits* that can destabilise the given concept of western science. Ghosh's symbolic maneuvering of ghosts and corpses, here in this novel, are quite significant and noteworthy. His constant switching off between the 'pre-lives' and 'after-lives' of the live and the dead helps the novel to achieve its polyphonic voices that can open up possibilities of many worlds, both fantastic and real.

In an e-mail correspondence AmitavGhosh and DipeshChakrabarty agree that forgetting brings an epistemological perplexity, engendering a number of fraught misrecognitions and hence, Ghosh's return to memory and microhistory allows him to restore the oppositional narrative of the subaltern people, conveniently forgotten and appropriated by the dominant discourse of western science. Through his project of retelling and reinvention, Ghosh recreates this event of scientific history through a resistant reading of Ross's *Memoirs* in which he foregrounds the role of marginalized natives and investigates the possibility of transmitting native knowledge through bodies across generations. It is Murugan's thesis that the Calcutta chromosome transfers "biological correlates" (213) from one individual to other through 'transferences' that is nonsexual and one that penetrates that blood/ brain barrier. Murugan traces this back to MangalaBibi, an illiterate sweeper woman who ends up working for the nineteenth-century British scientist D. D. Cunningham.Murugan's research leads him to the conclusion that Mangala and her associates are hindering Cunningham's research

so that he would be replaced by Ross whom they choose by eliminating other scientists like Cunningham and Farley and whom they can use as a vessel for their discoveries. MangalaBibi is the high priestess of a secret 'counter-science' cult, who deals in 'transference' of the body and mind. The twentieth century American lady resident in Calcutta, Mrs Aratounian, the sophisticated babysitter in New York, Tara and finally Urmila Roy, the self-sufficient Calcutta correspondence are all to be perceived as Mangala's 'reincarnation'. Working outside the Western empirical methodologies, Mangala has been attempting to evolve a technology namely "interpersonal transference" (93), an ancient vernacular strategy of transmitting knowledge from body to body. Ghosh explains that:

> If all of that information could be transmitted chromosomally, from body to body . . . when your body fails you, you leave it, you migrate. . . . You begin all over again . . . another body, another beginning . . . a fresh start . . . . A technology that lets you improve on yourself in your next incarnation (95).

Hence AmitavGhosh here dramatises the possibility of 'another beginning'—the possibility of the existences of lives even after the physical death of the body. Ghosh in this high-suspense novel theatrises the recurrent themes of disappearance, discovery and differential identities that actually open up discursive spaces for multiple invisible pre-lives and after-lives. This concept of interpersonal transference has a strong resemblance with the Hindu philosophy of 'reincarnation'.Reincarnation (the word "reincarnation" derives from Latin, literally meaning, 'entering the flesh again') is the philosophical or religious concept that a living being can begin a new life in a different body after biological death. This is also called rebirth or transmigration and it is a central tenet of all major Indian religions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Reincarnation refers to the belief that an aspect of every human being (or all living beings in some cultures) continues to exist after death, and this aspect may be the soul or mind or consciousness or something transcendent which is reborn in an interconnected cycle of existence. A soul, according to Hindu philosophy, reincarnates again and again on earth until it mingles with the divine source and during this process the soul enters into many bodies and goes through multiple death, birth and rebirth. Hence this concept of reincarnation in Hindu philosophy directly challenges the western notion of one birth; it questions the concept of a 'transcendental signifier' of western philosophy and refers to endless series of signs or new birth which act both

as 'necessity' and 'extra' – as 'supplement' in Derridian sense. Ghosh glorifies this notion by voicing: 'Silence herself. I see signs of her presence everywhere I go, in images, words, glances but only signs . . .' (108).

The image of Murugan's decaying body comes to life around "cybernetic states of fantasy and aversion" and the malaria virus and the disease of syphilis have allegedly generated this strange perversity in Murugan's body, allowing him to mutate and merge into a newly perfect body by means of Ava's complex digitized manipulations (Shinn 148). Now his body becomes ready for mutation in the last stages of syphilitic paresis; his brain softens becoming 'ripe' for its next biological transformation. The theory of the Calcutta chromosome builds on the extent to which the process of 'embodied' reaction can be technologized. With enough genetic information about how the body has been naturally programmed and with medical technology to mutate and transport this information, a person can theoretically move from body to body. It is very interesting to note that they do not abide by the laws of biology; rather they try to govern the rule of biological science. Murugan observes succinctly that – "who said that they have to be determined by biology? Maybe it even works the other way around—that they leave their imprint on biology" (213). All the characters, to my mind, here in this novel, become sources of multiple 'host bodies' as well as 'ghost bodies'. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin in their essay "Believing the Body: Introduction" says of "the possibility of embodied memory- of memories that are carried in the body and that may be transmitted between bodies even across generations" (*Regimes of Memory*, 23). In the same volume, Tony Bennet theories about the transcendentality of body into the 'reach of memory' beyond 'writing' and 'effective tradition' in his essay "Stored Virtue: Memory, the body and evolutionary museum"

> Like the personal, the body was now fashioned as a thoroughly archaeologised entity, with a series of sequentially, layered pasts-stored up within it for retrieval by way of a bodily or psychoanalytic mnemonics that stretched the reach of memory beyond writing and effective tradition into the depths of prehistory (Radstone 25).

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the narrative sets up several challenges to the idea of linear time and to the significance of memory and fancy. The narrative trajectory elides and juxtaposes different time and space, as it follows the pursuit of different characters in the past, present, and in different parts of the world, ranging from

Renupukur, a remote, almost ghost village in Bengal, to the virtually ghost town of digitised New York. There are equally ghostly presences in the story that seem to elude the normal exigencies of time and space. BishnupriyaGhosh in her essay "On Grafting the Vernacular: The consequences of Postcolonial Spectrology" says that – "only now the progressive intellectual must guard against a 'forgetting' facilitated by the current global hierarchies of knowledge" (201). Ghosh here warns against the dangers of forgetting, in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, where we encounter multiple levels of lost epistemologies (counter-scientific discourse, folk medicine practices, spiritualism, Hindu popular religion, such as *tantra*) owned by the phantom presences in the novel like Mangala, Lakhaan; European spiritualists and the maverick scientists, 'wronged' by Ronald Ross. At the metalextual level, the writer Phulboni's struggle over representation and the Lakhaan stories warn the readers against forgetting. Ghosh's symbolical use of the ghosts and corpses establishes his concern about forgetting and cultural memory. The 'Lakhaan stories' appear three times in the novel, variously as events experienced by the linguist Grigson, the missionary Farley, and the writer Phulbani (who narrowly escapes the ghosts); and the details of these fragments densely encrypt specific vernacular ghost fiction. The ghosts bear witness to the afterlives of a past life that is now not present and is directly linked with the significance of cultural memory. The 'ghosts', for, Ghosh, stands for the polyphonic voice that can disrupt the authoritative voice of the live persons; they can occupy "a more redemptive place"; and they are "intangible sites for imagining a future beyond discredited modernist narratives of progress" (Ghosh, 2004, 206- 07). Each major or minor character more or less is haunted by a differential identity – supplement identity, a secret which they try to rediscover, reinvent and reconstruct in his/her after life. Mangala is glimpsed only twice – once by Farely in the anteroom next to the lab where he is working, and in her next incarnation, by Sonali in a scaffolded house undergoing major renovation. Both times the woman is seen holding scalpels that she uses to draw blood from birds which are then placed on glass slides. SuchitraMathur posits nicely in her essay 'Caught between the Goddess and the Cyborg' that "the shedding of blood, an image that is associated not just with ritual sacrifice, but also with women and fertility, is as necessary as the 'scientific' knowledge of malaria in its myriad manifestations to enable the project of overcoming death" (135). Mathur believes in the possibility of "postcolonial new human", "a new life, a new existence" and this afterlife combines "past, present and future, male and female, goddess, human and machine, first and third world in a

single hybrid identity" (135). The repeated performances, described here in this novel refers to the old Indian Hindu tradition of *tantra*, which works against the "Brahminical imperative to control and prohibit desire in order to attain *moksha*"[1], and the trantric cults "deploy desire, and therefore the body, as a means of freeing the soul" (Ghosh, "On Grafting" 212). Thus the spectral uncanny presence of the silence here in this novel comes continuing "jolting(s) the memory of another specter, another sighting of unrestful spirits" ("On Grafting" 208). The main narrative force in this novel is achieved through a tension between the 'membrances of lived bodies' (Ghosh, "Spectral ethics", Bose, 125) and the 'remembrances of ghost bodies'. Urmila quotes beautifully Phulboni that "Whether life lies in words or in images, in speech or sight. Does a story come to be in the words that I conjure out of my mind or does it live *already, somewhere enshrined* in mud and clay– in an image, that is, *in the crafted mimicry of life*?" (194, my emphasis) The memory of these marginalized and forgotten 'other minds' live 'already, somewhere' in "images, words, glances but only signs " (108), in the grafted and 'crafted mimicry of lives'. They carry within them memory of their past generations; in a sense they can be called *jatiswar*[2]. Though they can't remember the whole events of the past life, they possess memories of their previous birth within them. Characters like Mangala, Lakhaan, Tara are, to me, examples of living history of lost memories or living memory of past history.

While discussing the relation between history and memory in his book *History at the Limit of World-History* (2002), RanajitGuha proposes that:

> . . . the role assigned to it [memory] is protective rather than nurturing. In other words, it is not for memory to hold the past in its womb and let time work on it slowly and creatively until it is ready to be *born again in repetition* . . . Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, has the doors of her temple open to all that survives time's ravages (70, my emphasis).

The marginalized characters are truly involved in 'protecting' as well as preserving their age-old memory of counter-knowledge and interpersonal transference secretly and silently until time is up to be 'born again in repetition'— that rarest moment of redemption or single perfect moment of discovery when discoverer is also discovered. An almost similar politics of memory is set forth when in the "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin links the relation of our utopian imagination to the redemptive aspect of memory: "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption" (*Illuminations*, 254).

The western colonial master Ronald Ross discovers the malaria parasite in a well-equipped laboratory in colonial Calcutta. But library and laboratory can only be accessed by educated middle class or high class society. It is true characters like Murugan, Antar and sonali are busy discovering the hence silenced stories and want to tell these hidden stories to the world or in a sense want to carry forward these to the next generations. But my point of concern is how the memories of those lost voices can be reached to the marginalized or subaltern people of next generation who do not have any access to library or laboratory. These marginalized people, who do not belong to the *bhadrasamaj* or are what we negatively call as chhotolok[3], to my mind, do not need any kind of institution or what Anderson term as Print capitalism; they continue to carry forward the knowledge of their past through 'folk-memory'[4]. They hang on to the wisdom of their previous birth through the process of remembering and interpreting the past, through silent communications, through signs, through mutation; and reconstruct the fates of their afterlives through "an entire micropolitics of desire, of impasses and escapes, of submissions and rectifications" (Deluze and Guattari 10) and through "the dynamics of the mutual recognition" (Guha, *History at the Limit of World*-History 16) of shared memories. The *namoshudra* or *dalit* characters of Ghosh's novel restore their memory to the next generations by 'choosing' (Mangala choose Urmila), by eliminating (Cunningham, Farley), by differential identities by sharing and appropriating memories within and outside community (Mangala with Ross and Urmila). To my mind, 'cultural memory' plays a vital role in the restoration of memories of the previous generations to the next generations in the cases of marginalised people. According to Jan Assmann (1995), humans unlike animals have to find an implement to maintain their nature over generations and culture memory serves as such an implement. Cultural memory is the concept for saving the knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in social context that lasts over generations. For Mangala and the other people of the community, the memories of age-old secrets and silences serve as this implement (by way of passing knowledge and wisdom) that maintained their nature in their invisible afterlives.

To my mind, Ghosh here in this novel is in search of "the faintest trace" (111) of this hidden storehouse of "accumulated memories" (111) that "would be enough" (111) for the "fringe people, marginal type" (92) or "Sweeper woman" (107) or "dhooley-bearer" or "down and out with nowhere to go" (207) to deconstruct the western 'empire' of Malaria[5]. While describing the stories of Phulbani, Ghosh informs the

readers that there was "a message to someone" (97) or they are sharing "some kind of shared secret" (97). If we take the word secret as some hidden source of knowledge or information, then we can see that these people who live on 'dust' or in 'mud' are actually sharing their multiple lives and afterlives, thus gaining in some kind of indigenous power through the means of silence or muteness or through making 'connections' (184) by which they can subvert the western concept of 'one life'. SuchitraMathur argues that "Ghosh has convinced us that it is the people of Calcutta (non-western, lower-caste, female, and subaltern included) that count" and that the people will ultimately return to a privileged and honorific place that is actually their "right one" (56). Thus through the shared memories of the subaltern people like Mangala, Lakhaan, Tara as well as urbanized Murugan, Antar, Urmila, Sonali, the author unfolds not only the 'other mind' of counter-epistemology, but also the hidden and lost cultural memory of the city, as Ghosh puts it in the novel:

> Every city has its secrets . . . but Calcutta, whose vocation is excess, has so many that it is more secrets than any other . . . here in our city where all law, natural and human, is held in capricious suspension, that which is hidden has no need of words to give it life (22).

GyanendraPandey in his book *Memory, History and the Question of Violence* succinctly describes 'memory' as to "accommodate the malleable, contextual, fuzzy, lived community and to recognize how the community (the subject of history) is forged in the very construction of the past" (49). Hence in reconstructing the afterlives of the marginalized people, cultural memory is of utmost importance that can accommodate the 'malleable, fuzzy' and fluid lives of community. Here in this novel memory is a "perpetually actual phenomena" and always in the process of "permanent evolution" (Nora, 8); and a part of 'an undifferentiated eternal present'[6]. Antar, the sole survivor of a malaria epidemic in a small Egyptian hamlet, now at the end of the novel, gets ready for the incarnation – to cross over into a transcendental time and space, into his 'afterlife'. His promise of ultimate homecoming is similar to the soul's reunion with the divine source in Hindu Philosophy or what Walter Benjamin recognizes as the 'redemptive aspect of memory' (254). Here I want to draw attention to a Bengali word *abishkar* which can be translated as both 'discovery' and 'invention' in English. What do the characters here in this novel succeed in – 'discovery' or 'invention'— by revisiting the pasts and reconstructing the afterlives through their memories? I will say that they discover their fates as invented (reinvented) by their memory and invent

their fates as discovered (rediscovered) by their memories. Ghosh unearths the moment of redemption – 'the Time of Conversion' (262) quite ceremoniously:

> There were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people were in the room with him. They were saying: We're with you; you're not alone; we'll help you across (262).

While analysing the relation between humans and knowledge Ghosh proposes that 'knowledge couldn't begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge' (91). To my mind, this line is theoretically very important in understanding the relation between life and afterlife in terms of ancient Indian philosophy. I wish to theorise with some alteration of the above mentioned line that – 'life couldn't begin without acknowledging the possibility of another life'. Ghosh's characters, here in this novel fall in an eternal tension between discovery and invention in remaking their afterlives; the meaning of their lives and afterlives rests, to my mind, in RanajitGuha's apt phrase –'Borne again in repetition' or in AmitavGhosh's phrase – 'in the crafted mimicry of life'.

Notes :

[1]According to Brahminical Hindu philosophy *moksha* denotes the freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth.

[2]A Bengali term which refers to someone who can recall the memories of their previous birth.

[3] *bhadrasamaj* is a Bengali word that denotes high/ middle class civil society and *chhotoloks*

do not belong to that class and generally supposed to be uncivilised, uneducated and belong to the lower castes.

[4] By "folk memory" I mean myth, orality, intuition, uncanny and several forms of indigenous signs and gestures through which memory of the folk/rustic is carried on.

[5] Ghosh says in the novel that "Doc Manson wants to get the malaria prize for Britain, he says, for the Empire." *The Calcutta Chromosome*.Pg- 61.

[6] GyanendraPandey in *Memory, History and the Question of Violence*(1999) quotes

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