ISSN 2231-1629
Knowledge Resonance
*A Half Yearly National Peer-Reviewed & Indexing with SJIF Impact Factor Research Journal*
**IMPACT FACTOR 8.072**

# Use of Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosome

**Dr. Ajiet Ravikant Jachak**
Bar. Sheshrao Wankhede Mahavidyalaya,
Mohpa

HHH

***Abstract***

*Amitav Ghosh's fourth novel The Calcutta Chromosome (1996) is a complex, quasi-science fiction narrative placed in the near future. It centres on the Egyptian-born Antar's attempt to determine why his former colleague Murugan disappeared while on leave in Calcutta during a New York-based conglomerate. Using computer-mediated communication and holographs, Antar discovers that while researching the real-life scientist Ronald Ross (1857-1932), Murugan had uncovered the workings of an Indian "counter-science" group. The group comprises subaltern figures, including the scavenger woman Mangala and Ross's favourite servant sometimes referred to as Laakhan. This paper attempts to explore the use of narratives in this novel.*

***Keywords:*** *Murugan, malaria, narrative, science, supernatural*

This complex story concerns the trip Phulboni makes as a young man to the remote village of Renupur, on an official assignment. When he reaches the Renupur station, he is surprised to find it deserted except for a comic stationmaster. Because of monsoon flooding, Phulboni decides to spend the night in the signalroom, although he meets strong opposition from the stationmaster. Ignoring the stationmaster's insistence that it is not safe, Phulboni makes himself comfortable within the confinement of the signalroom. Almost immediately he observes some strange occurrences, which culminate in him being enticed onto the railway track by a bobbing red lantern. He hears a few cries of "Laakhan", one of the names adopted by a central member of the counter-science group. Phulboni then believes he almost gets run over by a train, only to be awakened and be told by the stationmaster that the lantern has not been disturbed all night. He subsequently fully wakes up and finds himself on the railway track with a train coming. He manages to hurl himself out of the way just in time, and at this point the train is "all too real" (Calcutta 279). The train grinds to a halt a mile away and its engineer tells him that the siding has not been used since its former stationmaster was killed after being lured ahead of a train by Laakhan as a young boy. Phulboni's story is refracted through several discursive lenses. Not only are there many rumours and stories within the narrative itself, but also Phulboni's account is conveyed by several different tellers. The journalist Urmila recounts to Murugan a story that Phulboni had reported many years ago to her friend's mother, but her voice is quickly subsumed to one that appears to belong to an omniscient narrator, such that far greater detail is provided than would be probable in a spoken monologue.

Like Phulboni's story, "The Signalman" may be a tale that relies on hearsay, which complicates its relationship to truth. The most striking motif in both stories is also quite similar, a red lantern that lures people to their deaths. In Dickens's story, a red light held by a frantically waving phantom appears to the signalman several times, and in three instances it is the harbinger of disaster. The repeated image of a mysterious red light, conjoined with the signalman's eventual gruesome death by being run down by a train, are the clearest indications we have that Ghosh's story is to be read in part as a re-writing of Dickens's tale. Both stories also share a sense of ambiguity at the end as to whether baffling occurrences can be accounted for by coincidence, or whether supernatural forces are at work.

Despite the chill that runs down the speaker's spine, this is an eminently sensible interpretation of the vision. Talk of proof, experiments, and patients is, however, immediately undercut by the signalman's revelation that shortly after the phantasm's appearance a serious accident had taken place. The narrator promptly argues that "remarkable coincidence[s] did continually occur", only to be puzzled once more by the signalman's account of the ghost's next emergence and therefore the death of a woman on the train. In this way, the narrative moves between rational and supernatural explanations for bizarre events. Similarly, in Phulboni's story there are always two possible solutions to the mysterious events at Renupur, one reasonable and one paranormal. When Phulboni's light goes out for no reason, he's struck by an unreasonable fear, which is described in much similar terms as Dickens's narrator uses: "Phulboni froze; a chill ran down his spine." He is reassured by the presence of his gun: "[t]here was nothing he knew of that was proof against a .303" (Calcutta 270), but this comforting thought

inevitably points towards the idea of mysterious beings that are impervious to gunfire. The fantastic's ambivalent relationship to both scientific rationalism and religion or spiritualism has proved to be a useful form for a writer like Ghosh, who suggests that neither science nor religion can explain things fully. There is thus a silence at the guts of both narratives, a refusal on the narrators' part to elucidate "what really happened."

Only towards the last part of this description do the events become absurd and evidently dream-like, when Karma's feet metamorphose into an Englishman's gumboots and he is woken by a stray dog. The subject matter of this passage also reflects Phulboni's story, therein Karma's dream prefigures a key trope of the Ghosh's story: the dream of being run over by a train. Another more canonical story that Ghosh cites as having an influence on The Calcutta Chromosome is Rabindranath Tagore's "The Hunger of Stones" that Ghosh himself translated. On the surface, there are fewer parallels between "The Hunger of Stones" and Phulboni's story than can be made with Dickens's "The Signalman" and Renu's "Smells of a Primeval Night". The theme of Tagore's story is quite different from Phulboni's, because it tells the story of a tax-collector during the British Raj era who decides to stay in a deserted palace in the Muslim princely state of Hyderabad. He is able to watch through a mysterious process (though without seeing) invisible spirits of Persian courtiers and maidens who had lived in the palace centuries earlier. Significantly, Meher Ali, the main protagonist is a collector of cotton duties, a controversial British tax that drained India of one of its most lucrative natural resources. This and the tax collector's fondness for British clothes, such as sola-topees, "English shirts" and "tight Western pantaloons" mark him out as a Westernized representative of the colonial government, who has complete confidence in reason and materialism as ways of understanding the globe. His confidence is shaken by apparitions from an earlier, Muslim India, whose nocturnal appearances make the tax-collector question whether his masters' way of ruling India is any less delusory than the supernatural world he inhabits at night.

However, there is much ambiguity on how we are to read this story, and here Tagore's story intersects with Phulboni's. As with Phulboni's tale and Dickens's "The Signalman", this is like a story within a story. The stranger's tale of the "hungry stones" is never completed, as it is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of a train. There are also explicit references within Tagore's text to incomplete narratives. This is probably the most telling parallel between the two texts: the refutation of a perceived Western belief that all phenomena are eventually explicable through language.

Furthermore, both stories are closely connected with trains. This brings me to the significance of the railway in Ghosh's novel as well as the networks of international communications, and a complex intertextual web linking varied literary genres and texts. There is another important network in the novel-the railway network. Trains are an incessant feature of The Calcutta Chromosome: Mangala is found at Sealdah station (Calcutta 145) and later on it is explained that many of the counter-science assistants are found in the station: "if you wanted to find people who were pretty much on their own, down and out with nowhere to go, [the station] was the place to look" (Calcutta 243). New York migrants meet up at Penn Station; Murugan turns himself into the lunatic asylum at Sealdah station; and Mangala leaves a note at the end to say that she has taken a train from Sealdah to Renupur (Calcutta 303).

Ghosh's image of networks of stories interlaced with silence thus forms a powerful plea that knowledge be regarded as a dynamic process, rather than a fixed entity. It is not that Ghosh is opposed to knowledge, but that in this novel he indicates that all knowledges, whether concerning science, history, or geography, are in fact provisional, they are stories still being told, still mutating. Ghosh seems to suggest that it is only when one recognizes that scientific practice or any claim to knowledge are in fact processes akin to story-telling, that one can actually set off on the evolving course of knowledge. To return to the epigraph, the phrase "the impossibility of knowledge" (Calcutta 104) indicates Ghosh's other important point that full knowledge is not out there for the taking: there will always be silences and gaps in our narrations of knowledge. As a novelist, Ghosh foregrounds fiction as an important instrument of knowledge transmission, highlighting in particular the mode's open-endedness and ability to encompass many different viewpoints.

***Works Cited***

1 *Dickens, Charles. "The Signalman." The Signalman and Other Ghost Stories. Stroud:*

2 *Sutton, 1990 [1866]. 1-13. Print.*

3 *Ghosh, Amitav. The Circle of Reason. London: Granta, 1994 [1986]. Print.*

4 *--. In an Antique Land. London: Granta, 1992. Print.*

5 *--. The Calcutta Chromosome. Basingstoke: Picador, 1996. Print.*

6 *Tagore, Rabindranath. "The Hunger of Stones, or Kshudhita Pashan." Trans. Amitav*

7 *Ghosh. Civil Lines: New Writing from India 2 (1995): 152-68. Print.*