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Between Colonial Enterprises and Imperialist Dystopias

Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995)

Abstract

Winner of the 1997 Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction, Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) takes place within an apartment in a near-future, wrecked New York, where Antar, an immigrant computer programmer, finds himself cyber-investigating the mysterious disappearance of a colleague in Calcutta, brought there by the compelling desire to find out the truth about the transmission of malaria in 19th-century colonial India.

Across various locations and temporalities the novel is then launched in a time-bending, overlapping post-modern narration which, through the multiple, 'transfactive' embodiments of the malarial Plasmodium, refracts the global interconnectedness of human migrations, old and new colonialisms, and dynamics of hospitality and community formation.

As I will discuss in my study, Ghosh's fourth novel imaginatively re-negotiates Asian American writing in a globalized framework, inaugurating the author's creative engagement, in the following decades, with broader and more ramified transatlantic histories across Europe, Asia and the United States. With a look at its circuits of publishing, readership, and reception my reading of the novel, therefore, will investigate how the deployment of a cyberpunk avatar aesthetic integrates, contests and re-inscribes South Asian American diasporic experiences and literary representations, particularly via gendered tropes.

Keywords: *Amitav Ghosh, The Calcutta Chromosome, South Asian American, postcolonialism, global writing*

1. Transmigrating texts in Asian America: South Asian literary production at the crossroads of global writing

Spanning three time-frames and multiple narrative registers across the cities of New York and Calcutta, Amitav Ghosh's fourth novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), winner of the 1997 Arthur C. Clarke Award for best sci-fi novel, epitomizes transnational literary dynamics via the trope of viral contagion and genetic mutation. Structured on a futuristic horizon, the novel crosses temporalities and locations offering an alternative history of the scientific

discovery of the malarial transmission, and highlighting the disease's multivalent potential to rewrite the legacies of colonial systems. In this essay, I will discuss the ways in which Ghosh's novel imaginatively re-negotiates Asian American writing within a globalized framework, inaugurating the author's creative engagement, in the following decades, with broader and more ramified transatlantic histories across Europe, Asia and the United States. After briefly recalling its circuits of publishing, readership, and reception, my reading of the novel will investigate how the deployment of a cyberpunk avatar aesthetic integrates, contests, and re-inscribes South Asian American diasporic experiences and literary representations.

Ghosh's position and his writing have been always characterized by a radical troubling of any national literary canon: although the author is a permanent resident of the United States, and emotionally and creatively connected to the Anglo-American sphere in terms of audience and public participation, his writerly status, as Ruth Maxey has stressed, decidedly interrogates those "hemispheric, Asian American [literary] gesture(s)" (2016, 567)¹ that encapsulate *Asian Americanness* on the grounds of a constant instability and openness to ongoing intellectual and political negotiations: in Ghosh's fiction, "the material reality of the United States as a distinct nation remains putative and unrealized. But as a global presence, it hovers, politically and ideologically at the edge of his writing" (Maxey 2016, 569), with its national mythologies and exceptionalism constantly challenged and put side by side with the South Asian American experience, which, in turn, extends and alters the terrain of Asian American histories.²

At the forefront of global writings, therefore, the works of Amitav Ghosh have been explored—like those of other earlier and later successful diasporic authors of South Asian descent, such as Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Mohsin Amid, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meena Alexander, and Amitava Kumar, to mention just a few—also for their wide circulation and their strong connections with the dynamism of the anglophone literary marketplace. This involves an acknowledgment of the patterns of South Asian immigration in the late 20th and early 21st century, characterized by the metropolitan movements of a relatively prosperous and educated class of professionals

¹ See also Chuh 2006.

² Works of fiction of the late 1980s such as *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Shadow Lines* (1989), as well as travelogues and essay collections such as *In an Antique Land* (1992) and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) manifest what Ruth Maxey described as the author's growing strategic employment of an Indian "exceptionalism" in themes and locations, or rather, in Ghosh's words, India's persistent "epic relationship" with its diasporas (2002, 247-48), increasingly counterbalancing the predominant political, cultural and literary role of the US. Albeit pitting the US and India against each other ideologically and ethically, his writing has always been characterized by a greater spatial and temporal sweep, confirming the author's wide reach into imaginaries and histories—an often forgotten, peripheral or perishing archive of knowledge—to be narrated and read in an inherently planetary perspective.

fluidly engaging with narratives that explore multiple deterritorializations, and able to further investigate intra- and supra-national concerns.

As a consequence, these authors' position as implicit or explicit intellectual interpreters and intermediaries of the complex scenarios of their lands of origin has engendered lively debates, revolving around their deployment of a 'semantics of subalternity' attractive to Anglo-American readers. This has been seen as reinforcing privileged positions through the commodification and the ventriloquization of Third World realities, under the aegis of free-floating theoretical categories such as 'cultural diversity,' 'hybridity,' 'syncretism,' and 'migrancy.' These issues, conspicuously debated in the Anglo-American academy in a polemical vein (Krishnaswamy 1995, 129; Brouillette 2007, 87; Huggan 2001, 32-33), have been elaborated by Gayatri Spivak in more nuanced and scrupulous discussions. Spivak has examined the "native informants" as the metropolitan, migrant subjects of postcolonialism operating from the US academic and literary spheres, invoking their ethical responsibility in confronting and conveying the narrations of their ancestral realities, in order to avoid a "sort of retrospective hallucination," fueled by an "epistemic violence" toward the subaltern, less privileged subjects of their representations (1999, 357-361). Spivak's deconstructive approach, therefore, has considered the production and use of postcolonial thinking, by asking *where* postcolonial knowledge comes from, *what* relationship it has with the postcolonial native cultures and languages other than English, and *how* that knowledge is reproduced in literary, historical, philosophical, and cultural texts.

These concerns, along with the demographic and cultural changes of the late 20th century, have widened and enriched the scope of Asian American discourses, originally driven, at least at the beginning of the movement in the 1960s, by the internal resistance and oppositional stance of communities firmly grounded in the US political and cultural terrain, and operating within an identity politics aimed at signaling the agency of racialized subjects, marginalized by the Euro-American episteme and socio-cultural milieus. The most recent diasporic experiences and literatures, suspended between worlds, rooted in both Euro-American and Asian spheres, strive to confront these problems in the postcolonial and neocolonial settings of globalization: they expose and trouble, reflect and negotiate their own self-consciousness as part of the field's dynamism, imagining agencies among different strands of power and hegemonic forces—political, economic and cultural—from multilocalized and multipositioned narratives. However, while highlighting movements, transitions, and instabilities, they keep a focus on the significance of standpoints, and of discursive kernels embodied in the narrations of specific localities, communities or historical circumstances (Odabas 2018, 174-175).

Ghosh's post-millennial fiction, such as *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and the historical novels of the *Ibis Trilogy*—*Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015)—conceived under the shadow of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and resonating with a deep environmental sensibility,³ confirms the author's sustained creative engagement with the task of reporting on and critiquing the state of the world, as well as with issues of migration and the way the global displacements of people are affected by the dynamics of old and new empires. It is within these concerns that the US dimension is confronted in an increasingly tighter dialectical relationship with the Indian subcontinent and its epistemologies. This relationship, pervasive throughout the author's creative routes, had already emerged prominently in the futuristic, dystopian setting of third-millennium New York in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

Recalling Vilashini Cooppan's intellectual corollary of globalization in literature as a system operating through movement and exchange, through a constant comparative endeavor to link texts with one another, and "hearing the echoes of one, or indeed many, in the voice of another" (Cooppan 2004, 11), *The Calcutta Chromosome*, with its manifold imaginative crossovers and diegetic frameworks, intensely interrogates the global moment both on postcolonial and on US ethnic writing platforms. Challenging definition—a postcolonial detective novel, a medical thriller, a South/Asian American text, a transnational text—the novel problematizes the growing visibility of South Asian diasporic literature in America, and troubles all genre distinctions by drawing attention to a thematic constellation of science, colonial relationships, and global cultural productions intersecting across the US/UK/India axes. In a prose crammed in multiple narrative strata and formal frameworks, the novel jumps from the future (an undefined decade of the third millennium) to the past (colonial 19th century) and the present (the mid-1990s), enframing, however, these temporal planes in a well recognizable science fictional narrative inspired by popular 1980s cyberpunk novels—such as *Neuromancer* (1984) or *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) by William Gibson—and a wider body of works by authors more or less emerging as part of a collective literary movement, such as Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley, Lucius Shepard, and Lewis Shiner.⁴ The novel, whose publication came as a

³ *The Great Derangement* (2017), one of his latest non-fiction works, poignantly discusses issues of global warming and climate change: divided in three parts, "Stories," "History," and "Politics," it is a thorough reflection on the humans' imaginative limitations vis-à-vis the current, and urgent, environmental crisis.

⁴ The first cyberpunk manifesto, unequivocally entitled "The New Science Fiction," appeared in 1985 in the British magazine *Interzone*. Bruce Sterling defines the movement through the ambitious intention to create a literary movement capable of expressing the dreams, hopes, and problems of the 21st century planetary human. The apex of the creative trajectory of the cyberpunk movement was reached with the anthology *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*

surprise to readers who had known Ghosh's previous works (mostly realistic accounts of India's post-independence history),⁵ seems to contain all the elements of cyberpunk postmodern writing: the picaresque marginality of the characters, a hyper-technological yet ordinary, 'plausible' environment, a dysfunctional social and political background showing decadent, post-industrial Western urbanities, and precarious lives entertaining sometimes foggy, other times loyal, but more often evanescent and transient human relationships (Mehan 2012, 8-10).

The novel, therefore, tends to re-enact the transversal and self-conscious interlocking of literature, technology and social dynamics of the American and UK-bred cyberpunk movements of the 1980s and the 1990s, and by pulling its multiple temporal strings down to the late 19th century—with the historical substratum of its plot revolving around the development of colonial medical science on malaria—it seems to draw further inspiration from the derivative *steampunk* imagery: its trans-historical, trans-continental scope reverberates both with the imperialist preoccupations of traditional speculative fiction, whose genesis coincides with the "most fervid imperialist moment in the late XIX century" (Rieder 2008, 2-3), and with the imperialist concerns encoded in the high-tech, futuristic themes of the cyberpunk movement.

In the inherently transnational cyberpunk literary worlds, the cultural production of Asia and its relationship with the West is mostly reconfigured in terms of 'invasion' and 'pollution,' of a threatening 'alien' presence to be kept at bay, and as these are grafted onto the idea of crumbling empires, the presence of the immigrant, Asian or otherwise, emerges as the bearer of alien, 'other' forces. This transnationalism is represented by the cynical figure of the cyborg or the cyber user, not just a hybrid of human and machine, but often a posthuman entity of different races and ethnicities. Expanding upon Donna Haraway's 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," Emily Apter identifies in the transracial, transnational cyborg body "an identity no longer split between the First and the Third world, between the metropole and the native home, but rather a body so fragmented that its morphology encodes a *diaspora*," implanted within "postcolonial conceptions of nation and race as a part of the politically charged relationship between the

(1986), which collected twelve short stories previously published on the most important SF magazines, and was the demonstration of Sterling's cultural and literary theorems. Whereas *Neuromancer* was the isolated single success of a single talented author, the act of collecting eleven authors on common themes was the proof of the real existence of a collective literary movement taking a stance on writing the literature of a postindustrial society.

⁵ The novel was first published in India in 1995, and immediately afterwards in Canada, the US, and the UK. Considered the less successful among the works of the author, due perhaps to its complex and puzzling narrative structure, it went out of print for some years until new editions reappeared in the early 2000s and in 2013.

diaspora and transnationalism, pigmentation and desire, and most controversially, between hybridity and miscegenation” (1999, 216).

With its underground and marginal communities of resident aliens, of human groups from colonial pasts transmutating into the hypertechnological, neoimperial space of North America, the cyberpunk-inspired dimension of *The Calcutta Chromosome* constitutes a nodal point of several historical condensations, resonating, often with tongue-in-cheek and parodic tones, with some of the most poignant tensions arising from the debates on postcolonialism, diasporas, and their relation with nation-state citizenship. The novel’s cyber-transmigrations combine a philosophy of multiple disseminations and a ‘poetics of the avatar’ with actual, bodily migrations; metaphysical peregrinations, ‘nomadic states’ of being with the physical materiality of a biological and cultural body striving to cope with the acceleration and the potential of informatics and biodigital technologies; the fear of distant invasions from alien forces with the socially grounded terrain of Asian and Middle Eastern immigrant workers and collectivities moving in the interstices of the global networks. The expansive, broad horizons that characterize *The Calcutta Chromosome*, therefore, are marked by the re-appropriation and the remanipulation of several literary imageries and theoretical frameworks through which Western and South Asian epistemologies interact and evolve from a complex series of cross-cultural exchanges, translations, and mutations. The novel consciously explores its own multiple literary forms, and exploits the global interest in India, as well as the country’s extraordinary potential as an imaginative resource for the West, further intensified by the active affirmation of South Asian diasporic communities in the American social and institutional contexts. Its themes and its rhetorical and narrative structure confront, therefore, both the meta-discourses in the academic circles and those regarding the emergence and circulation of South Asian literary works in the spaces of anglophone World literature.

These debates revolved, on the one hand, on a heavily gendered colonial heritage saturated by patriarchal ideologies and also inflected in national and transnational contexts; on the other, on the neoliberal restructuring of India’s economic policies in the 1990s, which opened the country to the international markets and projected it onto the global scale of media networking and transnational capitalism, manifesting the entrance of anglophone South Asian literary works into transatlantic and academic circuits.

I would like to briefly recall some of the social and cultural coordinates that specifically inform Ghosh’s novel. First, the important contribution and influence of the Subaltern Studies group, a collective of India/UK/US-based scholars who, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, interrogated the voids and gaps in the colonial historiographical archive, and critically addressed the official

colonial and nationalist interpretations of South Asian historiography, which had eradicated or left unheard the many insurgent consciousnesses of marginal groups. Drawing from Michel Foucault and Edward Said's perspectives, the Subaltern Studies collective would seriously challenge the US ethnographic approach to South Asia as a 'neutral' and 'objective' field of inquiry that could be *uncovered* and *discovered* through mere field research, language study, and the interpretation of ancient texts. In short, the predominant cultural bias entrenched in the colonial and Orientalistic epistemes, predicated on a desire to control and domesticate knowledge about India with a pragmatic political agenda, were debunked by heterogeneous discursive representations, which exposed how the Third World—viewed as an unchanging, millennial, static, apolitical entity—was being constructed through Western imperialist epistemologies.⁶

Second, and partly aligned with the concerns of the Subaltern Studies collective, the question concerning South Asian women's agency and subjectivity, almost impossible to achieve through the 'shadowy' texture of the colonial historical archives. This is explicitly exposed in Gayatri Spivak's 1989 famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which rejected the possibility of recovering subaltern mentalities and subjectivities in general, but especially those of the "female subaltern": caught in two conflicting representational systems—colonial power on one side and native patriarchy on the other, to which is added the domination of English as literary language and cultural system—her agency is violently displaced and silenced, and therefore disappears (1989, 287) within the grids of patriarchal logocentrism.

Third, the development of a complex literary landscape across the South Asian/North Atlantic, witnessing the acknowledgement of acclaimed anglophone postcolonial writers, whose works gained, especially throughout the 1990s, notable reviews, a conspicuous number of international literary prizes,⁷ and a wide, global circulation. A certain number of transcontinental

⁶ Among the patchwork of fragmentary texts retrieved and analyzed by the Subaltern Studies group we find the historical reconstruction of "The Slave of the MS.H.6," written by Ghosh himself in 1990 and also part of *In an Antique Land*. Retrieving the history of Bomma, an Indian slave belonging to a medieval Jewish merchant in ancient Egypt and Palestine, the essay incorporates several textualities in order to bring to life the otherwise forgotten history of the ordinary people who moved among the authoritative voices and historical accounts of *wazirs*, priests, and sultans.

⁷ Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Michael Ondaatje for *The English Patient* (1992); Amitav Ghosh won the 1997 A.C. Clarke Award for *The Calcutta Chromosome*; Salman Rushdie won the Whitbread Prize and the European Union's Aristeion Literary Prize in 1996 for *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995); Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the W. H. Smith Literary Award in 1994; Jhumpa Lahiri won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). US-based Anita Desai has been Booker Prize short-listed for *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), and Canadian Indian author Rohinton

publications translated from the numerous South Asian regional languages into English also found a path of recognition, due to the presence of the diasporic communities relocated in the Anglo-American sphere, and as a consequence of their growing intellectual impact on the American academies, and the more inclusive, more diversity-‘responsive’ multicultural curricula.

The disruptive quality of cyberspace technology and its narrative instantiation via a fantasy of techno-scientific empire, a future destiny rooted in colonial and imperialist pasts, offers the possibility to explore globalization’s complex fraying of any isomorphism between culture and geography, to unmoor concepts like ‘native,’ ‘local,’ and ‘indigenous’ from the ossified, essentialistic legacies of Western epistemology that has placed them on the scale of development and civilization. By intersecting local, national, and global processes, the narrative environment of *The Calcutta Chromosome* tackles, for instance, the Euro-American construction of an imperialist and colonial knowledge embedded in the constitution of scientific historical archives, and by extension, of a historical master-narrative produced by and deposited in the Anglo-American space. Transposed in the globalized near-future of neoimperial systems, this supposedly universal and all-containing technocratic epistemology entertains a continuous dialectic relation both with the gaps and the erasures of a colonial Indian counter-modernity and with postcolonial subjectivities moving in late capitalist environments.

The novel’s crucial tensions revolve, indeed, around gaps, secrecy, and silences, underwriting the interplay between the process of retrieving and affirmatively encoding knowledge and the onset of systems of dominance and surveillance, notably embodied in the machinic nomadism of a supercomputer able to phagocytize and process the whole world’s cultural and linguistic diversity: “You are a dust counter,” mutters Antar in Arabic to his supercomputer AVA, whose screen keeps him nailed to a digital global scenery from which the Egyptian American migrant worker supervises the endless retrieval and archiving of all the minimum units of information for data analysis. “*Addaad al-Turab*,” which elicits the computer’s spitting out an endless flow of translations of the sentence “through the world’s languages, in declining order of population,” until, getting “to the dialects of the Upper Amazon,” the man’s initial amusement turns to irritation: “Stop showing off’ [...]. ‘You don’t have to show me you know everything there is to know. *Iskuti*; shut up.’ But it was Ava who silenced him instead, serenely spitting the phrases back at him. Antar listened awestruck as ‘shut up’ took on the foliage of the Upper Amazon” (Ghosh 2001, 7). The intricate, Babelic arborescence unfolding before a speechless Antar seems

Mistry has also been short-listed three times for *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1996), and *Family Matters* (2002).

to foreshadow and catalyze the aesthetic import of silence, one that will be affirmed through the several temporal planes of the novel, as well as the author's enduring interest in and creative response to geo-literary worlds emerging from the interstices of several languages. The scene, therefore, opens up avenues for challenging the adequacy of English to express planetary experiences and sensibilities, and prefigures the author's broad, polyvocal narratives of *The Hungry Tide* and *The Ibis Trilogy*, where the growing presence of linguistic syncretism constantly blurs the boundaries between English and the South Asian idioms, or causes English to be absorbed into an uncontrollable heteroglossia of Pidgins, Chinese, French, Parsi, Malay, which disrupt its hierarchical position both as colonial and as global language.

The trajectories outlined above are therefore keys for understanding the underlying preoccupations informing *The Calcutta Chromosome*. These issues are echoed in the 'informational economy' of a text in which technology and science, and technologically and scientifically produced information and knowledge, become a battlefield of hegemonic representational forces on a global platform. The process of technological communication and information exchange between its several actors proves destined, throughout their transitions, to produce convulsions, conflicts, and lacerations in the social as well the individual body—to produce, just as Ghosh envisions in the subtitle of the novel, accounts of "fevers, delirium and discovery."

The paratextual borders of title and subtitle, therefore, refer to a simultaneous exploration of historical events and diasporic thematic concerns, through metafictional strategies that foreground the continuous and dense intermingling of the novel's multiple diegetic levels and extra-textual references. These strategies actively invite the readers to engage into a work of assembling together the missing links in the plots, into an epistemological chase without secure grounds, and into a constant problematization of Western systems of signification and cultural practice. Reminiscent of Pynchon's conspiracies and alternative, underground communication systems in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), the dissemination of several narrative agents and perspectives, of several interpretative traces in Ghosh's novel, relates, therefore, to the very impossibility of identifying ultimate truths: these moves challenge the very claims to *know*, and force a confrontation with incommensurable alterities (Thieme 2005, 136; Vescovi 2017, 43). The malarial fever, therefore, with all its symptomatic manifestations, intervenes as a narrative device which, in a constant flux of bodies, information, and historical and literary echoes, dramatizes the overcoming of temporal and spatial categories and geopolitical borders, and questions the very boundaries between the 'real' and the text. The novel's feverish state infects its very internal landscape, causing narrative boundaries to merge into one another in a

‘transfactive’ diegetic chain of events; at the metacritical level, it engenders an expansiveness of discursive horizons, prefiguring—in line with the author’s expertise as a social anthropologist—a polyvocality produced by the dynamics of reception, by a multiplication of critical approaches, further elicited by the ambiguity of a disquieting, suspended ending.⁸ Instantiating “a great metaphorical game” (Iuliano 2012, 138), therefore, Ghosh’s virus acts as a semiotic prism that simultaneously problematizes and contains critical and cultural schemes: starting from a broad recollection of its main plot-lines, this study will especially evidence how malaria dramatizes movement and change that impregnate the postcolonial and neocolonial spaces of modern globality. Its last paragraph will develop a discursive focus on the narrative role and power of the character who sets in motion the chain of the novel’s events: Murugan, the abjected Indian American researcher, the ‘resident alien,’ the global citizen, the one who, both as an informer and as a recipient of secrecy, negotiates the several levels of the narrative and its epistemic tensions.

2. Resident aliens on the edge of space and time

Here is how, in one of the retrospective narratives of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Murugan, the missing Indian American protagonist, lectures Urmila about the existence of

something that neither she [Mangala] nor Ronnie Ross nor any scientist of that time would have had a name for. For the sake of argument let’s call it a chromosome: though the whole point of this is that if it is really a chromosome, it’s only so by extension, so to speak—by analogy. Because what we’re talking about here is an item that is to the standard Mendelian pantheon of twenty-three chromosomes what Ganesh is to the gods; that is, different, non-standard, unique—which is exactly why it eludes standard techniques of research. And which is why I call it the Calcutta chromosome. One of the reasons why the Calcutta chromosome can’t be found by normal methods is because unlike the standard chromosomes it isn’t present in every cell. Or if it is, it’s so deeply encrypted that our current techniques can’t isolate it. And the reason why it isn’t present in every cell is because unlike the other chromosomes it’s not symmetrically paired. And the reason why it’s not paired is because it doesn’t split into eggs and sperm. And guess why that is? I’ll tell you: it’s because this is a chromosome that is not transmitted from generation to generation by sexual reproduction. It develops out of a process of recombination and is particular to every individual. That’s why it’s only found in certain kinds of cells: it simply isn’t present in regenerative tissue. It only exists in non-regenerating tissue: in other words, the brain. (Ghosh 1995, 250)

⁸ “Knowledge is something which all my books are about in one way or another—what can be known, what can’t [...]. And I suppose that it’s partly because I had this formal training in anthropology that I keep thinking of it. Procedures of knowledge are interesting to me, because there is a point at which [...] one really does have to pull back from this relentless search for exhaustiveness” (Vescovi 2009, 132).

The point of departure of *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a lonely apartment in a wrecked neighborhood of New York, where Antar, an Egyptian immigrant, works in a high-tech environment, attending to his panoptical computer AVA. Soon-to-be retired, orphaned since he was a child, widowed (both his wife and his unborn child died of a pregnancy complication), and isolated, right from the opening chapters Antar is identified as the atomistic, postmodern individual, lost in his sprawl on the verge of the Holland Tunnel and the Penn Station area in New York, in a state of suspended return to his native Egypt. Without a recognizable position within a nation, a family, a community, the man spends his days logged onto his super-computer AVA and surrounded by the silent corridors and apartments of his building, previously populated by other immigrants and now nearly empty of tenants. Confined under the ever-present gaze of AVA, Antar works as a telecommuter for a small independent public health company, recently absorbed by the multinational corporation IWC—International Water Council. Shortly before retirement, his job only consists in supervising the system's activity of cataloging the items landing on its screen, and coming from the Council's world satellite offices—a task that might eventually help the megacorporation to investigate the global “depletion of water supplies” (1995, 7). Though situated in a global metropolis, Antar's physical mobility is reduced to his home and his New York neighborhood, while his intellectual mobility is almost exclusively mediated through a supercomputer that functions as his primary interface with his work and with the world at large. Disenfranchised, de-responsabilized, and thus apparently ‘immunized,’ in terms of being disengaged from active civic and social involvement in the American environment, Antar owes his existence to a computer that instead of expanding his human agency, constantly relies upon the man's social attention and affective servitude. AVA's existence and activity of surveillance and archiving of any object or entity stumbling ashore on its screen, thus, fearfully dramatizes a taxonomic, racialized regime of US labor stratification in the late 1990s, the quintessential embodiment of Hardt and Negri's postindustrial informational empire.

Taking Antar's narrative frame as the ‘present,’ the rest of the plot occurs in a time-bending, retrospective mode: due to a temporary tripping of the computer's system on an ID card, Antar find himself investigating the disappearance of an Indian American colleague, Murugan, whose obsessive research on the malarial transmission had, years before, compelled him to travel to Calcutta in order to investigate the existence of a counter-scientific and secret group of people: according to his views, recalled in a previous conversation with Antar, at the end of the 19th century these people might have manipulated the ‘official’ colonial scientific research on malaria carried out by the British colonial officer Ronald Ross, in order to achieve the transfer of

personalities across bodies. The group's ultimate goal was to implement a therapy capable of arresting the devastating effects of syphilis on the brain, a disease suffered, as the reader will discover, by the members of the sect and by Murugan himself, whose detection and discovery peregrinations in 1995 Calcutta are retrieved by Antar through AVA's holographic assembling.⁹ Official colonial medical history, then, irrupts into the main strata of the novel to be in turn disrupted through a complex, postmodern textuality: Ronald Ross's experiments in the malarial transmission—often conducted on the bodies of the colonized natives—are in fact re-routed by the side presence of a mysterious character called Mangala, a low caste native sweeper who engages in surreptitious, parasitical interventions on blood samples, aimed at monitoring the British scientist's research and thus at achieving new modes of being.¹⁰ Beyond utterance and any discursive intervention on the scientific knowledge involved, that is, operating *through* and *in* silence, and thus escaping the workings of Foucauldian 'discourse-as-power,' Mangala and her group's counter-scientific activity discloses subjectivities constituted by biological as well as social features across time and places; these reincarnations determine the development of numerous other narrative ramifications¹¹—literal rhizomatic textual assemblages—interlocked with a network of characters directly or indirectly involved in the mysterious transferences. These personalities are, first, the protagonists of the Calcutta-based narrative retrieved through the cyberspace; then, the members of Antar's US based expatriate social group; finally, merging from the Indian colonial past and through Murugan's plot-line in 1995 Calcutta, they reach the lonely programmer in New York. As Antar realizes he has been both the discoverer of the chain

⁹ The counter-scientific group's alternative cure to syphilis actually refers to the little-known use of artificially induced malaria to arrest *dementia paralytica* in the last stage of the disease. This therapy was experimented by the Austrian psychologist Julius Wagner-Jauregg, who was also awarded a Nobel Prize in 1927.

¹⁰ The character of Mangala seems to be inspired by one of the local folk deities in West Bengal, Sitala Devi, goddess of maladies, able to either spread contagion or cure people from several diseases—especially smallpox, which in the novel is substituted by the "great pox," that is, syphilis (see Fabrizio Ferrari 2005, 130-163).

¹¹ Obliquely inspired by the Bengali ghost stories of Rabindranath Tagore, Phaniswarnath Renu, and Satyajit Roy, the so called *Lakhaan Stories* unfold from the prophetic voice of the writer Phulboni, providing uncanny clues about the sect of Silence operating in Calcutta. Bishnupriya Ghosh's reading of the novel confronts precisely the haunting presence of the Indian vernacular languages in Anglophone writing, "a stalking of the English novel" that dramatizes the restoration of a corpus of lost epistemologies at multiple levels—indigenous knowledges, folk traditions, Hindu popular beliefs—all bearers of an 'other' archive that is permanently endangered, or at risk of being forgotten, or appropriated within the grids of a sovereign globalism. "Ghosts," writes B. Ghosh, evoking Jacques Derrida, "are literary devices that return us to those ethical questions of historical, cultural and economic violence" (2004, 217).

of transmission of the chromosome and part of a wider experiment on himself, a community of shadowy presences, including the holographic projection of Murugan, gathers around his feverish body, inviting him to join them and, perhaps, be carried across into a new existence.

By pursuing an aesthetics of in-between spaces and suspended conditions, *The Calcutta Chromosome* powerfully expresses how the specters of the colonial heritage and the pace of an increasingly inoperative colonial history reverberate in uncertain, transnational forms of neocolonial history: the malarial parasite, in fact, condenses and structurally organizes the semiotic and discursive apparatuses of both colonial past and neoimperial future, becoming the vehicle that extends the work of violation and exploitation from the colonial enterprise—and the imperialist project of bringing civilization to the underdeveloped Asian populations through the healing power of medical science and Western rationalism—up to the era of globalization. In fact, if under colonialism the subaltern, racialized body of the colonized represented the ‘risk bearer’ of labor force for medical experimentation, engaging in the ‘hospitality work’ of gestating the alien parasite in the blood, the same conceptual category is also transferred to and compared with a contemporary scenario, where the trope of the anopheles mosquito multiplying in the blood and crossing over bodies and personalities via the cyberspace summarizes the neoimperial exploitation experience of the denizens of the Global South and of its emigrants to the metropolitan spaces of the Northern hemisphere.

Murugan’s description of the mysterious chromosome evokes the power of the counter-science he is chasing; its actions do not merely involve a rejection or a correction of the superior truth claim of Western science. Rather, they refer to a praxis of secrecy and mutability, and are expressed in the form of denying the hypostasizing nature of the verb ‘to be.’ ‘Non-standard,’ ‘not present in every cell,’ ‘not symmetrically paired,’ ‘not sexually transmissible’: through the practice of Mangala’s counter-science, nothing ‘is’ as such—at least not in a way that can be ascertained by traditional science and held as knowledge. Similarly to Adorno’s concept of negative dialectics, the empirical form of a concept is not its truth content; instead, it is only a reflection of the ‘limits’ that the larger context of the contemporary social structure imposes on that particular concept. As such, all that is codified by the claim ‘to know’ is configured as a particular narrative history that tells *how* something has been conceived and *how* it can be perceived at a particular time and within a particular framework (O’Connell 2012, 788).

3. Writerly avatars, impossible homecomings

If *The Calcutta Chromosome* can be considered a literary postcolonial laboratory, a site of knowledge production and a site for examining the processes of that production—in other words,

to paraphrase Claire Chambers, “its own epistemological experiment” (Chambers 2009, 46)—in this interplay the character of Murugan, quintessential figure of the global cosmopolitan, seems to wittily encapsulate some of the writer’s compelling dilemmas: multi-positioned between worlds, Murugan stages a vertiginously open cultural and personal identity, unstable, porous, polymorphous in its multiple narrative manifestations: as a researcher, and against a hostile scientific community, Murugan defies the totalizing impetus of a knowledge imposed by the West on its former colonies, by identifying modes of knowing that question its claims to an autonomous, universal applicability and recognize the very ‘impossibility’ to access knowledge, that is, to ‘fix’ in immutable forms the intuitive, dynamic knowledge practices of the counter-scientific group led by Mangala, whose silence and secrecy constitute their foundational assumptions. The man’s obsessive desire to reveal fissures in the rigidity of Western medical science leads him to challenge artificial boundaries between textual forms: with his “unplaceable accent, neither American nor Indian” (1995, 21), “his half-remembered Bengali and [...] Hindi” (1995, 40), he becomes the irreverent biographer of Ronald Ross, one who, starting from a rigorous reconstruction of the official colonial archive, dismantles the monumentalizing account of the British officer’s discoveries, and assembles, instead, through his abrasive speech, a bulk of heterogeneous materials—scraps of medical bulletins, epistolary exchanges, poetic inscriptions on memorials—within a network of delirious clues that engulf him into a relentless hermeneutic journey, pushing him up against his own theorizations of ‘alternative’ epistemic spaces and against his own self-deceptive perceptions.¹²

Murugan, therefore, is reinscribed also as the detective-narrator for many of the other investigating characters, such as Antar in New York—compelled to retrack his wanderings in Calcutta via the cyberspace—and the journalist Urmila Roy, a complementary investigator who joins him in his search in Calcutta, and who, the readers will discover, will become Tara, yet another reincarnation of Mangala-bibi in America.

As Fernandes and Izzo have discussed, by crossing narrative genres, minority detectives of the 1990s rewrite the plot line of the autonomous, isolated, self-reliant male detective of the hard-boiled school in relational terms (2008, 113-129; 2000, 225-231): these detectives echo communities of people and play on gender and ethnic categories, as well as on literary genres and stereotypes, in a very conscious and frequently self-ironical fashion. Not only does this practice deconstruct the assumptions behind the formulaic plot-lines of hard-boiled detective fiction, but, in the case of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the ‘detective plot’ is also re-negotiated on

¹² For a detailed discussion of the deconstruction of Ronald Ross’s official memoirs see Vescovi (2014).

multiple registers, and through several re-manipulations of genre expectations, showing how Ghosh's novel is more than a free-floating postmodern celebration of hybrid actors, of textual intersections sustaining a declaration of independence from the constrictions of literary genres, or an all-encompassing dramatization of "narrative nodes and networks" (Chambers 2009, 45-46) with an extreme inter- and hyper-textual potential. What the novel does is posing major problems in terms of its reading modes, with readers actively acquiring a double point of view, as both researchers into the story and witnesses to a fictional experiment on themselves (Thieme 2005, 140-141),¹³ bringing "into greater disciplinary focus the important critical intersections of the Asian diaspora, transnational migration, post-national geographies and postcoloniality that contain a direct relevance to the global inquiry of Asian American literature" (Shinn 2008, 162). *The Calcutta Chromosome*, therefore, simultaneously constitutes a counter-canonical text and maps out a new space for Asian American fiction, which actively counteracts the danger of being positioned as an 'item for distanced inventory' to be enlisted in canons, appropriated, or commodified: it pushes the reader inside its capillary web of unsettled, contested sociopolitical sites, into Calcutta's "humdrum street corners and dreary alleyways" (1995, 25), behind the domestic doors of the uprooted and transitory existences of metropolitan migrant workers, the "bleak, cold building encaged in its scaffolding of rusty steel fire escape" (1995, 14), in cultural territories represented from *within*—the colonial laboratory, the crammed Indian middle-class home, the migrant's anodyne domesticity, the urban swarming of metropolitan transit zones, the brothel, the temple.

As an implied 'ethnic' and postcolonial character, Murugan strategically inhabits the 'tourist guide' avatar, providing the readers with glimpses of Calcutta, yet from the uncertain and

¹³ This may, in part, explain the impasse surrounding the novel's cinematographic transposition, a project long cherished by director Gabriele Salvatores which, however, he had to give up for both budget reasons and pressures from the producers, claiming that "many aspects of the story had to be clarified." This, according to the director, would have suffocated exactly the challenging epistemological questions posed by Ghosh's work. "Its complex and multistratified temporal plot-lines do not fit the American market rules, for which a high-budget film must be structured on a linear, simple plot. So, we preferred to give up, rather than spoil the book" ("Salvatores rinuncia a 'Cromosoma Calcutta'"). In another interview Salvatores further highlights that his own idea of the filmic adaptation of the novel deeply eludes any attitude of "passivity toward the image. Something that visual culture nowadays cultivates relentlessly." Although specifically referring to one of his latest films in 2002, his comments on the failed project recall a "story that would require a deep sense of commitment from the viewers, so that the very last piece of the jigsaw would be completely in their hands; no other character in the movie could see it. This carries a declaration of trust, and love, if you allow me" (Melandri). While on stall, the film project underwent a sort of transmigration: echoes of Ghosh's novel, in fact, resonate in Salvatores's 1997 Italian cyberpunk film *Nirvana*.

unreliable mnemonic traces of his ‘peripatetic,’ ‘global identity.’ The colonial, metropolitan setting, in fact, deeply interacts with the contemporary contexts of global communities grappling with transnational forces, as well as sharing their diverse memories of colonialism; ‘trans/migration’ in *The Calcutta Chromosome* also signifies a temporality of repetition, mobilized by Ghosh’s writerly cultural memory, apt to dispel the haunting presence of colonialism and oriented towards interventions within the present: thus, for instance, the ex-imperial metropolis of Calcutta is interlocked with digitalized New York. The city—just like the patchwork of unusual sources, documents, and coincidental encounters that Murugan puts together to form a readable pattern and that, in a parallel way, Antar assembles via the super-computer AVA—becomes an integral part of a flowing processing of informational units: doubled in the temporality of New York, with its coming and going flux of immigrants and molecular inscriptions, Calcutta is a huge metropolitan postcolonial space traversed by turbulent human and non-human particles which constantly mark and dissect its physiognomy.

‘I guess it started somewhere over there.’ He made a vague gesture at the skyline. ‘On Free School Street. I was fifteen: I’d been to see a film at the Globe, after school. I was walking past New Market, on my way home, when a guy came up to me and whispered in my ear. I guessed he was a pimp: I’d been reading a lot of American detective novels. I was in my ink-stained school pants and a sweaty end-of-the-day shirt, with my textbooks and class notes slung over my shoulder. He was wearing a green checked lungi, and he had a thin pencil moustache and tiny bloodshot eyes. He winked before he whispered in my ear and gave me this toothy little grin. I could smell the *paan* and stale liquor on his breath. It was irresistible. (1995, 287)

Murugan’s retrospective narration of his fatal initiation to sex as an adolescent, through which he contracts syphilis, significantly stages a metafictional reflection on literature’s ideological power in shaping individual and collective imageries. His mind is *literally* haunted by “a lot of American detective novels,” which, in the passage, accompany “ink-stained school pants” and a shoulder burdened by “textbooks and class notes,” the signs of transmission of an educational system inherited from the British colonial era. Yet all these elements, along with the pimp’s “thin pencil moustache,” also equip him with a sort of authorial identity: driven, consciously and unconsciously, by these literary molds, Murugan’s initiation to pleasure (which might be read as a *writerly* desire to shape oneself as a detective) occurs “down one of those tiny alleys around Free School Street, just around the corner from the Armenian school, where William Thackeray was born” (1995, 287). As if mocking for the very last time in the passage the legacies that have

modelled his middle-class, anglicized *babu* education,¹⁴ Murugan's transition to a space unencumbered by colonial and postcolonial bourgeois regulatory apparatuses is described as a re-Orientalistic ascension "up a dark, stinking staircase:"

But then we got to the top and suddenly there was this great sunburst of light and noise and voices and music: it was like walking into a fairground—a huge room, with little curtained cubicles all around it, and vendors selling paan and tea, and all these women sitting on chairs lined up against the wall, with flowers around their wrists. I never looked back; I was hooked. I loved them; I loved everything about them. (1995, 287)

Interlocked with malaria, the virus of syphilis is the subterranean propelling engine of all the researches and discoveries performed by the characters across the spatio-temporal layers of the novel, and key to the mysterious workings of interpersonal transferences operated by the syphilitic-born Mangala. A disease mysteriously spreading across centuries, along colonial routes, and fraught with the proliferation of imperial establishments, syphilis is also captured in a symbolic net of silence and revelation, of visibility and invisibility, and fearfully perceived as a factor of national degeneration, a threat for the future of lineages, families, and the stability of a 'whole' nation: during the colonial period, like the practices of stereotyping and racializing, the mapping and spacing of syphilis were viable technologies of ordering and othering. However, "as a synecdoche of the colony [...], the brothel and its positioning in the (proximity of the) cantonment, was an ambiguous space [...] that curiously mirrored, questioned and reversed knowledge-power relations in the cantonment and in the colony. It was the colony's own heterotopia: a territory that put to plain view the illusory character of the colony itself" (Pietrzack-Franger 2018, 196), and that, furthermore, mocked the teleological historical trajectory of the empire's metanarratives about the 'healthy' epistemic Western subjects of

¹⁴ The passage, furthermore, reverberates with a similar, crucial scene from James Joyce's story "An Encounter" in *Dubliners*, where the young narrator's readerly addiction to "some American detective stories [...] traversed from time to time by unkempt fierce and beautiful girls" (2012, 14) is commingled with the strange encounter with a man showing "great gaps in his mouth between his yellow teeth" (2012, 20), speaking with a low voice and mysteriously, who lures him into a monologue about "little sweethearts" (2012, 20) by way of literary references to erotic literature, soon followed by an abrupt monologic turn to the righteousness of corporal punishments on boys. 'Paralysis,' on one side, and the need for 'escape,' on the other, constitute the dialectic leitmotif of Joyce's stories, written from the perspective of a self-exiled author whose lived experience is haunted by syphilis. Apart from signaling the novel's active confrontation with the creative process of writing, the self-conscious use of metaliterary elements in Ghosh's work evidences a creative engagement with what Wai Chee Dimock has defined the 'continuum' of literary space-time, a singular elasticity that brings together literary forms separated by historical moments, geographic places, and linguistic heritages.

medical and scientific progress. Calcutta's heterologic spaces, therefore, show ambiguous contact zones that keep disrupting both the isolationist policies aimed at reinforcing any process of cultural self-definition in opposition to an alterity—be it between colonial and native, scientific and irrational, real and fictional—and the very possibility for the city to be passively scripted by Murugan's detecting, inspective gaze. The city, instead, ironically, seems to write itself on the lives, the bodies, and the minds of those who share its secrets.

'And when it was finally caught there was no disguising it. That was why my family had to leave the city: the shame.'
 'But syphilis is curable now, isn't it?' Urmila said. 'With antibiotics?'
 'Sure,' said Murugan. 'I got cured. They can cure it now—except for what it does to your head.' (1995, 288)

"Shame" here opens up representational chasms whereby Murugan is abruptly projected into a diasporic existence motivated by escape, an upbringing determined, as the newsletter retrieved by Antar from the archives of the IWC reports, by a "global' [...] wandering between the world's capitals with his technocrat father" and "a love of Hollywood B-movies and old American TV serials—the only constant, as for so many, in a peripatetic, internationalized coming-of-age" (1995, 35), which seem to substitute or weirdly integrate the temporal collapse and the serialized structure of the Indian epic narratives. The representational chasm is even more evident in the tone of the IWC notice informing of Murugan's disappearance, which, slightly allusive to the subtle social ostracism hovering on the man, refers "to him as 'Morgan,' [with] the reminiscent, quietly respectful tone of an obituary although the writer was careful to describe Murugan as 'missing'" (1995, 35).

Shame, as Timothy Bewes suggests, stages a fundamental dissonance of existence, "an experience of the subject's dissolution" (2009, 20), and this dynamic is literally inscribed in Murugan's sudden appearances and disappearances throughout the novel, and in his final, fearful presence in Antar's New York apartment as a disfigured and mutilated holographic projection; it lingers even in the fact that, among all the characters experiencing the process of transference, Murugan is the only one to be denied, until the end, the certainty of a transformation.

The man urgently pleads with Urmila, who in the meanwhile has been acknowledged as the next reincarnation of the mysterious Mangala, for a translation into another form: "change the script, *write me in*. Don't leave me behind. Please" (1995, 308, emphasis mine). Ingrained in the textual fabric of the novel, the dissonances of Murugan's floating existence therefore concern questions of literary form in a global literary space, and the form of the novel itself as the man's

dissected, phantasmatic reappearance in America mocks the grand, unitary master narrative of place and national identity of the novel genre. Embedded in the very act of writing, Murugan's deranged floating across space and time refracts an incommensurable tension—between aesthetics and ethics, selfhood and otherness, form and content—that becomes manifest as “a certain constitutive failure,” an impossibility “hovering on the act of writing itself” (Bewes 2009, 20). Unease, a ‘dis-ease,’ therefore, seems to fuel the dialectical tensions of Ghosh's novel, as it constantly gestures toward other, occluded, repressed narratives that exist beyond its boundaries, poignantly recalled, in the author's words, as the very impossibility to narrate the relationship between India and its diasporas, first lived within the imagination: “an epic relationship without a text, which is all for the better, perhaps, for if that text were ever written, it would be a shabby, bedraggled, melancholic epic” (1986, 78).

Parallel to the frantic molecular movements of micro-organisms, bacteria, and parasites, and to a narrative texture hypersaturated by its own informational economy, a concern about paralysis, disaggregation, aphasia, seems to pervade *The Calcutta Chromosome* from its very first line: “IF THE SYSTEM hadn't stalled...” captures the accumulation of a block, the residue of unprocessable, indigestible material aptly represented by Murugan's ID card interrupting AVA's impeccable taxonomic regime. It is precisely the materiality of the chain attached to the card to block a process of fearful accumulation of data that may complete a new ‘master text,’ where the minimal units of the human, its most detailed articulations, may be unveiled and displayed. Around AVA's ‘trances of unrecognition,’ therefore, are launched trajectories that reach from the isolated individual to new forms of heterogeneous collective identifications, interrelated yet distinctively located: these are recoded in the languages, the accounts and the experiences of the migrants, the exiles, the diasporics, in ‘quantum leaps’ across their multiple states of loss and displacement. Thus Ghosh's narratives, by persistently hinting at the role that knowledges play in re-orienting and re-shaping our destinies, and at our capability to remember histories and imagine stories, prompt new ways of narrating life and the world, of listening to, holding on to, and then unleashing a narrative sense for our existences.

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