

ETHNOGRAPHY AND MICRO-CULTURE PERSPECTIVES IN THE FICTION OF AMITAV GHOSH

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In the history of fiction of Indian writing in English, very few of Indian novelists have dealt with the ethnography and micro-cultural aspects in their works. Amitav Ghosh is undoubtedly one of the distinguished novelists of the elite group who have highlighted in their fiction the ethnographic and micro-cultural issues very effectively. The term ethnography may be loosely applied to any qualitative research project where the purpose is to provide a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice. This is sometimes referred to as 'thick description' — a term attributed to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's writing on the idea of an interpretive theory of culture in the early 1970s. The use of the term 'qualitative' is meant to distinguish this kind of social science research from more 'quantitative' or statistically oriented research. The two approaches, i.e., quantitative and qualitative, while often complimentary, ultimately have different aims. While an ethnographic approach to social research is no longer purely that of the cultural anthropologist, a more precise definition must be rooted in ethnography's disciplinary home of anthropology. Thus, ethnography may be defined as both qualitative research process and method (one conducts an ethnography) and product (the outcome of this process is an ethnography) whose aim is cultural interpretation. The ethnographer goes beyond reporting events and details of experience. Specifically, he or she attempts to explain how these represent the cultural constructions, in which we live.

Long-term engagement in the field setting or place where the ethnography takes place is called participant observation. This is perhaps the primary source of ethnographic data. The term represents the dual role of the ethnographer. To develop an understanding of what it is like to live in a setting, the researcher must both become a participant in the life of the setting while also maintaining the stance of an observer, someone who can describe the experience with a measure of what we might call detachment. This does not mean that ethnographers cannot also become advocates for the people, they study. Typically ethnographers spend many months or even years in the places where they conduct their research often forming lasting bonds with people. Due to historical development and disciplinary biases, in the past most ethnographers conducted their research in foreign countries while largely ignoring the potential for work right here at home. This has meant that much of the ethnography done in the United States today is now being done outside of its disciplinary home. Increasing numbers of cultural anthropologists, however, have begun doing fieldwork in the communities where they themselves live and work.

So far as Micro-culture is concerned, it is a counterpart of macro-culture and it refers to the groups which exist within the context of a larger society and share political and social

institutions as well as some of the traits and values of the culture. It can also be called sub-societies or subcultures. These cultural groups are called micro-cultures to indicate that they have distinctive cultural patterns while sharing some cultural patterns with all members of the macro-culture and their unique patterns will identify themselves as members of their particular group. Cultural identity is based on several traits and values learned as a part of the national or ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, socioeconomic status, geographic region, place of residence conditions and so on. Our country, India has a large size of land, so the people coming from different geographic regions can be traced back to different ethnic and religion groups with the development of history and society, people of different origins, have integrated into the whole integrity. However the customs and habits of different regions have kept down, just by this, we can identify our particularity of being South Indian, North-Indian etc. and our commonness of having the same nationality of Indian.

When we study Amitav Ghosh's novels from ethnographic and micro-cultural standpoint, this becomes crystal clear that Ghosh's fiction challenges the artificial 'shadow lines' that have been erected to separate, for example, nations from their neighbours, fact from fiction, and academy disciplines from each other. His interrogation of boundaries accords with the preoccupation with hybridity, 'in-between' spaces, and diasporas in postcolonial debate. Although Ghosh dislikes being categorized as 'postcolonial', in his writing he frequently focuses on the ways the partitioned South Asian subject has been affected by, and yet can to some extent resist, colonialism's legacy. At the heart of Ghosh's corpus is the contention that knowledge is produced by structures of dominance, particularly the military, economic, and epistemic strategies of colonialism. His main focus is on the impact that Western paradigms of knowledge have had and continue to have on India. Ghosh is also crucially concerned with highlighting filiations and connections which go beyond the (neo) colonial relationship, such as the persistence of pre-colonial trade connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula, or the existence of an Indian community in Burma which was almost entirely erased by nationalism. In his writing Ghosh constantly experiments with form and genre in order to adumbrate a dialogic, non-coercive method of knowledge transmission.

Nowhere are the issues related to ethnography and micro-cultural more evident than in Ghosh's novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*. In this novel the new perspective of ethnographic practice not only replaces the duty of the ethnographer to the civilising mission with a commitment to the agency of the subaltern, but also demystifies the image of the colonial subject as a naive uncultured individual in desperate need of Western enlightenment and guidance. *The Calcutta chromosome* can be regarded as an alternative history of malaria research where Sir Ronald Ross is miraculously led to the discovery of the malaria vector by a secret society of subaltern 'research'. Through the thick fabric of a science fiction narrative Ghosh unravels a story of scientific knowledge in which traditional roles are shifted with official authority acting as a mere instrument in the subaltern's hands. Accordingly, the possibility of accessing research objects through pure knowledge is revealed as an illusion under the premise that **"... something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you have already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history."**¹

The story of the novel moves through the closing years of the nineteenth century into the whole of the twentieth century and, then passes on to the early years of the twenty-first century. Apparently, it covers the colonial and the post-colonial years of Indian history. Of course, the writer's liberty of rejection, selection and creation has been judiciously exercised by Ghosh. The

novel opens in the early years of the twenty-first century when Antar an Egyptian computer programmer and system-analyst in New York suddenly finds the ID card of one Murugan, an old colleague and researcher, flashed on his computer screen. He discovers that Murugan had mysteriously disappeared on 21st August 1995, better known as the World Mosquito Day, from Calcutta. Murugan himself deeply interested in malaria research was very curious about Ronald Ross, a British scientist posted in the Indian army in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Ross was ultimately awarded the Nobel Prize for identifying the Malaria parasite. Murugan firmly believed that there was an ‘other mind’ behind this entire operation of research and discovery. It was his theory that though Ross was thinking that **“he was doing experiment on the malaria parasite. And all the time it’s he who is the experiment on the malaria parasite”**². He had uncovered that there is one Mangala who with her handy-man Lutchman/Laxman/Lachan/Laakhan/Lokhon was carrying out the experiment through an indigenous method. Ghosh through the story-line subverts the superiority of the western scientific investigation and proves that not only were they far behind the scientific progress made by India but here, it had been spear-headed by a woman. If ‘matter’ and ‘science’ were the stronghold of the occidental world ‘anti-matter’ and ‘counter science’ was controlled by the oriental. It is a suggested conquest by the East of the West- a typical post-colonial framework. It is also an example of the defeat of the patriarchy and a victory of matriarchy. The search for ‘immortality’ is carried on by Mangala and Lachman.

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