



The Archive as a Transcultural Contact Zone in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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Abstract

The archive as a metaphor emerges as a contentious zone in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Not only does the plot of the novel revolve around several archival researches, but the negotiation of the archive becomes a post-colonial strategy of coming to terms with the history of colonial medical science. The novel intervenes and challenges the hegemonizing attempt of the pedagogical grand narratives of history, science and other forms of ‘objective’ disciplines to reveal the performative micronarratives – the ‘different’ stories, ‘different’ experiences, and ‘different’ histories. The archive becomes a potent metaphor of transculturalism itself in that it turns out to be a fluid and volatile space which not only stores textual traces but also creates the texts. Renegotiation of the archive by subaltern agencies, therefore, sets the archive perpetually in motion and reveals it as open to further change and reinscription. *The Calcutta Chromosome* delineates a post-colonial archival research which leads the researcher to the discovery of a counter-archive of indigenous, esoteric knowledge, posited as an epistemic ‘other’ to the colonial archive of scientific discourse.

Keywords

Amitav Ghosh, transculturalism, archive, subaltern, colonial science

In the 'Introduction' to his seminal work, *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha writes: "It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond" (Bhabha 1). In this book, as elsewhere, Bhabha has expressed his disavowal of any totalizing explanatory scheme of "multiculturalist notion that you can put together harmoniously any number of cultures in a pretty mosaic" (Bhabha, "Art and National Identity: A Critic's Symposium" 82). In contrast to this Bhabha posits his theory of hybridity as an agonistic process of negotiating with the totalizing tendency of subletting national and cultural diversities. This concept of cultural hybridization, which according to Rushdie, consists in "impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas politics, movies, songs," (Rushdie 394) seems to have found new purchase among cultural theorists. The shifting cultural and social paradigms which respond to the denationizing wave of globalization leaves their mark on the global ecumene of literature, with the result that it has become less internally homogeneous, less coherent and less self-contained. Cosmopolitan dispositions and pluralistic sensibilities, fostered by migrant, transnational and nomadic experiences and modes of being, have allowed for mixtures and permutations in the creation and circulation of literature, and in the ideological frameworks that are used in interpreting them. As such, the notion of 'transculturalism' proves eminently useful in deconstructing the concept of uniform culture and in accounting for, according to Wolfgang Iser, for both the inner differentiation" of modern culture and their "external networking" due to global migration and communication.

According to Arianna Dagnino, transcultural literature engages with and expresses [...]the confluential nature of cultures overcoming the different dichotomies between North and South, the West and the rest, the colonizer and the colonized, the dominator and the dominated, the native and the (im)migrant, the national and the ethnic. Transcultural literature records the re-shaping of national collective imaginaries in an effort to adjust to the cosmopolitan vision in a new age of transnational and supra-national economic, political, social and cultural processes. (Dagnino 3)

As the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole have accrued new momentum at the turn of the twenty-first century under the pressures of globalization and other concomitant factors, scholars and theorists have increasingly felt that a transcultural and transnational perspective to literary studies proves instrumental and overcoming the dialectic between identity and alterity that

oppose people and culture. To quote Ulf Hannerz, “More than ever, there is a global ecumene. The entities we routinely call cultures are becoming more like subcultures within this wider entity” (Hannerz 218).

In the present paper I have sought to discuss Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* in the light of the ongoing histories of migrations and transnational cultural flows. Ghosh’s novel interrogates the fluid nature, of borders between nations, between people between different literary genres and emphasises the role of memory in the formation and recovery of identities the role of narrative in shaping history and the subaltern consciousness and subjectivity which remains a trace rather than a presence. With an intellectual itinerary spanning across India, Egypt, England, America and many other countries across the globe, Ghosh embodies the politics of ambivalence with relation to the fluid lexicons of both liberal humanism and post-structuralism his political and theoretical positions are difficult to pin down, as divergent views of such critics as Robert Dixon, Gauri Viswanathan and Suvir Kaul demonstrate. The political and ideological ambivalence that characterise Ghosh’s works are, according to Anshuman Mondal the multiple contradictions inherent in modernity, which have been accelerated by globalisation.

[...] how is it possible not to be ambivalent, especially if attending to the ‘double task’ demanded by a post-colonial politics that seeks social and political justice for the wretched of the earth on the one hand, whilst observing and respecting the cultural difference in the other? This politics simply cannot be unequivocal because it must always contain within itself this inherent doubleness. (Mondal 173)

Ambivalence in terms of form, politics and ideological commitments lies at the core of *The Calcutta Chromosome*. The highly climactic and ambiguous ending and a number of deliberately suggestive elisions of the novel are in consonance with its constitutive ambivalence and open-endedness.

This very ambivalence aligns Ghosh’s novels with the concept of transculturalism and transcultural literature/s, which according to Arianna Dagnino, “are disposed to reclaim an inclusive vision of culture/s, one which stresses the power of confluences, overlappings, and interactions rather than of polarities” (Dagnino, *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* 1). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the narrative of which spans across New York, Calcutta and Egypt, and which temporally connects the British Imperial past, the post-modern present and an unspecified and emergent future,

the cultural and national boundaries are seen to be transcended through the archival researches of the main characters in the novel. By highlighting the limitations of post-colonial theorising and by rejecting the essentialist versions of national and regional histories Ghosh obscures the social and ideological specificities of Eurocentric modes of thinking and western discourses. At the same time as this, he effectively pre-empts any naïve revival of a 'nationalist' discourse, as opposed to the western discourses by positing a fictional and fantasized counter-narrative of malaria research in the context of nineteenth century colonial India.

The "porosity of cultural boundaries", which Robert Dixon, identifies as one of the major characteristics of Ghosh's works (Dixon 11) is evinced in *The Calcutta Chromosome* and it is through the archive that this transcultural osmosis is achieved. I seek to demonstrate in the present article that the remediation of archival material is posited in the novel as a possible way to rework a colonial and Eurocentric perspective. Critical interrogations of the archive by the characters of Ghosh's novel are shown to create alternative memories that effectively dismantle the centre/margin binarism of the Imperial discourse. The archive, as such, emerges in the novel as a 'contact zone' where the fluctuating cultural interchange, transcultural interactions occur and notions of otherness are negotiated. The entire novel revolves around different forms of archival research – the research of the new York based Egyptian data-analyst Antar into the mysterious disappearance of one of his former colleagues L.Murugan and Murugan's own archival quest for the hidden history of malaria research conducted in late colonial days in Calcutta.

According to Suzanne Keen, who remarks upon the Ghosh's Orwellian take on technology, the entire novel revolves around different forms of research, including medical research, spying and journalistic investigation. Like Ghosh's debut novel, *The Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* also interrogates the status of scientific knowledge as an objective, benevolent, universal and apolitical discourse. Science, particularly, colonial science, is shown to be enmeshed in a network of power and embedded in a complex narrative of the ideologies of the Empire. Abstracted from these narratives, the story of colonial scientific discoveries would be one of the progress of human knowledge achieved by the agency of the superior white man – the 'lone genius' – aided by good native informants. Ghosh's use of the critical interface of science and the politics of the Empire in *The Calcutta Chromosome* opens up a possibility of an ideological subversion and contamination of the privileged grand narrative by the

colonized culture. The critique of scientific reason which animates Ghosh's first novel is orchestrated in *The Calcutta Chromosome* in subtler and more complex ways. While in the former novel Alu's picaresque life-story deconstructs the straightforward concept of Reason put forward by empiricism, which universalizes a particular form of logic, in the latter novel archival research becomes the conduit to the 'other' knowledge, which is an inextricable part of mainstream knowledge.

The novel is divided into two sections: The first section, "August 20th Mosquito Day," is devoted to the search by Antar in the digital archive for the mysteriously vanished scientist L. Murugan. Situated in a not so distant future, Antar is intrigued by a discarded ID card belonging to Murugan, whom he once fortuitously came in contact with, and his interest in this archival object sets him off on an archival quest for the secret behind Murugan's disappearance. Murugan's own research leads him to the discovery that Ronald Ross's medical discoveries had been secretly engineered by an Indian 'counter-scientific' cult, consecrated to a mysterious mother-goddess Mangala. Murugan invokes through his (mis)readings of Ross's *Memoirs*, a charged Victorian milieu that depicts a struggle around the owning and appropriation of scientific research.

The next section, "The Day After" shifts the focus from Antar's quest to the quest of Murugan and involves two female characters, Urmila and Sonali, who are drawn into the vortex of the quest. Ultimately the novel includes the reader within the quest, so that the reader is involved in the narrative and Antar's and Murugan's quest becomes the reader's quest as well. The famously ambiguous and open-ended conclusion of the novel, the numerous and interweaving strands of narratives and the decentering of narrative authority obliges the reader to make her own (mis)readings of the text. Also, the epistemology of Silence, which threatens the colonial archive, is only precariously posited as a privileged discourse. As Ansuman Mondal writes,

Ghosh is not seeking simply to replace modern knowledge with 'other' knowledges. [...] Instead, Ghosh recognises the more profound point that the universalism of modern knowledge is founded in its monopoly of claims to 'valid' or legitimate knowledge – all 'other' knowledges cannot be admitted *as* knowledge. This raises a particular problem for any attempt to recover subaltern epistemologies: how is one to articulate these 'other' knowledges if the only language through which knowledge can be articulated *as such* is through modern scientific rationality? If, as had been claimed, modern scientific rationality is haunted by the erased presence of

these other epistemologies, how can they be exhumed if the only means available is scientific rationality itself? (Mondal 57-58)

Archival quest, therefore, does not end here in any definite achievement in the form of ‘truth’. John Thieme argues in “The Discoverer Discovered” that the focalizers, who are also the questers in the novel, are found to have limited narrative authority: Murugan’s contraction of syphilis has apparently affected his brain, and when ultimately Antar tracks him down, he is a lunatic interred at an asylum. Antar’s own narrative might have been addled by his feverish state. Therefore, the entire narrative is destabilized, with the reader grappling, like Antar, for “a semblance of a narrative” (Ghosh 108).

Murugan bases his research of Ross largely on the latter’s *Memoirs* and letters and he has studied extensively in the area of 19th century scientific discourse on malaria, so that he knows every single factual detail about Ross’s scientific quest. Antar recollects Murugan having told him once how thorough his acquaintance with the ‘archival’ Ross was.

[...] he [Ross] spent about five hundred days altogether working on malaria. And you know what? I’ve tracked him through every single one of those five hundred days: I know where he was, what he did, which slides he looked at; I know what he was hoping to see and what he actually saw, I know who was with him, who wasn’t with him. It’s like I was looking over his shoulder. (Ghosh 44)

Murugan’s fictional research, however, draws heavily on Ghosh’s own research in the history of colonial medicine and Ross’s biography. The factual historical details of Ronald Ross’s discovery are mixed with a subplot in which a gnostic cult and its acolytes manipulate the Westerner’s scientific research to discover the secrets of interpersonal transference of soul. Murugan’s reading of the official archive, unlike Balaram’s reading of the *Life of Pasteur* in Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*, is a deconstructive reading. He reads the ‘archive’ against the grain. For Murugan, Ross is not the motif of ‘Reason’ but a gullible fool, too engrossed in his own experiment to realize that it is in fact he who is the object of experimentation. Murugan’s reading transfers the agency to the subaltern group, whose unrecorded contribution to the discovery of the malaria germ is the crux of his research. This subaltern group, however, is not the prototypical ‘good’ native informant, who helps to precipitate and perpetuate the grand narrative of Western scientific progress. The cult of silence has its own agenda, which disrupts colonial science in that it is

counter-scientific and charts a course radically different from the 'scientific' intention of the colonizer.

Generically, the novel is famously difficult to place. It has been variously categorized as a postmodern science fiction, a medical thriller, sci-fi gothic, cyberpunk fiction and quest narrative. Ghosh apparently tries the boundaries of novelistic discourse, and by mixing up different generic styles, challenges the categorization of different disciplines, including that of science and religion. Anshuman Mondal argues, that the reductive conception of knowledge as purely empirical is challenged in the novel by positing 'other' forms of knowledge which are non-empirical, non-rational, and non-articulable. In doing so, the novel explores in fictional form the politics behind the omissions and commissions of the modern scientific discourse. The practice and propagation of European medical science is shown to be complicit in the discourse of colonialism, in as much as it places the colonized 'other' in an objective position, who must be studied, analyzed and cured by the civilized Englishman. In Ross's experimental project the colony is a field of knowledge, "a theatrical stage affixed to Europe" (Said, *Orientalism* 63). The native knowledge and epistemological system is replaced by colonial modernity and the subjective agency of the subaltern is forfeited. The transcendental claims of altruism and scientific progress that colonial science invokes as its own justification are challenged in the novel. The search for the malaria virus was never a search *for* the subaltern but a search at their expense. Knowledge neither belongs to nor acknowledges the subaltern who is delegated to the status of the willing 'object' on whom agents of colonial science would conduct experiments, and who is expected to internalize the colonizer's epistemological systems, but forever be denied the opportunity to create knowledge, or, more importantly, be the subject of knowledge. The 'archive' of the scientific knowledge and the interpretation and dissemination of it is the domain of Western, empirical epistemology.

According to Mark Harrison, "Medicine's role as a 'tool of Empire' is probably the most familiar theme in the historiography of colonial medicine till date" (Harrison 2). Harrison further elucidates the complicity of science with the Empire when he shows that Ronald Ross believed in the superiority of the British over the subject people in terms of ability, integrity and science and held that the British rule was integral to the development of the 'barbaric' colonies (Harrison 151). Zaheer Baber comments upon the complicity between scientific discourse and the ideologies of the Empire thus:

By the mid-nineteenth century, colonial India constituted the site for one of the largest, state-sponsored scientific and technological enterprises undertaken anywhere in modern times. During the course of colonial rule, India literally constituted a “social laboratory” where a number of “experiments” in institution building were planned and executed. The experience of developing scientific institutions in British India contributed to a fund of information that was later utilized in Britain. At the same time, specific colonial policies led to the decline and then withdrawal of patronage for indigenous scientific and educational institutions. In the context of rapid structural transformation, initiated in part by colonial policies, the interests of the emergent elites within India were intertwined with the evolving colonial social structure. (Baber 8)

As a serious anthropological researcher, Ghosh would have learned to read the phenomenon of colonial medical science for the embedded and interpellated colonial discourses.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the counter-scientific experiments of the subaltern people like Mangala and Lachman point to the possibility that the subaltern *can* assume the agency in search for knowledge. Neither does the methodology of this group, nor its object of search resemble those of the European scientist. While Ross is engaged in discovering the vectors of the malaria virus, the counter-scientific group seeks to unravel the secret of immortality. They merely use some of the investigative modalities of the empiricist-scientific research of Ronald Ross. Apparently, the knowledge of this group about the malaria virus is much ahead of Ross, or other European scientists. Mangala had already been using artificially induced malaria to cure venereal diseases when Ross embarked upon his scientific quest. What she needed was to move on to the next stage and use the mysterious potential of the malaria virus to reveal the secrets of interpersonal transference of the soul, whereby one could become virtually immortal. Therefore, she manipulates Ross’s scientific quest to fill out the gaps in her own investigation. While Ross believes that natives like Abdul Kadir and Lakhan are menial workers who willingly devote themselves to the progress of European medical science, it is actually these subaltern people, Murugan suggests, who are pulling the strings: “He thinks he’s doing the experiments on the malaria parasite. And all the time it’s he who *is* the experiment on the malaria parasite. But Ronnie never gets it; not to the end of his life” (Ghosh 69).

The principle difference between the western scientific knowledge system and the counter-scientific knowledge system is that while the former articulates its findings and forms them into intricate narratives, the latter works on the principle of ‘silence.’ This is how Murugan explains his assumptions about the *modus operandi* of the counter-scientific group:

[...] let’s say there was something like science and counter-science? Thinking of it in the abstract, wouldn’t you say that the first principle of a functioning counter-science would have to be secrecy? The way I see it, it wouldn’t just have to be secretive about *what* it did (it couldn’t hope to beat the scientists at their game anyway); it would also have to be secretive *in* what it did. It would have to use secrecy as a technique or procedure. It would in principle have to refuse all direct communication [...] to put ideas into language would be to establish a claim to *know* – which is the first thing that a counter science would dispute. (Ghosh 88)

So, essentially, the knowledge generated by the research of the counter-scientific group is against the archival principle and logocentrism. However, they also have their own power and mode of articulation and this mode is the mode of silence.

What is also noteworthy is that it seems, as if, Murugan and Antar are themselves not free agents in their quests. It is, as if, they are meant to embark upon their respective quests and their archival researches are guided by some superior knowledge. By the end of his search Murugan seems to realize that his part “was to tie some threads together so that they could hand the whole package over in a neat little bundle sometime in the future, to whoever it is they’re waiting for” (Ghosh 252). The cult of silence, thus, uses the archival research of the likes of Ross, Murugan and Antar to propagate its knowledge. In fact, it is the gaps and fissures in the epistemological superstructure of the ‘archive’ that it inhabits. The *Memoirs* of the European scientist does contain the reference to Lakhan, but it is by reading that archive ‘differently,’ imaginatively and against the grain that Murugan arrives at his tantalizing hypothesis.

Later in the narrative the cult’s agency also seems to be engulfing the digital archive of Antar. The knowledge that the cult supposedly seeks to pass on to Antar through Murugan is encrypted in the database of Antar’s private computer program Ava/IIe without Antar knowing about it. As a revisionary and fictional counter-discourse to the grand narrative of European scientific project, the power of Ghosh’s narrative resides in suggesting that the non-archival, subaltern knowledge lies by definition outside

the purview of the rational Western scientific discourse. The subaltern's voice is structurally written out of the narratives of power and, therefore, it cannot be incorporated within the articulations of that narrative. Therefore, the subaltern in Ghosh's text communicates not through articulation but through silence, and yet, the 'archive', or rather the gaps in the 'archive' are used as conduits for such communication. As Phulboni, the famous Bengali author at whose felicitation programme Murugan meets Urmila and Sonali, exhorts, the silence is not without life nor is it inanimate:

‘Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life; that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice. It is not: indeed the Word is to this silence what the shadow is to the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life. (Ghosh 24)

Anshuman Mondal's observations in this context are worth quoting:

The Calcutta Chromosome executes a strategy whereby subaltern knowledge – all those premodern and/or non-Western forms of ‘belief’, ‘superstition’, ‘myth’, and ‘religion’ that were evacuated and distanced from modern ‘knowledge’ – is revealed (and not represented) as being secreted within the recesses of Reason itself. This troubles the discourse of modern science by contaminating it with its ghostly doubles. (Mondal 59)

This contamination occurs through the infiltration of the *anarchivic* (Derrida 10) drive into the *archive* (Derrida 9). It through the medium of the archive – digital archive as well as libraries and journals – that the ghosts of an other time, of other consciousness haunt the present.

The Calcutta Chromosome is Amitav Ghosh's only science fiction and one in which the theme of posthuman future is fictionalized. The human-computer interface and forms of futuristic technology imbricate the novel with issues of digital archiving and digital forensics which are central themes of digital humanities. The novel challenges the replication of the Imperialist project in science fiction with a counter-narrative recovered by the posthuman technological devices of ‘machine reading’ and digital archive, and reanimated by imaginative and interventionist reading of the ‘archive.’ The nineteenth century medical mystery surrounding the scientific breakthrough in malaria research is reanimated through the protagonist's quest in the digital archive.

The artefact that piques Antar's curiosity and sets him off on the trail of L. Murugan is generated by his super computer Ava/IIe. According to Pramod K Nayar, the two key components of the novel are “the material contexts and conditions of information

and the ‘immaterial’ (because it is electronic) nature (and quality) of information itself” (Nayar 55). Ava is an advanced and futuristic super computer which was provided to Antar by the International Water Council, for which he works. It is with the help of Ava that Antar manages to recover the digital traces of Murugan’s research about the counter-history of the discovery of the malarial germs by Ronald Ross. Ava’s enormous and all-encompassing digital archive, which is always expanding due to its inbuilt system of self-improvement, is designed for the purpose of creating official inventories. The huge archival data stored and processed by Ava does not, however, form a humanist archive but is designed particularly to optimize the efficiency of workforce and acquiring ‘meaningless’ details (Ghosh 4). Antar is merely an insignificant loop in the chain of global informatics and has no direct correspondence with the head office. His only job is to feed Ava with abstract and coded data, and consequently, corporeal information is beyond the assimilating power of the machine; Ava stores all information in digitized form. As Nayar shows, the disruption in the digital archive is caused by Ava’s inability to process “material basis of information” (Nayar 55), namely, the metal chain attached to Murugan’s ID card. Nayar argues,

The Calcutta Chromosome [...] was written around the time the body was becoming a set of data-bases in genetic, molecular and digital forms. In the novel the body is itself a recorder of data. For example, Murugan’s describes the symptoms of syphilis writ on the body (lesions, scabs, sores, loosening of teeth, etc) as signs of his past. On the one hand, in the new informational economy of genetic testing, gene databases such as the Human Genome Project, convert the body into mathematised data for computers to code (bioinformatics). Here the technology incorporates the corporeal body into itself. (Nayar 61)

The not-so-distant future which Ghosh depicts in Orwellian sweep is highly data-driven society.

The same tendency to convert the human into usable data and into objects of scientific knowledge is discernible in the colonial scientific project. Ghosh’s novel seems to suggest that even in the postcolonial period the digitization of data effects a similar dehumanization and impersonalization. Thus, despite its encyclopaedic retention of data and constant self-upgradation a supercomputer like Ava is deficient in the human quotient, and requires the human agent to feed data into it. Suchitra Mathur perceptively argues that *The Calcutta Chromosome* achieves “the requisite cognitive

estrangement of science fiction” but does not “accept the ideological implications of a progressive science that underlie this literary stratagem” (Mathur127). The accumulation of digitized data is thus compared by Antar to the historicist way of knowing through collecting more data than one could make use of. In Antar’s consciousness the act of collecting data is associated with the sifting of detritus that he witnessed as a child when a group of archaeologists came to his Egyptian village foraging in the dust. Ava’s unquenchable appetite for trivia is no different in Antar’s view: “He sat up with a start and said, in Arabic: that’s what you are Ava, a Dust-Counter” (Ghosh 6).

The narrative of *The Calcutta Chromosome* hinges upon moments of archival rupture. It is in the epistemological gaps and crevices of the ‘archive’ that the ‘other’ narratives are interpellated. Bishnupriya Ghosh comments,

All major acts of detection in the novel involve deconstructing existing and discordant accounts (journal entries, diaries, logs of scientific research, oral memories, letters) from the colonial era. The main pursuers of truth in *The Calcutta Chromosome* figure out the puzzle of the counter-scientific through filling in gaps, finishing log entries, or writing in the indecipherable [...] This is precisely the disjuncture of discourse that we encounter in *The Calcutta Chromosome* where the ‘facts’ of science, requiring communication (the narrative of discovery), are indeed ‘punctured’ by the counter-scientific will to secrecy, improbability, and inadmission. (Ghosh, “On Grafting the Vernacular: The Consequences of Postcolonial Spectrology” 128)

The action of the mystery plot that Ghosh weaves is triggered when the digital archive is disrupted by an unidentifiable object, namely the metal chain of an ID card. Likewise, the colonial archive of medical science is disrupted by Murugan’s discovery of the counter-narrative of the subaltern’s counter-scientific project. In both cases the power of the ‘archive’ over the subject to delimit and dictate are seen to be appropriated by ‘other’ voices.

It has already been discussed in the foregoing pages that the archival economy is inextricably linked with the desire to control and manipulate historical narrative. In Ghosh’s novel interrogation of the history of colonial medical science is part of the postcolonial critique of the history of the Empire and its knowledge systems. So, in discovering the malaria germs Ronald Ross was actually transcribing on the ‘docile body’

of the colony the history of Imperial superiority, which explains his proclivity for exhaustive archiving. As Murugan tells Antar,

The great thing about a guy like Ronald Ross is that he writes everything down. You've got to remember: this guy's decided he's going to re-write the history books. He wants everyone to know The story like he's going to tell it; he's not about to leave any of it up for grabs, not a single minute if he can help it. He's figured on a guy like me coming along some day and I'm happy to oblige. (Ghosh 44)

The archival investments of the International Water Council are, similarly, shown as part of a historiographic project:

They saw themselves making History with their vast water-control experiments: they wanted to record every minute detail of what they had done, what they would do. Instead of having a historian sift through their dirt, looking for meanings, they wanted to do it themselves: they wanted to load their dirt with their own meanings. (Ghosh 6)

While the 'archive' is on one hand, used to reinforce the ideologies of power, on the other hand, it can also be used to deconstruct the Imperial narratives. Murugan's reading of Ross's diaries is a potent example of the ways received history can be deconstructed and made to yield space for the marginalized voices that does not feature in the official archive. What is more pertinent is that the alternative history is shown in this novel to have been willingly silent. It only manifests itself in order to accomplish its specific ends. The counter-scientific project of Mangala and her followers neither needs Murugan to *recover* their story from the somnolence of the archive, nor is Murugan posited as an active hero or a rescuer. The cult of silence has rather used Murugan, as it had used Ronald Ross, to perpetuate their esoteric goal, as Murugan himself comes to realize by the end of his journey. Thus, he says to Urmila, "My part in this was to tie some threads together so that they could hand the whole package over in a neat little bundle some time in the future, to whoever it is they are waiting for" (Ghosh 253).

If the subaltern agency intervenes and manipulates the Imperial archive, it also destabilizes the technological archive of the future. It is revealed in the final pages of the novel that Antar's secure computer networks has been already infiltrated by the members of the cult of silence, and there is a suggestion that his finding of Murugan's ID card might not be a chance occurrence after all. The reader would remember that Antar had hooked his digital connection with his neighbour Tara's computer to help the latter search

for online job openings. Since Tara was herself a reincarnation of Mangala, it is suggested that she had somehow manipulated Ava's archive and planted Murugan's narrative, his memories. It is at this point that the reader realizes that Antar himself is being initiated into the cult and that the person the cult had been waiting for to pass on the secrets of their inheritance of knowledge to might have been him. The archival quest thus, comes full circle with the quester himself turning out to be the object of the quest. Madhumalati Adhikari rightly observes that the novel could be read as "a discourse on humanquest, project characters engaged in individual search for truth, self-identity and self-knowledge" (Adhikari 232). Neither Anter nor Murugan can avoid the legacies of their past any more than the reader, who, faced with the ambiguity of the ending, must participate in the interpretive process. John Thieme observes,

In erasing the distinction between discoverer and the discovered, Ghosh has also demonstrated the unsatisfactoriness of making rigid distinctions between story tellers and listeners. Nobody, the suggestion seems to be, is exempt from history or from playing an active role in the historiographical process. So perhaps, the ultimate discoverer who is discovered by the novel is the reader. (Thieme 140)

Thieme's observation could very well be the point of departure into the ethics of reading, a perspective that the present essay must fall short of discussing, but which might suggest interesting ways of looking at the questions of other knowledge and other consciousness in Ghosh's novel. The ethical demands enjoined on the novel's fictional readers of the archive are shown to configure their relationship with their pasts.

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