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Postmodern Strategies in
Writing by Amitav Ghosh:
The Case of *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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"This guy's decided to re-write the history books." Amitav Ghosh

In recent times, Indian novels in English have suffered quite a bizarre fate: their being read, analysed and marked as postcolonial fictional works, while it has in some cases overstated their distinctive traits, has also had the effect of restricting the scholarly approach to them and limiting their reading to a specific perspective. Amitav Ghosh, Indian postcolonial novelist, author of the diaspora, interpreter of Subaltern Studies as well as postmodern voice, is a case in point. A leading Indian exponent of the contemporary international literary scene, Ghosh has distinguished himself for, among other reasons, being a writer sensitive enough to capture all the stimula that a misty contemporaneity offers, and to express them in a complex array of works that reflect the contradictions, challenges, ambiguities and conflicts that our global society copiously produces. My intention here is to stress how Ghosh's fiction mirrors many of the key elements of postmodern writing. In order to do so, I will focus my attention on his 1995 novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* to suggest analogies with a recognized masterpiece of postmodern literature, A.S. Byatt's 1990 novel *Possession.*

The Calcutta Chromosome is indeed an ingenious and innovative work of art, and Ghosh's reviewers and critics have not underestimated such aspects. The plot vividly combines the stories of a number of brilliantly sketched out characters, scattered

over a period of time ranging from the end of the nineteenth century to an imminent future. By and large, we may select three main time units in which the action takes place:

1. **Past**: A period of time from the last decades of the 1800s up to the 1930s. The setting is generally India, with most scenes set in Calcutta. A key protagonist is real-life British bacteriologist Ronald Ross who gained fame for (supposedly) discovering the link between the anopheles mosquito and malarial infection.

2. **Present**: Since the novel was published in 1995, "present" time is in line with the technological developments and general circumstances of this decade. Events in the novel occur in a limited but crucial period of time, which spans a few weeks up to 21 August 1995. Half of the story takes place in New York, half in Calcutta and its surroundings. The protagonist is the Bengali clerk Murugan.

3. **Future**: There are no hints to a specific period of time in the whole novel. We may reasonably presume that the action takes place within the first two decades of the 21st century, more or less our present. The location is New York, and the protagonist is Antar, an Egyptian computer archivist.

We may add a fourth time unit. I would refer to it as either a "future beyond" or as a totally "out-of-time" period. This is the time dimension of the narrating voice, which reports the events occurring in the future in the past tense. The *incipit* of the novel, for instance, is set in the future but narrated in the past tense. This time unit, in which no event whatsoever occurs, is the one from which the narrator tells the whole (hi)story and should therefore be considered a privileged point of view.

Before shifting to further considerations, it would be worthwhile to focus our attention on the most piquant and innovative time section: the future. *The Calcutta Chromosome* has fascinated the critics, so much so that every one has felt compelled to define it, to attach tags to it, or simply to place it within an ac-

knowledged literary canon: labels such as "mystery novel,"[1] "mystery thriller,"[2] "philosophical novel,"[3] "scientific thriller a metaphorical whodunit,"[4] "experimental work,"[5] "anthropologic detective-story"[6] are evidence of a feverish quest for categorization that has possessed critics in much the same way, ironically, as the novel's fictional characters. Curiously enough, not even the contributors of Wikipedia have kept their critical creativeness under restraint and have given in to this temptation: "medical thriller"[7] is the label chosen to refer to the novel. This variegated critical response attests to the multifacetedness of the novel, as well as to critics' creativity. However, it is rather bizarre that rarely have critics called this fictional work a "historiographic metafiction," the famous label adopted by Linda Hutcheon to describe texts, such as the novel under scrutiny, that are part of postmodern literary production. I believe this expression to be particularly suitable for Ghosh's novel, especially if we take into account that the Canadian academic stresses that such so-called historiographic metafictions are "obsessed with the question of how we can come to know the past today."[8]

In keeping with Hutcheon's theory, *The Calcutta Chromosome* in fact challenges the traditional notion of a water-proof past, isolated and uncontaminated from possible re-writings and re-presentations. Written six years before Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* theorizes that

> postmodern fiction stresses . . . the tensions that exist, on the one hand, between the pastness (and absence) of the past and the presentness (and presence) of the present, and on the other, between the actual events of the past and the historian's act of processing them into facts.[9]

A.S. Byatt's *Possession* also clearly addresses such issue: the void of the past is completed with the present's fullness, a strategy similar to that employed by Amitav Ghosh in *The Calcutta*

Chromosome. The Indian novelist's crafty and innovative varia-
tion on Hutcheon's canon however consists in his broadening the
time dimensions on which the plot is unravelled from two to
three parallel time units, and enlarging the extent of his *pastiche*
to a re-organization of the science-fiction genre. This also ex-
plains how Ghosh's novel manages to present a totally irreverent
historical point of view, at least if read against a traditional ap-
proach to historical report, by subverting the natural laws of
time.

Amitav Ghosh moves with the ease and the freedom of an
anarchist back and forth through time and space units. He jollily
sacrifices them by proposing a new concept of plot unit, inde-
pendent of historical rigour. Contrasting the assessed norms of
reason, which would prescribe that a certain past event has con-
sequences on the present, which will further influence future
mechanisms, the novelist deconstructs history by writing a story
which arises in the future and has repercussions on the present
and the past; once the farthest point has been reached, the narra-
tive circles viciously backward and is eventually extinguished at
the genesis. Future is both the starting point and the end of a cy-
cle; it has control over past and present, in that it possesses the
kind of power that technology employs over the weak and the
powerless. Amitav Ghosh seems to indicate that in order to keep
control over both past and present, one has to control the future:
or, alternatively, the act of re-writing both the past and the pre-
sent is possible in the future because of its technological suprem-
acy. This is why, although both past and present are largely set
against the background of Calcutta, the future can be as far away
as New York. More precisely, the stage on which future scenes
are essentially represented is Antar's extremely fast AVA com-
puter. The AVA system with its breathtaking potentialities is in
fact the element which most relevantly distinguishes future from
present. Were it not for the striking innovations of the AVA,
Antar could almost be an ordinary everyman of the present. The

state of perfection which machines have reached takes them at least to the same level as men. The AVA treats Antar as any human being would: it is amused to talk to him (in the "appropriate rural dialect of the Nile Delta"[10]), it watches and hears him, it answers him back if ordered to shut up, it causes reductions in his pay if he is idle at work. It is not the stage of the 'rebellion of the machines' because they still live harmoniously and peacefully with men, but on conditions which—at that point—are no longer decided and imposed entirely by man. The man/computer relationship is now of the *au-pair* kind. Actually, Ghosh depicts the computer in its most humanised traits, since the AVA is always referred to with the feminine pronoun 'she' and not by a neutral 'it'; besides, we know that it works "with a bizzarrely human smugness" (7). On the other hand, the novelist shows how the human mind may be assimilated to a computer. Antar's ideas are focussed like images on a computer screen when we read that "the image grew clearer in Antar's mind" (18). Therefore, the future is the stage where man and computer reduce their differences to the very least, and the powerful AVA system metaphorically comprises all those elements that enable Antar to have an advantaged point of view. Discourses about power-control and supremacy acquire great significance in the context of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and the literary background posited by Hutcheon is once again fundamental for a full understanding of such a situation: narrative representation at the time of postmodernism "is a historical and a political act,"[11] and Amitav Ghosh strikes us as acutely aware of the former as well as of the latter.

Similar to what happens in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, the reader of *The Calcutta Chromosome* is left to believe that the plot originates after a fortuitous discovery occurred to the protagonist: in the first case, Roland Mitchell unintentionally discovers two unknown letters by the English poet Ash, while in the second case, due to a system malfunction, Antar finds the rem-

nants of an ID card on his screen. Excited by their findings, Roland and Antar—both of them living on the margins of society—naively imagine that such discoveries may represent a turning point in their lives and transform their dull routine to a state of ferment, while they remain unaware that this episode simply entangles them in a mechanism whose contours they completely ignore. Although they picture themselves as the protagonists of a new plot, they are actually manoeuvred by that same plot. In other words, they are both possessed by a feverish drive which leads them into a blind research rather emerging as self-conscious agents of a frantic investigation.

Antar soon discovers that the retrieved document belongs to Murugan, a colleague of his who disappeared in Calcutta in August 1995. The whole story puzzles and enthrals the Egyptian clerk who, at his own risk, tries to unearth the mystery revolving around this case of missing person. Murugan, on his part, had gone to Calcutta in order to conduct personal investigations on Sir Ronald Ross—who in 1906 received the Nobel prize for his discovery of the life-cycle of the malaria parasite—convinced that the latter's research had been side-tracked by an occult organisation. The plot can be roughly summarised as 'Antar searching for Murugan searching for Ross.' At this juncture, the genius of Amitav Ghosh is twofold: first, he skilfully involves in a feverish and reciprocal inquiry a host of complementary characters, each of them concerned in his/her own puzzle to solve. Secondly, he clones different replicas of past events which he disseminates both in the present and in the future. Thanks to this technique, Ghosh creates intersections of time units, thus 'magically' connecting the future with the present and/or with the past. The novel abounds in cyclic repetitive patterns; the reader more than once feels that the narrated event has already happened in the future or in the past. In the following paragraphs, such a systematic approach (and tendency) in narration will be discussed.

To start with, it may be useful to file the cases into two distinct groups: the first one will simply list recurring episodes, whereas the second will reckon the repeating instances related to a particular character. An example of the first sort is that of the pigeons. We first come across them while following Elijah Farley's research on malaria. Farley was one of the scientists who had worked on the malaria project in the same Calcutta laboratory, which will later become the theatre of Ronald Ross's discovery. His theory was along the same lines of Laveran's, whose results dated back to 1860 but which were then rejected by the majority of the scientific world. By chance Farley noticed that his researches were actually manipulated by his assistant, Lutchman, and the laboratory sweeper-woman, Mangala; it was as if they wanted to keep the bacteriologist away from a certain truth as they provided him with wrong proofs for his research. At the scientist's vehement reaction, they simply gave in and revealed Laveran's parasite on a slide smeared with the fresh blood of a pigeon affected by *halterdium,* a bird version of malaria. That was the test which most clearly evidenced the searched for information. The same species of birds also feature in the present time when Murugan, summarising this story to Urmila, throws a stone at a group of pigeons exclaiming: "'I wouldn't be surprised at all' he said, 'if there were a couple of descendants of Lutchman's flock up there'" (166). A pigeon, finally, is the link with the future as well. While Antar is at home ready to work at his computer,

> something shot up out of the airshaft and began to knock furiously on the glass windowpane. Antar recoiled, throwing his arms up: it was a pigeon, flapping against the glass. Its beady red eyes fixed on him for an instant, and then it was gone. (196)

The emphasis on repetitive instances related to a particular character is still more significant. A web of information not only creates correspondences among different incidents but also among

different characters living in separate time sections: this technique leaves the reader with the sensation that, being the affinities or combinations so plentiful, one is facing various levels of 'double' cases. In this sense we should also register how this aspect characterises A.S. Byatt's *Possession* as well, where a romantic thread connects two distinct plots unravelling during the Victorian age and the present time. The secret romance between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte has a commanding influence over the lives of Roland Michell and Maud Bailey who, almost despite themselves, seem to carry on from where the two Victorian lovers had left. The equivalence between the two love-stories is further validated by an element of secrecy and sense of guilt, because the two men are respectively married and engaged. In simple terms, Roland mirrors Randolph Ash in the same way as Maud replicates Christabel LaMotte. These sets of analogies across different time ages or—as we shall soon see—different countries should be directly associated with the postmodern cultural milieu. Steven Connor is assertive as he claims that "postmodernist fiction is ontological,"[12] and stresses how crucial the issue of identity is in this literary context.

Like A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* creates an impressive net of mirror-like situations among different sets of characters. We may start by taking into account the remarkable analogy between Lutchman and Lucky, a friend of Tara, Antar's neighbour. Their similitude is not merely a noun assonance. Lutchman's peculiar physical mark is that

> his left hand was missing a thumb. It doesn't seem to have made any difference to his manual skills. He was probably born that way, because his index finger seems to have re-trained itself to do the thumb's job. (210)

On the other hand, we might say, Lucky does some cleaning in Tara's flat. There is an evident allusion to Lutchman as he is de-

scribed in the following way: "Lucky was notoriously clumsy, always dropping trays and spilling tea: 'all thumbs' as Tara often said." (185). A similitude of this kind therefore not only connects past with future, but leaves the reader with the legitimate doubt that Lucky is playing a role analogous to Lutchman's.

There are also a number of elements that seem to suggest that Murugan is able to establish an impressive work of links with every and each male character of the novel, with a handful of alter-ego situations dispersed all along the plot. Not only are episodes cloned, but so are identities. The parallelism with Antar is sketched out as soon as they meet: the narrating voice reports that "they were about the same age, Antar estimated; both in their early forties" (41). Both of them suffer a reduction of salary because entangled in their own researches. Yet, most important of all, they share some relevant affinities with Ronald Ross. Like his two future counterparts, while implicated in his successful three years' research, Sir Ronald Ross is "about to hit his mid-life crisis" (45). Very soon, as the narration flows, the reader learns that the three protagonists had contracted malaria.

Involved in a personal challenge within the breathless process of investigations, the male triad sometimes misses important clues. In this respect, they very much resemble Grigson, a linguist who first discovered Lutchman's double nature. In terms of the succession of events, he provides an anticipation to Murugan: he is a busybody, a meddler, but a guileless, somehow an instinctive, trouble-seeker, too engrossed in his ingenious discovering to notice other remarkable but evident cues. The following passage provides evidence of those common traits:

> So Grigson gives him a smile, and says, speaking to him in his own dialect: "So your name is really Laakhan isn't it? Isn't that how they say it where you're from?"
>
> The minute he says that word, Lutchman's face goes into rigor mortis. But Grigson doesn't notice; he's busy congratulating himself on his infallible ear. (79)

The most important issue is the solving of a linguistic enigma; Grigson does not go beyond that point and, say, wonders why a man disguises himself under a wrong identity. Consequently, he puts his life at severe risk. His behaviour also places him on the same wavelength as Ronald Ross, who had just been described by Murugan in such terms:

> there's this one guy who's doing world-class science, and who's caught up in what he's doing he hardly notices whether there's anything happening around him—and there is, there's a lot happening around him, only the stupid son-of-a-bitch is such a fucking genius he doesn't know. (75)

Murugan is obviously a genius himself; yet, Amitav Ghosh uses a kind of thrift in depicting him as an extraordinary character. At most, while dealing with Urmila's private considerations, he hints that "he wasn't like anyone she knew" (182).

In addition, Murugan is associated with Phulboni, the old and celebrated Bengali writer, whom we find intent on giving a very elaborate speech, fascinating and poetical in its eloquence, but also spiced with what may seem an excessively rhetorical tone. Addressing himself somewhat mysteriously to the silence of the city (Calcutta), he invokes this enigmatic figure with the unmistakable tone of a plea, an act of devotion which seems out of place:

> The time of the crossing is at hand, I know, and that is why I am here now, standing in front of you: to beg—to appeal to the mistress of silence, that most secret deities, to give me what she has so long denied: to show herself to me. (27)

This scene can be easily juxtaposed to the episode occurring in the final section of the novel when Murugan kneels at Urmila's feet. In Phulboni's case, the figure is just symbolically feminine, whereas she becomes a real woman with Murugan. In the case of the writer, then, his devotion is directed at an identity which metaphorically personifies Calcutta, which, by the way, happens

to be the curious nickname Murugan uses to address himself to Urmila.

Finally, Murugan disappears just like Farley. Moreover, while in the case of the American bacteriologist he was last seen at Sealdah Railway station, Murugan's traces are lost while he is going to the same railway station by taxi.

As far as female characters are concerned, the topic becomes more and more complex. At the beginning, the plot portrays Antar in a future landscape. He soon comes across two women; Maria, a Guyanese clerk in a Chelsea used-clothes store, and Tara, an Indian emigrant looking for a job. When first described, they provide a good study in contrast:

> Tara was small and bird-like, with a fine-boned beak of a nose. She was youngish—in her thirties, Antar reckoned—a good deal younger than Maria: he guessed at once that she was from India: the connection was obvious really, because Maria was a Guyanese of Indian origin and he knew she still had relatives there.
>
> The two women made an interesting contrast, although they seemed very easy with each other. Maria was tall, stately, and unfailingly well-dressed, although she barely made minimum wage, Tara on the other hand seemed so uncomfortable in Western clothes that it was clear she'd just arrived: the first time she came to Penn Station she was wearing a loose white shirt that hung halfway down to her knees and a pair of trousers that flapped limply above her ankles. (14-15)

Almost immediately after this description, the scene skips to the present time. The leading character here is Murugan who accidentally meets two women: Sonali Das, a renowned socialite, and Urmila Roy, a young reporter working for the *Calcutta* magazine. Compare their first description with the one just quoted:

> Taken by surprise, Murugan looked up and down the glass-fronted hall. It was still empty. Then he noticed two women running up the stairs. They came pelting into the hall and stood by the door, wip-

ing the rain from their hair and shaking it off their sarees. One of them was in her mid-twenties, a thin aquiline woman with a fine-boned face, dressed in a limp, rather bedraggled saree. The other was taller and older, in the beginnings of a youthful middle age, darkly handsome and quite elegant, in a black cotton saree. (21-22)

The analogy between the two scenes, although set in different time units, is too evident to be ignored. If it further enhances the theory of a likely mixture and contamination of the two male protagonists, it prefigures a similar condition for the female characters. More specifically, the analogies between Tara and Urmila are intensified as the plot unfolds. On 20th August 1995, Murugan perpetrates his researches on his own for quite a considerably long time. The first time he actually has a partner in his investigations occurs when Urmila steps in. Their alliance is symbolically sealed under a summer storm with a sexual relationship. Ghosh, at any rate, is subtle enough to describe the entire amorous scene by placing it within an 'as if' area, a sort of virtual reality, an unrestrainable lust which remains unresolved between desire and consummation. As soon as the next scene appears, the reader is projected into Antar's New York flat. He is thinking of a time when he witnessed the damages a pouring rain was causing to Tara's flat, left unguarded with open windows. He has now helped her in searching for a job; she is grateful to him and ready to offer her assistance, as he now feels feverish. They seem genuinely and reciprocally affectionately tied. The reader has a vague sensation that a tender feeling has been established between the two of them. A sort of alliance is therefore secured. There are, anyway, some odd elements that the novelist introduces at this juncture in the narrative. In a couple of circumstances Tara appears as a mysterious figure: the first time is when Antar catches Lucky prostrated at her feet (her explanations of the fact seem an excuse rather than a convincing clarification). The second time is during the telephone conversation: she first tells him that his previous message was mysterious and

then hints that in case he needs her she can be next to him in a moment. This fact somehow stuns Antar as she is now working and quite far away from him. The first accident, in particular, can be linked to similar events which portrays a woman revered by a man (I am referring to the already debated cases of the mistress of the silence and Urmila) but has a correspondence with a past episode of which Farley is the witness: "On the floor, by the divan, clustered around the woman [Mangala]'s feet, were some half dozen people in various attitudes of supplication, some touching her feet, others lying prostrated." (125)

The connection is overt and the critic M. Adhikari is keen in stressing it: "It cannot escape the notice of the readers that the majority of the female characters are christened after the Great Mother archetype. Mangala, Tara, Urmila, Maria are the ideological representatives of the Great Mother."[13]

This issue leads to a crucial point: if the reader can accept the similitude between Tara and Urmila, both of them being 'allied' to Antar and Murugan, he/she is not equally ready to welcome the news of Tara being part of an occult organisation. Her role would be utterly ambiguous. If the two final chapters once more represent the situation of the likely continuity of Urmila through Tara, that, nonetheless, does not solve all the puzzles for the critics. "One moment they are all rushing to the station in 1995, with Urmila saying that she would save them and take them across, the next moment we find Antar hearing voices, finding resemblance between Tara and Urmila and Maria and Sonali, talking to him, as if they were all with him in his room."[14]

Subash Chandra's doubts are made still more evident as she approaches the closing lines. Following, she discusses Tara and Maria's appearance in the end wearing saris: "Who are these women? Are they Sonali and Urmila? They were the ones who were with Murugan. Or are they Tara and Maria, as they appear to be. But they are living in New York, Tara living in the same

building as Antar. But then how come Tara and Maria are wear-
ing sarees."[15]

There are few doubts, however, that the mayhem around all
these characters is a deliberate choice of the novelist. A possible
explanation for the conundrum revolving around the strange
connections among female characters, as well as for many other
mysteries which the novel seems to leave unresolved, is origi-
nated and solved through the character of Murugan, who, as pre-
viously discussed, displays an impressive set of links with all the
other male characters of the novel. He has a similar variety of
time-links: he has a virtual life in the future but also some virtual
connections with the past. For instance, when talking about
Ronald Ross, he insists on saying:

> 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. (44)

In addition, Murugan, the agent of future and the fulcrum in this
novel, is the sole character who possesses the right connections
to both science and what he names "counter-science" (88) as
well as to the West and to India. That is the central enigma of the
plot: if on one hand scientists were painstakingly carrying on
their research work in order to cure malaria, they did find—that
is Murugan's amazing but disturbing discovery—a strong reac-
tion from an occult organisation working in order to side-track
the course of medical studies. The Bengali clerk postulates the
theory that the occult society carries on this program in order to
reach a further, grander result: immortality. The opposition be-
comes a challenge and a clash too, when some dead bodies are
left on the ground. Some characters, frightened, flee, thus avoid-
ing any risk. The "Other Mind" (31), as Murugan calls this clan-
destine order, works on a parallel stage; rather than looking for

solutions in the scientific domain, it directs its efforts towards a mystical field. Mangala, the sweeper-woman who is at the head of such an organisation, is "not in this because she wants to be a scientist. She's in this because she thinks she is a god" (208). Biologists versus gods, that is the essence of the conflict: if the former work by method and reason, the latter counter with faith and 'sixth sense.' What is most striking of Murugan, and what makes him a breed apart among the characters of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, is that his mind is perfectly able to switch from one domain to another, without losing the control of the situation. His intelligence allows him to grasp all the scientific principles and details which would be largely incomprehensible to a mind not trained in medical studies; on the other hand, whenever clues are out of his range, he fills in the blanks by using his intuition, a process, it must be stressed, that never fails him. The three following passages bear testimony of how often the term 'guess' is used in his idiom:

> 'The Calcutta chromosome,' said Murugan. 'That's my name for what she was working towards.'
> 'Now I'm really lost,' said Urmila. 'I've lived here all my life ad I've never heard of this thing you're talking about.'
> 'And who knows if you ever will?' said Murugan. 'Or whether I will. Or whether it exists or has ever existed. At this point in time it's still all *guess*work on my part.' (203, italics mine)
> I'm just *guessing* wildly here, okay? (204, italics mine)
> It's my *guess* that by about 1897 Mangala had run into a dead end, and she'd come to the conclusion that the existent strains of malaria wouldn't let her go any further. (208, italics mine)

Murugan therefore is also the bridge between science and counter-science. That is why the chain of interpersonal transfers from Mangala to Mrs. Aratounian, to Urmila way up to Tara undergoes a mutation halfway along its course. To start with, Mangala is quite a terrifying character. As M. Adhikari aptly underscores: "No Indian reader can overlook the idea that Mangala is

one of the names of Goddess Kali"[16] and the correspondence with the terrible Goddess is reinforced in the scene where she appears to Farley with a knife in one hand and a decapitated bleeding pigeon in the other one. Mrs. Aratounian still somehow adheres to that model; when Sonali spies her doing her experiments, she is still a rather dreadful figure. The change occurs with Urmila who, being on Murugan's side, is no longer a terrible figure. Urmila is still modelled on the archetypal Great Mother but, as the critic G.C. Pande underlines, that is a representation of woman "as the embodiment of spiritual power, of light and love or pure bliss,"[17] which finds his favourite example in Savitri. Tara, of course, is modelled along the same lines of Urmila's. The dichotomy present in the nature of the archetypal Great Mother cannot be better formulated than in Jung's own words. See how precisely Ghosh's female characters adhere to Jung's classification:

> The qualities associated with it [the Great Mother] are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. On the negative side, the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate.[18]

Like the Kali myth they incarnate, Mangala and Mrs. Aratounian are not seen in connection with any man; incidentally, their being modelled on the terrible Kali goddess creates further associations with the city of Calcutta, whose name reveals a devotional attitude towards the Hindu goddess. On a parallel route, Urmila and Tara, even though still unmarried, can be considered very close to Murugan and Antar and their role as protectors is a further confirmation of their mythical heritage. Finally, as far as the

open ending of the novel with the intersection between Tara and Urmila is concerned, their individual symbolic representation may be evaluated in relation to the locus of their action. Urmila plays on a Calcutta stage; therefore her role as protector of her man can be quite naturally ascribed to an influence of a Savitri-kind myth. On the other hand, Tara, whose action takes place in New York and who is portrayed as a sort of a virtual female character offering warmth and shelter to Antar, is similar to the Christian typology of angels. She does not quite differ from the celestial images we have seen in the movies of Wim Wenders. In sum, Murugan would appear as a go-between both from a Kali to a Savitri-based model, in that he bridges science with counter-science, and from a Savitri to an angelic model, in that he is able to link East with West.

In conclusion, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, a brilliant cocktail of genres, perspectives and characters, deals with a painstaking search for identity. In his mental journey to 1995 and to the past, the Egyptian Antar does not only unravel a mystery about a sci-entific/mystical case, but also investigates his own roots. His search for a mystery in the past and the unsuspected discovery of a key to his own self mirrors the situation that Byatt represents in *Possession*, where Maud Bailey is equally astonished to learn that she has connections with Christabel LaMotte: possibly, it is the discovery about her linkage to the passionate Victorian poet-ess that enables her to change from a somewhat frigid, and cere-bral scholar, to an uninhibited and loving woman. The fascinat-ing feature of both these novels lies in their protagonists' total lack of deliberation regarding the search of identity.

N O T E S

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