Narrative of a Neurosis: Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosome as an Anti-narrative

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Abstract:

Recently, the relationship between autobiography, narrative, and identity has become the subject of a new theoretical and empirical interest. Drawing on research in several disciplines, a literature has emerged that has highlighted the specific cultural nature of these constructions of life by studying the narrative and discursive fabric of the stories. These new ideas are linked to the emergence of a new semiotic, discursive, and cultural paradigm in the human sciences, that too has cast a new light on our view of the function, content, form, and agent of the autobiographical process. What happens in this process, as Bruner (1993) has argued, is life-construction through text-construction. To understand a life, we must turn to its text; more specifically, we must explore how this kind of text is "written," so to speak.

Keywords: Narratology, coherence, unreliability, master-narrative, neurosis.

This paper explores the possibility that narrative modality in The Calcutta Chromosome points towards the presence of a neurosis at the core of the text. The term neurosis has been used here from a narratological rather than a psychoanalytic point of view: the idea that mental health is a coherent life story and neurosis is faulty narrative. The narrative technique adopted in The Calcutta Chromosome exhibits palpable signs of a 'dis- ease'. Antar, the homodiegetic narrator not only suffers from malaria and seems delusional; he is also unreliable and unable to complete his tale. Moreover, the pattern of story woven is similar to illness autobiographies as laid out in painstaking detail by Shlomith Rimmon Kenan. Using Shlomith Rimmon Kenan as a narratological springboard this paper traces the ways in which Antar's narrative tries to grapple with the idea of illness and the means of recuperation thereof. As Ghosh himself pointed out in a conversation at Ramakrishna Mission, Narendrapur, in 2008, form arises out of 'conditions of persuasion'. If this is true, the form adopted in The Calcutta Chromosome does persuade the reader that the lack of coherence at the core of the text has its origin in a neurosis in as much as what is really needed to be narrated never gets narrated. So far as a narrative employs logical progression of events an anti-narrative is one that systematically calls narrative logic and narrative conventions to question and I call The Calcutta Chromosome an anti-narrative in this sense. The first half of the paper will deal with the presentation of the dominant issues of identity in the text. The second half of the paper will be devoted to the hypothesis that the narrative oscillates between two contradictory impulses- to narrate and to not narrate- and that the text is an anti-narrative.

"Narratology has made it clear that, while narrative can have any number of functions (entertaining, informing, persuading, diverting attention, etc.), there are some functions that it excels at or is unique in fulfilling. Narrative always reports one or more changes of state but, as etymology suggests (the term narrative is related to the Latin gnarus-knowing', 'expert', 'acquainted with'- which itself derives from the Indo-European root gna, to know), narrative is also a particular mode of knowledge. It does not merely reflect what happens; it can discover and invent what can happen." (Gerald Prince, 'On Narratology Past, Present, Future').

So far as narrative can know what has happened, The Calcutta Chromosome attempts to uncover Ronald Ross's malaria research by putting together bits and pieces of information from diaries and journal entries. In as much as it can discover and invent what can happen, it traces the outcomes of Antar's journey in terms of what can happen to him in the process. Antar is in fact undergoing a condition of all classic detective fiction, that the investigator repeat, go over again, the ground that has been covered by his predecessor, the criminal, albeit hyper-realistically. He investigates the mysterious disappearance of Murugan, only to have his own destiny revealed to him. Tzvetan Todorov has noted that the work of investigation in the detective story, which is in presentia for the reader, acts to disclose, divulge the story of the crime, which is in absentia but also the more important narrative because it bears the meaning. (Todorov. Typologie du Roman Policier). Todorov categorizes the two orders of the story, the crime and its investigation, as fabula and sjuzet. He also classifies the detective story as the narrative of all narratives since it involves the laying bare of structure of narrative and dramatizes the nature of relationship between the fabula and sjuzet. According to Todorov therefore plot is the active process of the sjuzet working on fabula, the dynamic of its interpretive sequence.

Identity issues plague the text from beginning. Researching about Murugan's ID, Antar comes across the information that the subject has been missing since August 21st 1995, and that he had been last seen in Calcutta, India. A LifeWatch newsletter confirmed the same, without being too explicit about the disappearance. The disappearance was even considered a euphemism for suicide. Chapter 36 discloses Murugan's whereabouts to be a shelter for 'people

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in alternative states' in Fort William, Calcutta. Identities are always in flux; a sudden reversal of it at the end shows Sonali and Urmila to be Maria and Tara. As a matter of fact, the entire text is structured so as to acquire meaning by virtue only of the Final Act of Antar's delirious self-revelation. The primary fabula involving Ronald Ross and the secondary fabula involving Murugan are hermeneutically sealed in a pact of justification through Antar's tryst with destiny in the world of simulation and its culmination in "going across". Antar's spiritual quest, trying to arrive at an awareness of oneself though others, is shown to be a highly problemmatized one. Self-knowledge is systematically denied to most of the characters in the tale like Murugan, Urmila and Sonali. The narrative comes full circle with Antar's abysmal lack of self-knowledge. He feels feverish and it cannot be ascertained whether the voices in his head are real or an outcome of delirium. The tale is polarized with reference to twin concepts of knowing and telling. Those who tell do not know; those who know do not tell. The circularity of any quest for signification is emphasised time and again. The beginning and end are thus thematically joined in the conspiracy of Silence.

Early on in the tale snippets from Antar's life indicate his sense of self-imposed isolation. In fiction writing, after being handed over the leashes of the story from the extradiegetic narrator, intradiegetic narrators like Antar usually become focalizers. It does not happen here. The initial chapters go by without any intimation of his intricate thought processes. External analepses that fill up his life for us are presented without emotion and traumatic incidents, such as the death of a pregnant wife, are matter-of-factly reported:

"In the end it didn't matter: an amniotic embolism killed her and the baby in the thirty-fifth week of her pregnancy." (Ghosh, 1996)

And then, his growing lonesomeness:

"They were all gone now, all those noisy, festive families that had so attracted Tayseer. They had been siphoned slowly into small towns and suburbs by the demands of their expanding businesses and their ever-growing families. Antar had sometimes thought of moving too, but never with much conviction...every year the building grew emptier of people, while the storage spaces expanded." (Ghosh, 1996)

Tara comes into this empty space of Antar's house apparently by chance rather than by design. A hint remains, however, that her entry as a signifier into empty space may be more than just chance occurrence:

"On the way out, walking towards the Broadway exit, Maria took him aside to say that Tara was looking for an apartment.

...He shrugged. 'I'm sorry', he said. 'There's nothing I can do.' Maria raised her eyebrows. 'But I've heard there's lot of empty space in your building,' she said. 'Isn't there a vacant apartment on your floor?'

Antar was taken aback. 'How do you know where I live?' One of the unwritten rules of the doughnut shop was that they never enquired too closely into the details of each other's lives.

Maria made a bemused gesture. 'Oh I just heard from someone...,' she said. Her voice trailed away."

First reading of the book will label the incident at the best as a snare or a partial answer. Not until the final chapter has been reached, and by that time the incident has been forgotten, that the significance of the conversation, if recalled, takes shape. In so far as all characters in the book are under observation and being stalked by Silence, this partial disclosure attains meaning vis-a-vis the finale. That Maria and Tara are the high priestesses of the secret cult is the ultimate revelation of diegetic truth at the end. But only a second reading will yield the desired connectiff the rails. Both Laakhan and Budhhu Dubey seem to have been phantoms of Phulboni's hallucinatory self and he wakes up from one experience only to find himself placed in another from which he wakes up once more. Phulboni's déjà vu throws up questions of narrative reliability. Formulated first by Wayne C. Booth in his 'Rhetoric of Fiction' the concept was elaborated by theorists such as Gerard Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan: 'A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary in it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader is supposed to suspect.' Phulboni's déjà vu remains unexplainable. An instance of double hallucination as it may seem, it is definitely an instance of unreliability. Authenticity of thumbless Laakhan's presence is suspect in as much as he is always foregrounded by his absence. Only a sign remains-decipher it how you will-an imprint of thumbless palms. He is never narrated in the sjuzet, but remains forever in the fabula as a signifier whose signified is permanently deferred from fabula to sjuzet thereby rendering him not as a person per se but as a fleeting glimpse always around the next corner so far as the reader's vision travels. Phulboni's waking up after waking up leaves the reader similarly baffled as the narrative hovers around conditions of indeterminacy and frustrates expectations of any solid realistic anchoring. All in all these narrative gaps emphasise the text's dominant trope of impossibility of cognitive truth.

Now we come to the final question of narrative structuration. Taking into account fabula, sjuzet, fallible narrator et al, what does this entire conglomerate of Valentinian Cosmology, malaria research, syphilitic dementia and interpersonal transference lead us towards? Confusing as all these concepts together may be, the narrative in The Calcutta Chromosome does vaguely seem to grapple with the idea of illness and the means to overcome it. Using this idea as a

springboard let us look at what Shlomith Rimmon Kenan, investigating illness narratives has to say in The Story of 'I': Illness and Narrative Identity:

What happens when the present is so different from the past that subjects experience themselves as "others"? And how does uncertainty about the future, or its blocking, affect the "identity" of ill subjects? ... An affinity between "narrative" and "identity" has been suggested in many disciplines. I wish to benefit from this insight and replace the term "identity" by "narrative identity."

Further.

"One of the main features, common to "narrative" and "identity" according to many theoreticians, is "coherence." To give one example from many (though not all are normative in this way), here is Peter Brooks, a psychoanalytically oriented literary theorist: "Mens sana in fabula sana: mental health is a coherent life story, neurosis is faulty narrative". (Brooks, Peter. Psychoanalysis and Storytelling. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.)

Want of coherence and continuity is the hallmark of plot-construction in The Calcutta Chromosome. Tripping off Antar's investigation into Murugan's life, and Murugan's into Ronald Ross's, the narrative detours into Urmila's and Sonali's experiences, as well as those into Farley's, Grigson's, Phulboni's and Romen Haldar's weave a zigzag route the reader is hard pressed to follow. Making sense of circuituous causality and chain of events that hang loosely to each other, the text rapidly intertwines events, people, past, present and future. Disruptions of stability abound as the intradiegetic narrator zips into his past and then zaps into the present only to come to a screeching halt in the last episode of "going across". If mental health is a coherent life story, then this faulty narrative is neurotic. But Antar is reconstructing his identity though this story in more senses than one. Not only is he trying to make sense of the present but actively restructuring his past incidents and looking forward to a future that comes to a close even before it is about to begin when he recognises Tara and Maria. Antar is reconstructing Murugan's "bulky" file in the same way that the reader, only after having come to the end chapter of the novel and learning about the crossover, will be able to reconstruct Antar's tale not only from the information he has furnished in the circuituous arrangement of his plot but from what he has glided over and never for a moment glossed.

In the subsection 'Narrative Restructuring' of her above mentioned journal article Shlomith Rimmon Kenan notes that reconstruction is undertaken by the ill subject in two categories, that of narrating the past in the light of the present and that of narrating the present in the light of the past:

"Motivated by a conscious or unconscious desire to (re)establish continuity between present and past, these narrators tend to emphasize elements of their past history that they did not stress before the illness, to create new connections among events, to change the balance between foreground and background, etc."

In mapping out Ronald Ross' malaria research as a topic of expertise in the life of a subject of his own investigation, Murugan, Antar is certainly narrating the past in the light of the present. We are not told what happened; that any lay reader can surf the net and find out. We are given what is nowadays called 'the inside story', an active romancing of the past from the vantage point of present requirements. Sometimes, as in the case of the black feminist poet Audre Lorde, the present is also seen as an intensification of the past in narrating an illness. In believing himself as the 'chosen one' of the counterscientists, he is rearranging the story of his neurosis around the vantage point or the privilege of being different, and trying to see his illness as a fortuituous rather than tragic circumstance. If the disease is a debilitating one, an illness that requires the subject to make sense of his present in the light of the freer past, sometimes that is also undertaken. Robert Murphy, a professor of Anthropology suffered from a tumour in his spinal cord that developed over a period of fourteen years that rendered him motionless and speechless, was left with a 'gap' in identity, a sense of loss not only 'of' limbs, but alienated to a degree that produced a sense of loss of feeling 'for' them. He completely forgot about his past and memories of his limbs were erased from his mind. In recuperating, Murphy had to assert his past in order to see his present in the light of his past. He forced himself to keep looking at his present, not as a discontinuous part of his existence, but as an essentially continuous part of the academic self which had embarked on a spiritual journey.

Antar, we remember, continues to work from home close to retirement. Pulling himself up from the silence of the abyss into which he has climbed down, he is trying to see his present in the light of his past by recreating a jocular, irreverent relationship with Ava. If his sense of isolation and loss of selfhood due to his 'at home' designation offered by LifeWatch worry him we have no way of knowing. He is clearly not a man given to sentiments. His matter-of-fact reportage of the sudden death of his pregnant wife Tayseer many years ago prove that. It is possible that he is a neurotic not given to social life and hence the need to recuperate with the help of the digital world that provides scope for self-narration. In this respect, like Robert Murphy's narrative, The Calcutta Chromosome may also be labelled 'auto ethnography', its writer, Amitav Ghosh being a trained anthropologist, and Antar being his alter ego:

In long-term illnesses, the needs of the present are subject to alteration, causing a dynamic modification of stories

constitutive of the relations between past, future, and present.'

Antar's dynamic remodelling of his past, present and future, however, are undertaken with the help of a faulty narrative reminiscent of neurosis. Silence, abyss, colonial malaria research, séances and paranormal railway trips are peripheral narratives that revolve around the core narrative of interpersonal transference which is another name for the grand narrative of immortality. Shlomith Rimmon Kenan writes:

'Narrative continuity (and continuity of narrative identity) is created and/or maintained both by internal principles (e.g., a linear structure of the type: symptoms, diagnosis, remission, return to work, recurrence, etc.) and by a conscious or unconscious modelling of the specific narrative upon master narratives embedded in the culture. The role of master narratives in the formation of individual stories has been emphasized by Hayden White for historiography, Roy Schafer for psychoanalysis, Jerome Bruner for life stories and Paul Ricoeur for any narrative. Illness narratives are no exception'.

Master narratives play a vital recuperative role for the ill subject. They not only provide space for transformation, so crucial to providing a vision of the future to most ill subjects whose futures have undergone radical disruptions, but also enable the narrator to anchor his/her narratives of past to a point of stability. Hope remains an essential recuperative tool in illness narratives. To have hope, in whatever form it may be made available to the ill subject, is to be able to carry a narrative forward, to be able to provide a semblance of narrative closure. As emphasised in Chapter 1, closure is one important device used as part of the imposition of structural principles on the chaos of experience as delineated by Hayden White. The grand narrative of 'interpersonal transference' may therefore be seen as a type of any one of the several mythological master narratives that form the seed of the illness fabula. One prototype of such a master narrative is the 'phoenix' myth.

'Interpersonal Transference' provides just such a figment of hope to the narrator of The Calcutta Chromosome. Whatever illness Antar is suffering from, the experience is so traumatic for him that he has no name for it. The only narrative indications for it are the two Valentinian deities Abyss and Silence who significantly resist narration and cannot be mentioned or named or even hinted at in the course of narration. As the sjuzet repeatedly reminds us through the experience of C.C. Dunn (seemingly an inversion of the name of Sergeant major D.D. Cunningham), these are extremely vindictive deities who 'come to claim' any person who dares to narrate them. The only way out is to circumlocute. This poses a problem of narration that a verbal medium like a written text cannot handle. However, the text negotiates with the simultaneous presence and the unmentionableness of these entities by providing hints to chosen characters like Urmila and Sonali. If we remember Urmila's mysterious fish seller, we may also remember how the plot arranges for the piece of paper containing passenger information of trains containing C.C.Dunn's name to be delivered to Urmila who is supposed to somehow put the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together.

Whatever be the central malady of the tale, it resists full or even partial disclosures. The reader is left with the burden of reconstructing what is not narrated, and therefore most important, from what is narrated and therefore peripheral. The grand narrative of immortality, no doubt a typological variant of the 'phoenix' myth, provides an escape route for the traumatised narrator for whom narration of 'real' experience becomes impossible because what is 'really' experienced is hyper real and beyond words. At the most, the reader is left with subtle hints of a split self whose one part is completely beyond recovery and beyond narration. Faced with the scientific truth of this truly debilitating condition, which may never be overcome, the narrator seeks psychic comfort in master narratives of counter science. Ronald Ross's path-breaking Nobel winning research is reduced to a manipulated, hence unreal narrative, whose true story remains for the narrator of counter science to be disclosed. But in describing the unreality of Ross's journey, the journey of counter science must be charted and this is where the text hits a narrative conundrum. Not only is there an aporia at the centre of The Calcutta Chromosome, but in emphasising the impossibility of narrative truth, the text, which is dependent on words as signifiers of reality, turns back on itself, negating the veracity of its own claims to truth and knowledge.

In so far as the root of the word 'narrative' goes back to 'gna' i.e. to 'know', to 'not know' is equated in the story with 'being unable to narrate'. This is the equivalent of what in psychopathology is called 'neurosis' or 'being unable to narrate'. What Antar is unable to narrate may be a lost self or an experience which remains a mystery.

This, above all else, renders The Calcutta Chromosome an 'Anti-narrative'.

Endnotes:

¹ In "The Story of I: Illness and Narrative Identity" Shlomith Rimmon Kenan traces the identity reframing undertaken by ill people to make sense of their changed bodies.

² Prince ,Gerald. A Dictionary of Narratology. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and London, 2003.Print.

³ Fabula is the set of narrated events and situations in their chronological sequence. Sjuzet, in Russian formalist terminology is the set of narrated events and situations in the order of their presentation to the reader. (Prince, Gerald. A Dictionary of Narratology. 2003).

⁴ A narrator external to diegesis. The concept must be clearly distinguished from a heterodiegetic narrator who is not part of the

framing narrative. (Prince, 2003)

⁵ Pertaining to or part of the diegetic narrative. (Prince,2003)

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