

**Uppinder Mehan, “Postcolonial Science, Cyberpunk and *The Calcutta Chromosome*.” *Intertexts* 16.2 (2012): 1-14.**

Literature and science studies have, to date, largely focused on science in the Western world and, to an extent, the literary production of ‘the West’; the global history of science, and science as it figures in postcolonial and world literature, have remained relatively unexplored. Uppinder Mehan’s article offers scholars an introduction to these topics as it surveys the complex history of science in colonial contexts and, using Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* (2000) as case studies, examines how the seeming opposition between Western science and Eastern mysticism is addressed in postcolonial fiction. Mehan’s contention is that these novels “trouble all manner of genre distinctions and by doing so draw attention to the constellation of science, colonialism and cultural production” (1).

The article begins by situating these novels in the context of debates amongst postcolonial critics about the relative merits of the promotion of Western science education in the colonies. The colonialist view that the colonies were “devoid of any meaningful science” and “the possessors of only ancient technologies” influenced even anti-colonial reformers, who encouraged Western science education (2). While some critics, such as Sandra Harding, suggest that a way to move beyond the equation of Western science with reason and Eastern science with superstition is a more inclusive definition of science as “any systematic attempt to produce knowledge about the real world,” others, such as Nandra Meera, are concerned that the removal of the scientific method from the definition of science would legitimise retrograde and fundamentalist practices while diminishing the “hard-fought gains [. . .] of the Enlightenment” (2).

Interweaved with this discussion is an analysis of *The Calcutta Chromosome* which, Mehan argues, explores the “clash between western and eastern understandings of science and technology” (2) through its portrayal of British scientist Ronald Ross, who is conducting malarial research in turn-of-the-century India and whose scientific method is manipulated by his assistant, Mangala, who is engaged in an alternative experiment to transmigrate souls. While Ghosh critiques “western” notions of “objective science” and reason through portraying the blindness of Ross to Mangala’s genius, he also, Mehan contends, “forces the reader to question this counter-scientist group’s oppositional ground by showing their methodology to be fairly similar to the conventional notion of doing science” (7). Although Mangala is portrayed as a scientist “outside rational modernity” (7) who is worshipped as a divine figure by her followers, her discoveries rely on the manipulation of Ross’s experiments. Mehan traces the ways in which Ghosh links this group’s belief in alternate realities to potential artificial intelligences in virtual worlds, as the novel shifts between colonial India and the future in which a New York based computer programmer begins to investigate the disappearance of the man who was searching for the “other mind” (i.e. Mangala) behind the discovery of malaria.

Mehan’s central argument is that by depicting a world in which “the East is the source of powerful technological [. . .] realities” and where “transmigration” is “not only a philosophy of the transference of the self” but also of the global movement of people, Ghosh offers us “a glimpse of a Third World cyberpunk novel” (10). Comparing *The Calcutta Chromosome* with the cyberpunk fiction of William

Gibson, Mehan suggests that Ghosh emphasises the mystical elements of artificial intelligence, and thus the “romantic,” “fantasy aspect” of cyberpunk (11). The article concludes with a brief analysis of Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, which Mehan argues shares with cyberpunk a concern about the relationship between the human and the machine, and with Ghosh a concern about the relationship between the postcolonial and science.

Mehan’s ambitious article is packed with a variety of historical and geographical examples of European science in colonial contexts; India, China, Japan, Africa and the Philippines are all discussed as Mehan surveys colonial science from the seventeenth century through to the Second World War. Such breadth is paralleled by an equally wide discussion of literature and theory; science fiction, fantasy, cyberpunk authors, postcolonial theory, Heidegger, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, Caribbean and Indian writing all make an appearance, with the effect that the thrust of the argument becomes somewhat lost amongst digressions which, given their number, inevitably lack depth. As such, while the article makes interesting connections between cyberpunk and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, its main offering to the scholar of literature and science is as an introductory survey of the global history of science and an overview of the science fiction and fantasy genres which some postcolonial writers have employed to explore this history. These are important, yet little explored lines of enquiry in literature and science studies and Mehan’s article demonstrates this to be a fertile area which requires greater investigation.

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