

DECOLONIAL FORCES IN KALPAVIGYAN

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Abstract

Bengali science fiction, unlike its technology-centred Euro-American counterpart, engages the posthuman as a decolonizing force and as a tool to critique the socio-political pitfalls of the society. 'Kalpavigyan' (Bengali Science Fantasy Fiction), while creating an air of imaginative science, dystopian settings, and utopian subjectivities, "writes back" to the totalizing narrative created by the empire. This creates a distinct genealogy of posthuman thought. Such stories are inspired by the traditional scientific discourse, such as Jagadish Bose's plant consciousness, Satyendranath's idea of 'boson' elementary particles, or even America's landing on the moon in the 1970s and anxiety about visiting aliens. Consequently, it uses the language of science to, as Ray puts it, "imagine" alternate realities. It foregrounds not only the scientific but also the postcolonial subjectivity. This paper explores the articulation of the posthuman in Kalpavigyan by studying such narratives.

The term 'Kalpavigyan', initially coined by Adrish Bardhan, created a body of work and was a tradition followed by several authors. Foremost among such examples would be the short stories titled 'Green Man', a competitive exercise by Bardhan, Satyajit Ray, Premendra Mitra, and Dilip Roy Chowdhury. The stories blur the line between plant consciousness and establish a biological and philosophical posthumanist thought. In contrast, stories like 'Sultana's Dream' employ the posthuman to subvert the patriarchal structure to re-envision humanity through a utopian feminist lens. Later stories by Ray indulge in advanced concepts of AI subjectivity and their otherization. However, this tradition is further complicated by the partition and the dehumanising tendencies of portraying the refugee as the "infrahuman" subject. The paper aims to establish that Kalpavigyan uses the posthuman not to achieve technological transcendence but as an aim to re-evaluate humanity in a cultural and culturally specific context.

Keywords: Kalpavigyan, Bengali science fantasy fiction, Green Man, Sultana's Dream, posthuman, decolonial

Introduction

Dr. Amit Chakraborty and Sanskaran Ray in their interview with Satyajit Ray (1982), opine that literature without scientific backing would be quite unjustifiable, ("...সাহি ত্য বি জ্ঞান ভি ত্তি ক না হলে, সে টা সার্থক হয় না...")¹. They ask Ray to elaborate on his views regarding this subject of realism. Here, Ray brings up the concept of 'Kalpavigyan', which in English may be translated to 'imaginative fiction', Bengal's version of Science Fiction or Science Fantasy Fiction. He says that such stories may fall under a separate genre altogether, ("... আলাদা জাতে র মধ্যে পরে যাচ্ছ...")².

Kalpavigyan, through the writings of Jagadish Chandra Bose, Ray, Premendra Mitra, Adrish Bardhan, Hemendra Kumar Ray, and others, presented both postcolonial and posthuman subjectivities. They emerged at the intersection of Western and scientific debates and the unique historical experience of people of the subcontinent. The posthuman, often seen as the critique of the centralized human, the "anthropocentric figure," incites a movement beyond bodies, a surprise and a passage that exceeds the molar structure of beings, challenging the simplistic and binary understanding between the human and the

non-human (Banerji et al., 2025). For the writers of Bengali Science Fiction, contending the centrality of the Eurocentric male became an imperative. The concept of the 'universal human' or 'Man' was, in reality, this Eurocentric model that actively defined colonial subjects as something 'something less than human'. This historical dehumanization means that for formerly colonized people, the initial political struggle was too often simply to assert their full humanity. The figure that emerges through such a fiction is thus a being that navigates the dialectical tension: who one may say embraces the posthuman call to go 'beyond the human', in so doing distances itself from the 'human', the exclusionary project wrapped in biased thought patterns and affective reinstatement.

Such figures may be manifested as aliens, robots, extra-terrestrial creatures, or genetically altered humans. These figures are a product of cultural, political, and philosophical close encounters. The space afforded to such 'Others' thus becomes a reflection of the author's acute awareness of ideological personality, journeys of such actants become the presentation of a space in the realm of the fiction, showcasing India's contact with the European sources. The 'other' in its myriad forms works to foreground the alienations generated within the Indian society, while Prof. Suparno Bnerjee, further concludes that the 'óther' works as a 'device to foreground the alienation and alterity' and other times it 'denoted alterity' through either beneficent mechanics or forces of menace, also mentioning that it may appear as a 'Lacanian mirror' that established ¹ Drawn from the archives of Akashvani Kolkata, one of Ray's rare interviews taken in Bengali.²ibid. the identity of the protagonist, often muddling the boundaries between the self and the other. (Banerjee, 2020, pp.161-189)

The hybrid creature born out of this 'third space' becomes a site of profound challenge to pure identity. The alien, robot, or cyborg often functions as the alienated subject representing marginal groups or those struggling with the traditional social hierarchies (based on class, caste, and gender). They are figures who experience a constant 'non-being', a split self, much like Haraway's cyborg, too removed from a traditional 'Eden', pre-oedipal, and thus immune to global norms.

The concept of such a creature reflected through fiction thus challenges the sole authority of Western techno-science, creating an equal area for Indian discoveries, Vedic sciences, and local subaltern knowledge systems. This rejection of the singular 'rational' truth becomes the hallmark of the posthuman figures found in Kalpavigyan. This strain of science fiction not only participates in the critique, but a decolonial anthropocentric view creates a differential space to comment upon the ongoing state of affairs.

Methodology

The study focuses on the identity of the posthuman subjectivity in the postcolonial world, drawing on the genre of Kalpavigyan as a genre of 'cognitive estrangement' to examine how the non-human entity performs an act of decolonial self-assertion. Focusing on the figures of the Cyborg, alien, and hybrid creatures in the stories like Rokeya Begum's 'Sultana's Dream', 'The Green Man' anthology, Ray's 'Bonku Babu's Friend', the character of Professor Shonku, 'The Inhuman' by Hemendra Kumar Ray, Premendra Mitra's *Ghanada*, and Bardhan's *Professor Nutboltu*.

Through the intertextual analysis of these stories, it traces the narrative thread back to the raw materials of Indian history to identify how the entity, process, or creature may symbolically harken back to the real historical phenomena and, if it is the result of a scientific or philosophical phenomenon in the real world. This may further ascertain if the struggle seen in such narratives reveals any ongoing political or ethical struggles. The perpetual mutations of the characters arguably thus become not a fantastical deviation but a literalized expression of multiplicity, a direct opposite to the myth of the 'pure' and the 'sovereign' Western subject. It contextualizes the posthuman within the history of colonization, where the assertion of human status was often

a political struggle. We further question if the genre was a "write back" against the epistemic violence that disrupted the non-Western knowledge as inadequate or primitive, forcing the non-human as a reflection of their own fractured hybrid or oppressed identity. Thus, the posthuman entities in Kalpavigyan are read not as a copy of their Western counterpart but as a unique, interstitial figure whose fictional presence is a necessary decolonial function. The study will argue that such stories decentralize Western norms and reassert the narrative agency of the formerly colonized world. However, it is to be expected that the scope is directed towards Kalpavigyan studies and narratives in Bangla only. The science fiction genre has been adopted and experimented with in many other vernacular languages in India, foremost among them being Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, and Oriya.

Literature Review

The emergence of Bengali science fiction is inextricably linked to the Western colonial rule in India. This European domination in India created a fertile sector to challenge both imperial domination and to foreground specific Indian philosophies. Rather than merely emulating the Western science fiction model, Kalpavigyan in Bengal serves as a powerful instrument of decolonial thought. Rooted in the critique of Western techno-science, and vividly expresses the figure of the posthuman. Almost every aspect of Indian SF is dependent on the relationship between India and Western culture, making the genre 'a cultural hybrid par excellence' (Banerjee, 2020, 24). This literature, thus, grapples with the historical imposition of a straight line of modernity, opting instead to articulate an ethically sound, hybrid modernity often represented by technically advanced yet culturally grounded protagonists. Both posthumanism and Kalpavigyan arise as a form of resistance against Eurocentric rationality that privileged the human or specifically male thing 'cogito' over the rest of the world, practical representations of the posthuman is vividly seen in Kalpavigyan, through Haraway's 'cyborgization', Braidotti's idea of an embedded 'embodiment' or Bennett's idea of 'thing-power', they are represented in the narratives.

In its initial days, the colonial education primarily aimed at creating a class of Bengali 'bhadralok', who would serve as administrative subjects. This inadvertently provided the intellectual tools for resistance by creating an understanding of Western science and providing the tools for the creation of 'future-history', serving as veiled political manifestos. Both Kylas

Chunder Dutt's *A Journal of Forty Eight Hours of the Year 1945* (1835) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain *Sultana's Dream* (1905) are anti-establishment, serving as prophetic and utopian acts of political self-assertion. Where Dutt situates his narrative is an act of rebellion against the colonial rule in power; Hossain reverses the normative roles of gender in contemporary society, creating space for men to live under 'parda' called 'mardana', through the deployment of advanced science.

Perhaps the most fruitful and enriching time for the publication was after independence from 1945 to around the 90s of the same era. Seminal among the activities that happened at this time were the publication of magazines like *Sandesh* and *Desh* by Ray, and the sci-fi magazines *Aschorjo* and *Fantastic* by Adrish Bardhan. Many of the stories of Kalpavigyan we read and admire today in Bengal were first published in the pages of these magazines. This generically inverted the literary gaze; instead of white explorers, the narrative installs indigenous heroes like Ray's Shonku, Premndra Mitra's Ghanada, or Bardhan's Professor Nutboltu. Such characters appeared as paragons of scientific acumen and intellectual prowess, routinely surpassing their Western rivals, attuning young minds to the idea that Western techno-intelligence was not the sole prerogative of global advancement. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay frames this genre as fundamentally rooted in resistance to "imperial technoscientific modernity" (Taylor et al., 2023), which positioned foreign knowledge systems as superior and shifted the possibilities of alternate history.

The decolonial angle in Kalpavigyan articulated through an epistemic critique that Western Science, rooted in an often devastating system of 'epistemic violence,' is against the local knowledge systems. Kalpavigyan, broadly defined as "stories of imagined science", is a term deliberately chosen to encompass a 'fluid and culturally specific understanding of 'science' that transcends the rigid, purely empirical boundaries imposed by the West (Chattopadhyay, 2017). This intellectual resistance manifests most in the development of a 'mythogerm', a tendency to appropriate India's precolonial and mythic heritage, to redefine it through the vocabulary of science. This transformation imbues ancient concepts such as the tenets of Advaita Vedanta or the medical expertise of Ayurveda, which informs us about the continuous flow of scientific studies before European contact. Ray's Shonku creates a drug called 'Miracurall' by fusing the rational laboratory scientific methods with a plant extract given to him by a Sadhu in the Himalayas.

The philosophical shift that takes place due to acknowledging the pluralities present in India converges with the posthuman. The hybrid subject produced within the folds of these stories challenges the idea of a uniform Indian identity. The posthuman entity in such cases becomes a reflection of the area that it embodies, creating an environment of the creature or element embedded into the system that produces it. This system of materiality is evident in aliens, cyborgs, robots, and natural creatures that are present in the elements of the story. Shonku can never mass-produce Miracurall; he tries, but he fails. Ray here posits a situation much like his father, Sukumar Ray, in *The Diary of Hesoram Hushiyar*, whose samples of imaginative wild creatures like 'Langratherium' are lost in a storm in the wild jungles.

Such knowledge systems or creatures essentially exist only in the environment that enlivens them and refuse to be uprooted for a mere sense of affirmation by a larger community. The aliens seen in the stories are dual-sided as well. It may be a benevolent alien force, creating a space for the establishment of a sovereign India, or a malevolent force reflecting the greed and aspirations of the colonizer. This narrative struggle, common across the genre, ultimately situates the use of the posthuman to perform a profound act of self-critique, forcing the Indian readership to confront their now imagined prejudices and adapt to a situation defined by complex cultural and scientific negotiations of a rapidly globalizing, postcolonial world.

Analysis

The Feminist Utopias

Critical Posthumanism seeks to move beyond the traditionalist mode of thinking that the human is an autonomous body, self-willed, and individual agent. Instead, it looks at the human as an assemblage moving forward through a mingled relationality with their environment. (Nayar, 2014, 13). This re-conceptualization of the human is also present in Begum Rokeya's 'Sultana's Dream'. The utopian 'Ladyland' in the story subverts the traditional centrality of the human male as the lord and master of the social order, confining the men (often equated to the universal 'Man' in humanist thought) to the 'mardana', suggesting that they are 'fit for nothing'. Its insistence on harmony with the natural environment connects to themes of Eco-feminism and the posthumanist call for a balanced relationship with the nonhuman, recognizing nature as an "agent of power", rather than an object to be dominated. In her book *Vibrant Matters* Bennett talks about, the materiality of matter and its consequential influence on the world, calling it 'thing-power', Sultana's Dreamland too reflects that vibrant nature of matter, showcasing the change in the conception of a gender and living conditions through its reversals. Concurrently, the land runs on an alternative feminist science that prioritizes peace, knowledge, and social benefit over the male association of militarism and exploitation. The women, competing with each other, invent solar ovens, control the weather, ultimately creating technology that enhances collective life rather than individual power. The story satirizes species and gendered hierarchy by posing the question, "A lion is stronger than the man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race". Interestingly, the women of the land do not force the men to retreat into the mardana; their exit is caused by situations that can only be caused by militant behavior. Hossain's story not only creates an environment for a feminist utopia, it showcases the range of Kalpavigyan that can encompass the discourse. Furthermore, the earliest writers of the genre solidified its space as a genre of hybridity and transgression.

Green Dystopias

One of the most prominent figures in Kalpavigyan was Adrish Bardha, primarily through his role as the editor and publisher of two of the most splendid Science fiction magazines. *Aschorjo*, launched in 1963, is widely recognized as the first Indian SF magazine. The magazine ran until 1972 and published several authors who experimented with the ideas of subjectivity, embodiment, natural space, etc. He later re-visited the magazine scene to publish his newer *Fantastic*, co-edited with Ranen Ghosh. While still featuring Science Fiction prominently, the magazine broadened its scope to include fantasy and horror. It was in this magazine that he coined the term “Kalpavigyan”. The contributions and collaborations he led are invaluable. However, *The Green Men* or *Sobuj Manush*, a project he indulged in with others in his field, namely Satyajit Ray, Premendra Mitra, and Dilip Ray Chowdhury. Originally, a part of a radio audio drama, the plot was begun by Premendra Mitra, and Ray ended it.

The stories, with their titular ‘Green Men’, are supernatural, almost alien, which blurs the lines between science fiction and Gothic tropes. While secretly infiltrating humanity, the ‘green men’ create chaos as agents of destruction, working secretly through covert manipulation and hatred.

The narrative thus appropriates the trope of horror fiction, which almost challenges the idea of the monster, as even while possessing green blood, they wear familiar faces of friends and colleagues. This not only aligns with the sense of ‘uncanny associated with horror but creates a sense of embedded reality with nature. They draw from the strength of nature; in specific cases, they even exhibit dominion over nature. Despite this, their consciousness is bound to the natural, and they are defined by these traits. This ‘estranges’ the idea of the human body and makes it a hybrid of the human form and the plant physiology, creating an almost cyborgized ‘Other’ identity. The result is a postcolonial dystopia that situates plant-consciousness as a vehicle to exhibit a critique of totalitarianism and imperial aggression. The hybridized origin story borrows from both the idea of the modern aliens, scientific ideas of plant consciousness, and ancient European folk stories of faeries and peskies, repurposing them to create an identity that embodies ontological ambiguity. While very few stories of an authoritative power exist in the Bengali tradition, such narratives address the dual anxiety within the people. On the one hand, it speaks of a natural anxiety that humans feel as a part of the natural world, where Nature is instrumentalized, utilized, and exploited without a second thought. The repercussions of the destruction of this symbiotic relationship may be felt as we, as a species, are meant to co-evolve, as Scott Gilbert has proposed. The body, right from the embryo stage, is dependent on the environment. (Nayar, 2014, 63). On the other hand, it reflects upon the steady occupation of the land and the human resources in the subcontinent that have previously been under the domination of British colonial rule.

The Posthuman and the Postcolonial Human

The figures of Professor Shonku, Professor, and Ghanada represent a convergence of decolonial resistance. All three protagonists share a core political and intellectual belief in that they challenge the cultural and the scientific Supremacy of the West.

Their narratives often function as patriotic acts, wherein they position themselves at the center of scientific and philosophical discourse, often seen to triumph the west over the acquisition of such power. This deconstructs the primitivist portrayal of the subcontinent and depicts it as a nation capable of challenging the West's scientific supremacy. (Karmakar & Ghosh, 2022). They diverge in their methods of achieving intellectual victory. Particularly in the ways in which they connect their own hybrid identities and approach scientific knowledge.

Professor Shonku and Professor Nutboltulargely operate as epistemic bricoleurs. Their strength is derived from the synthesis of the western scientific method and deep indigenous knowledge. Shonku is an internationally renowned scientist, but his laboratory is situated at a provincial part of India, Giridih, where most of his neighbors are incapable of understanding his scientific rigor. His genius lies in his successful fusion of laboratory sciences with the Vedic heritage. He produces instruments like 'snuff gun', 'miracurall' pill and the 'annihilin' pistol. For instance, as it has been previously mentioned the secret to miracurall lies in the *Charak Samhita*. Nutboltu Chakra too promotes an alternate form of modernity, his name too mixes the mechanical 'Nutboltu' (a nut and a bolt) with the hindu spiritual 'Chakra' carried by Vishnu. His adventures often blend the hyper-technology with seemingly supernatural phenomena like Ghosts and elemental unity. The figures and the environments that they come across decentres the human, housing aliens, creatures from pop-culture, magicians and machines. They are situated in African jungles or inside of a UFO. In such cases it is nearly impossible to posit the humanity of the human, thus the human becomes a part of the networked system. He cannot in such a case be exclusionary but is at par with the surroundings. They reflect Hayles' stance that the human is interwoven in the technological as well as the natural, their sense of 'embodiment' is dependent upon the informational system that their environment is.

Similarly, the adventures recounted by Ghanada are often tall tales, covering subjects of astrophysics and biochemistry. His excellence lies in his act of storytelling, yet miraculously they adhere to scientific principles. From the story of genetically altering mosquitoes to weapons of biological warfare to his encounter with the Yeti in Mt. Everest, to destroy supercomputers imbued with a powerful AI, that might harm humans. Conversely, in a story we also see Ghanada decode waggle dance to calculate distance and direction relative to the sun, in another such tale he is seen exploring the habitats of the reindeer. This posits Ghanada as a human embedded in his systems. He is curious, at the same time he tells his tales with vigour. His decolonial contribution is therefore one based in strategy.

The hybridity of these characters is a literal blend of cultures. They do not meet the posthuman subject with fear or dissatisfaction, but as a product of his environment. This supposes their behavior as scientists and adventurers to seek the wild, the fantastic and the chimeric. It does not deter them nor do they exoticise it, their attitude is of acceptance. Through them, Kalpavigyan asserts its identity moving beyond mimicry to establish a complex, authentic self that is free from the colonial discourse surrounding the examination of a species, people or land.

The Human (?), the Alien and the Monster

The self, discovered upon these narratives is myriad and experimental, to further elaborate we look in Hemendra Kumar Ray's satirical novella *The Inhumans*, in which posthuman subjectivity is a direct evolution of the human species. A "lost race narrative", at the forefront of the novella is a species of human beings that had evolved to no longer require their skeletal system. Encountered by the protagonist Amal Kumar Sen in the 'Juju Mountains'. The core posthuman identity of the creatures is established through their lack of a skeletal structure, an extreme form of biological mutation or evolution, placing the story firmly within the imaginative genre of science fiction. The narration satirizes the adventure format, the possibility of the indigenous scientific advancement, it explores themes of an imaginative yet scientific, challenging the fixed ideas of the 'human'. It replaces the European language and the white hero in lieu of a Bengali man who falls upon a defamiliarized version of his own kind.

In 'Bonku Babu's Friend', Satyajit Ray too questions the position of a peripheral Indian village. In response to the emergence of the alien spaceships; people in the village speak about the dynamics of an alien spacecraft. They ponder on the fact that if an alien ship is to land, it may land in the Americas or even in Kolkata. However, it is at this juncture that an alien spacecraft lands on the village and the story's protagonist, Bonku Babu happens to chance upon the alien, Ang, a being sent to the Earth to observe humans from the planet Craneus. Ang is portrayed as someone far superior to human beings. His superiority stems from an advanced intellect and can speak several languages. He eventually becomes a narrative for Bonku Babu's self realization, challenging the preconceived notions, his appearance as an alien is strange, but he as the metaphorical 'other', highlights Bonku Babu's sense of being an outsider. Ang, thus, conceptualizes the possibility of a more inclusive world.

Thus, stories of Kalpavigyan not only speaks of the posthuman subjectivity but foregrounds it as a creature or a being immersed in and the product of the environment which it navigates. It is not only a tool for the establishment of the anthropocene anxiety, alienation and otherization, but as a part of juvenile literature it became a unique tool to condition the mind of a child in the discourse of the postcolonial.

Conclusion

The enduring popularity of the Kalpavigyan narratives, even today, reveals the strength of speculative fiction as a powerful intellectual and cultural tool, with the posthuman as the core instrument of decolonial thought. These figures, across the works of several authors transcend the biological and philosophical limitation of a classical European Humanist subject. It dismantles the perceived superiority of the enlightenment and rationality to assert an authentic modernity. It posits itself as the site of postcolonial hybridity, synthesizing, epics, laboratory sciences, and indigenous knowledge systems to create stories that not only foreground the posthuman but exposes the limitations of a monolithic Western thought pattern. The literature not only reimagines a future but showcases the fatalities presented by a lack of plurality in discourse. In this way it offers a strong resistance to Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge and power.

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