

Mangala's Cult and the Posthuman Body: Troubling Life, Death, and Human/Nonhuman Boundaries in "The Calcutta Chromosome"

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Abstract

This study examines how Amitav Ghosh's "The Calcutta Chromosome" reconfigures the human body through Mangala's subaltern scientific cult, positioning embodiment as a posthuman process rather than a fixed biological fact. In the novel, Mangala and her followers develop practices of bodily transfer that use malaria parasites, ritual, and secrecy to move consciousness between bodies, thereby challenging Western biomedical models that define the self as discrete, autonomous, and bounded by mortality. By reading Mangala's experiments through posthumanist and new materialist frameworks, the paper argues that Ghosh disrupts the Enlightenment binaries of human/nonhuman, self/other, and life/death that underwrite colonial science. The analysis first situates Mangala's work as "counter-science," a subaltern epistemology that treats the "Plasmodium" parasite and the mosquito not as objects of study but as collaborators in knowledge production. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's concept of zoe and Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, it shows how Ghosh presents the human body as porous, entangled with microbial and nonhuman agencies that co-author identity and history. The cult's manipulation of the "Calcutta chromosome" further illustrates a posthuman re-engineering of life itself, where immortality is achieved not through technological mastery but through inter-species symbiosis and ritual transfer. Second, the paper contrasts Mangala's practice with Ronald Ross's colonial malaria research to reveal competing ontologies of science. Whereas Ross's Nobel-winning work depends on extracting knowledge from nonhuman nature, Mangala's cult depends on becoming-with the parasite, dissolving the subject/object distinction. This contrast exposes how Western humanism secures its authority by denying agency to subaltern and nonhuman actors alike. Ultimately, the study contends that "The Calcutta Chromosome" theorizes a posthuman body that is multiple, transferable, and temporally non-linear. Mangala's cult does not simply invert colonial science but proposes an alternative ethics of entanglement in which survival requires surrendering the fantasy of human exceptionalism. The novel thus anticipates contemporary Anthropocene concerns by suggesting that rethinking embodiment is essential to decolonizing knowledge and confronting ecological crisis.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh; "The Calcutta Chromosome"; Mangala; posthumanism; posthuman body; counter-science; subaltern epistemology; malaria; Plasmodium; colonial science; Ronald Ross; life/death; embodiment; zoe.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's "The Calcutta Chromosome" interrogates the foundational myths of Western scientific modernity by relocating the history of malaria research from the colonial laboratory of Ronald Ross to the clandestine world of Mangala, a subaltern healer whose cult practices a science of entanglement, transformation, and survival. The novel traces how a hidden network of sweepers, station-masters, and laboratory assistants in 1890s Calcutta manipulates British malarial research for ends that remain illegible to colonial epistemology. At the center of this network is Mangala's cult, which uses the Plasmodium parasite, ritualized secrecy, and



techniques of “bodily transfer” to move consciousness across bodies and generations. Through these practices, Ghosh configures the human body not as a discrete biological unit but as a porous, historically sedimented assemblage constituted through its relations with microbes, insects, infrastructures, and subaltern knowledges. In doing so, the novel advances a posthuman critique of human exceptionalism and proposes an alternative ontology in which life, knowledge, and selfhood emerge from multispecies collaboration rather than human mastery. This study reads Mangala’s cult as a site of counter-science that directly challenges three interlocking binaries upon which Western humanism depends: human/nonhuman, self/other, and life/death.

First, the cult refuses the colonial distinction between active human knower and passive nonhuman object. Mangala’s experiments treat the malaria parasite and the *Anopheles* mosquito as agents who “choose” their human hosts and participate in the production of knowledge. Such reciprocity resonates with what Rosi Braidotti terms “zoe-centered egalitarianism,” a posthuman ethics that recognizes nonhuman life as a generative force rather than inert matter to be instrumentalized. By allowing the parasite to become a medium of transmission for memory and identity, the cult enacts what Stacy Alaimo calls “trans-corporeality”: a mode of embodiment in which the human is always already immersed in, and constituted by, more-than-human flows. The body in “The Calcutta Chromosome” is thus never simply human; it is a microbial, technological, and ritual ecology.

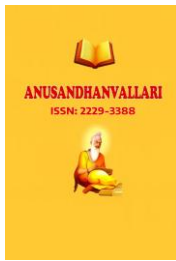
Second, Mangala’s practice of bodily transfer dismantles the liberal humanist conception of a singular, self-contained subject. In the novel, individuals such as Laakhan and Romen Haldar become vessels for consciousness that originates elsewhere, suggesting that identity can be dispersed, inherited, and reassembled across time. This model of selfhood conflicts with colonial science’s reliance on biography, authorship, and individual discovery, exemplified by Ross’s claim to have “found” the malaria vector. Ghosh’s narrative structure mirrors this dispersal: the plot moves non-linearly between 1895, 1995, and mythic time, refusing to grant the human subject chronological coherence. The result is a posthuman historiography in which agency is distributed across human and nonhuman actors, and history is written as much by parasites and rumors as by scientists and archives.

Third, the cult’s redefinition of immortality as intergenerational and inter-species continuity disrupts the teleology that opposes life to death. Whereas Western biomedicine seeks to prolong the individual organism, Mangala’s science seeks to perpetuate consciousness through microbial mediation and collective ritual. The so-called “Calcutta chromosome” becomes a figure for this alternative vitalism: a biological-material trace that enables personhood to exceed the limits of a single body or lifetime. Such a formulation troubles the biopolitical logic that separates living from dying, suggesting instead that existence is cyclical, entangled, and shared. By juxtaposing Mangala’s counter-science with Ross’s colonial research, Ghosh exposes how Western scientific authority is produced through the erasure of subaltern and nonhuman agencies. Ross’s experiments depend on Indian labor, malarial landscapes, and insect vectors, yet his narrative renders these participants invisible. Mangala’s cult, by contrast, makes them central, thereby decolonizing the history of science and foregrounding what Bruno Latour calls a “parliament of things” in which humans do not monopolize action.

In the context of the Anthropocene, where microbial, climatic, and technological forces increasingly shape human futures, “The Calcutta Chromosome” offers more than historical revision. It theorizes a posthuman body adequate to planetary crisis. This introduction therefore contends that Mangala’s cult provides Ghosh with a conceptual apparatus for rethinking embodiment, knowledge, and survival beyond human exceptionalism. To inhabit the present, the novel suggests, requires learning from epistemologies that were never human alone.

Discussion

The posthuman body in “The Calcutta Chromosome” emerges most forcefully through Mangala’s cult, whose practices reconfigure embodiment as a relational process rather than a biological given. By using malaria

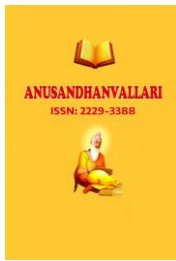


parasites to facilitate transfers of consciousness, the cult dismantles the Enlightenment premise that the self is coterminous with a single, bounded organism. This section argues that Mangala's counter-science operates on three registers microbial, social, and temporal each of which contests Western humanism's insistence on human exceptionalism and produces a model of the body as a posthuman assemblage. The cult's microbial register exposes the human body as trans-corporeal, to use Stacy Alaimo's term. In Ghosh's novel, the Plasmodium parasite is not merely a pathogen to be eradicated; it is a technological medium through which Mangala rewrites personhood. The "Calcutta chromosome" functions as a biological vector that carries memory, intention, and identity across different hosts. When Laakhan becomes the vessel for Romen Haldar's consciousness, the transfer is achieved through deliberate malarial infection and ritual mediation. Such a process reveals what Alaimo identifies as the traffic in toxins, genes, and bodies that constitutes all life. The human is thus shown to be constitutionally porous, always already inhabited by nonhuman agencies that determine its capacities. Mangala's experiments make explicit what colonial science disavows: that scientific discovery itself depends on this porosity. Ronald Ross could not have isolated the parasite without mosquitoes, Indian assistants, and malarial blood, yet his Nobel narrative extracts the human discoverer from the web that enables him. Mangala's cult reverses that extraction by centering the parasite as co-author of history.

The social register of the cult troubles the liberal boundary between self and other. In Western biomedicine, the patient is an individual whose disease is personal, and whose cure reinstates autonomy. Mangala's practice, by contrast, is collective and initiatory. Bodily transfer requires a community of knowers sweepers, station-masters, and priests who coordinate their labor and secrecy to sustain the ritual. Identity becomes distributed across this network rather than housed in one body. Antar's later discovery that he has been selected as a vessel demonstrates that the cult's posthuman body is also transhistorical: it recruits across centuries, making the 1990s computer analyst continuous with 1890s Calcutta. This continuity undermines the colonial archive's linear temporality and its privileging of the individual author. Ghosh's non-linear narration mirrors the cult's logic, as plot threads are braided through rumors, fragments, and digital traces that refuse to resolve into a single point of view. The novel's form thus performs the same dispersal of selfhood that Mangala's science enacts.

The cult's temporal register reconfigures the binary of life and death. Western science defines death as the termination of the individual organism and treats immortality as a technological horizon to be achieved through genetic or digital means. Mangala's immortality is neither technological nor individual. It is ritual, microbial, and intergenerational. Consciousness persists not by defeating death but by passing through it, using the parasite as a bridge between bodies. Such a model resonates with Rosi Braidotti's notion of "zoe" as a "nonhuman yet affirmative life-force" that exceeds the boundaries of bios, or individuated life. For Mangala, to live is to become multiple; to die is to change vessels. The cult therefore proposes an ethics of finitude that does not cling to the self but accepts dissolution as a condition of continuity. This ethics directly confronts colonial biopower, which manages populations by distinguishing living subjects from disposable ones. By making the colonized body the site of a different kind of survival, Mangala reclaims agency from a system that renders her community statistically and medically expendable.

The posthuman implications of Mangala's cult extend beyond thematic representation to Ghosh's method. "The Calcutta Chromosome" withholds resolution and causality, suggesting that no single epistemology colonial, scientific, or literary can master the entanglements it describes. The novel instead invites a mode of reading that is itself posthuman: attentive to rumors, gaps, and nonhuman traces in the archive. In this sense, Mangala's body is not only the object of analysis but the model for a critical practice. To understand the cult is to become entangled with it, to accept that knowledge, like malaria, circulates through vectors one cannot fully control. Ultimately, Mangala's cult theorizes a posthuman body adequate to the Anthropocene. It demonstrates that survival in a world of pandemics, climate change, and technological mediation will require abandoning the fantasy of autonomous humanity and learning from subaltern sciences that were never human alone.



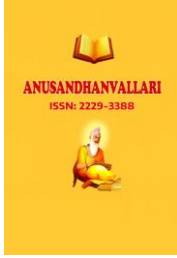
Conclusion

Mangala's cult in "The Calcutta Chromosome" ultimately offers a radical re-theorization of embodiment that exceeds the conceptual limits of Western humanism and colonial science. By situating consciousness within a microbial-ritual continuum, Ghosh's novel refuses to locate the human in a discrete body or a linear lifetime. Instead, it presents the body as a posthuman assemblage: porous, collective, and co-constituted with parasites, insects, infrastructures, and subaltern knowledges. This concluding section contends that Mangala's counter-science does not simply invert colonial binaries but dissolves them, proposing an ethics and ontology adequate to the entangled conditions of the Anthropocene.

The cult's practice of bodily transfer demonstrates that life, death, self, and other are not stable oppositions but mutable relations enacted through more-than-human collaboration. In making the Plasmodium parasite a medium of memory and identity, Mangala exposes what Stacy Alaimo calls the trans-corporeality of all bodies, the fact that humans are always already materially intermeshed with nonhuman flows that precede and exceed individuality. The "Calcutta chromosome" thus functions as both a biological trace and a conceptual figure for this intermeshment. It materializes Rosi Braidotti's notion of zoe, a nonhuman vital force that circulates across species and generations, unsettling the biopolitical distinction between individuated life and disposable matter. For Mangala, to be human is to be multiple, microbial, and unfinished. Immortality is achieved not by preserving the self against death but by accepting dissolution as the condition of continuity. This posthuman ontology carries significant decolonial implications. Ronald Ross's colonial science achieves authority by extracting knowledge from Indian bodies, landscapes, and labor while rendering those contributors invisible in the final account of discovery. Mangala's cult reverses that logic by centering the very agencies Ross erases: the mosquito, the parasite, the sweeper, the ritual practitioner. In doing so, the novel reveals that Western scientific modernity is itself a posthuman phenomenon, dependent on nonhuman actors and subaltern infrastructures that it disavows in order to claim autonomy. Ghosh therefore suggests that decolonization requires more than the inclusion of marginalized human voices; it requires acknowledging the agencies of nonhuman participants that co-produce all knowledge. The cult's secrecy and non-linear temporality further resist the colonial archive's demand for transparency, authorship, and chronology. By refusing to yield a stable origin or a singular discoverer, "The Calcutta Chromosome" enacts what Bruno Latour identifies as a parliament of things, a political ecology in which humans are not the sole actors.

Beyond its historical intervention, Mangala's posthuman body speaks to contemporary planetary crises. In a moment marked by pandemics, climate change, and biotechnological manipulation, the fantasy of a bounded, masterful human subject has become ecologically and ethically untenable. Mangala's science offers an alternative premise: survival depends on entanglement, not control. Her cult models a form of knowledge that proceeds through symbiosis, ritual, and collective care rather than extraction and mastery. Such a model aligns with recent calls in the environmental humanities to think with microbes, climates, and other nonhuman forces as collaborators rather than threats. Ghosh's novel therefore anticipates Anthropocene thought by suggesting that reimagining the body is a prerequisite for reimagining politics, science, and history. Finally, the novel's own narrative structure performs the posthuman condition it describes. "The Calcutta Chromosome" withholds causality, disperses agency across rumors and fragments, and recruits the reader into a network of partial knowledges. To read the text is to experience the same porosity, delay, and mediation that characterize Mangala's transfers. In this way, the cult's body becomes a method as well as a theme. It trains readers to relinquish the desire for sovereign knowledge and to accept that understanding, like life itself, is always collective, mediated, and unfinished.

In conclusion, Mangala's cult theorizes a posthuman body that troubles the foundational boundaries of life/death and human/nonhuman on which both colonial science and liberal humanism depend. By centering microbial agency, distributed selfhood, and cyclical temporality, Ghosh articulates an alternative epistemology



and ethics grounded in entanglement. "The Calcutta Chromosome" thus not only rewrites the history of malaria research but also offers a conceptual map for inhabiting a world where survival can no longer be imagined as exclusively human.

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