



Divya Srinivasan Breed's *Meru*: A Paradigm of Disability-Conscious, Postcolonial, Gender-Neutral Posthumanism

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Abstract

This paper studies the various ways in which disability, gender, postcolonialism, and posthumanism intersect in Divya Srinivasan Breed's (pen name S. B. Divya) science fiction novel *Meru* (2023). How does S. B. Divya delineate questions of reproductive autonomy for disabled and non-heteronormative bodies? How do ableism and colonial rhetoric come together to oppress an entire race? How does S. B. Divya expose this oppression and what does a resistance grounded in posthumanism look like? How does Divya envision posthuman relationships and a society that is considerate of differently abled, gender non-conforming, and alternately sexual bodies? This paper thus postulates S. B. Divya's *Meru* as a new, creative paradigm for subversive posthumanism that is conscious of the various axes of oppression in human society—disability, gender, and colonisation.

Keywords: Posthuman, disability, chronic illness, postcolonial, gender, *Meru*

Introduction

As a theoretical framework that incorporates post-anthropocentrism, post-humanism, and post-dualism, posthuman studies offer a uniquely fertile ground for challenging the prevailing status quo in human society as well as for imagining inclusive alternatives to it. This paper looks at Divya Srinivasan Breed's science fiction novel

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Meru as a posthuman challenge to the heteronormative, ableist, and colonialist discriminations upon which human society is built. It deals with the following questions in *Meru*: How does Divya decentre humanity as a species and their ableist, heteronormative society? How can a posthuman approach subvert colonialist agendas? Can posthumanism offer a modality that creates space for alternative sexualities and non-heteronormative motherhood?

Meru is set over a thousand years from now when genetic engineering has led to the post-human descendants of humanity—alloys and constructs—being in charge of the universe. Humanity’s attempt to control evolution led to the creation of alloys – conscious life forms made of metal who believe that “all forms of consciousness have equal value in the universe” and that “all Beings should minimise harm to other forms of consciousness, with priority given to other Beings” (Divya). After destroying Earth and Mars through the process of terraforming, humans give authority over the entire universe to the alloys who need only water, sunlight, and bhojya (a nutrient solution) to survive. Reproduction is generally done via artificial “wombs,” structures with their own medical constructs which have the equipment for genetic editing, gestation and birth of humans as well as alloys. Sexual reproduction exists too, but is considered old-fashioned and looked down upon due to the arbitrary mechanism of genetic heredity.

Within this society, two alloys Kundhina and Vidhar choose to spend their lives on Earth raising their human daughter Jayanthi. Jayanthi is born with Aspiration and Avarice Disorder and sickle cell anaemia, but refuses to get gene therapy for either despite being of consenting age. When she hears that an Earth-like planet, Meru, has been discovered but will be forever forbidden to humans, she volunteers to be the test subject of an experiment to see whether humans can thrive on the planet without causing any harm to its environment. With the support of Hamsa, now a politician in favour of humans, she goes to Meru with Vaha, a pilot alloy capable of space travel with human habitable chambers inside zir body. The novel narrates their journey as the two beings find a fulfilling romantic relationship with each other and dream of a life together on Meru.

***Meru* as a Paradigm of Disability-Conscious, Postcolonial, Gender-Neutral Posthumanism**

The universe of *Meru* is posthuman in many ways. This is first evident through the depiction of a post-human race of alloys and constructs whose physical bodies differ significantly from those of present-day humans. For example, Vaha, an alloy pilot, is described as having “blue-black skin, violet eyes, and golden solar wings shaped like a bird’s, rectangular with rounded corners. . . . Zir body tapered into a long, elegant tail with split fins” (Divya 54). Such embodiments make the population of the Constructed Democracy of Sol post-human at a very material level. But Divya’s posthuman engagement in this text goes far deeper than surface-level physical changes. The use of queer pronouns like “zie,” “zir,” and “they” for various characters throughout the text—Vaha, Kaliyu, Sunanda, etc.—shows that in addition to bodily variations, this society also has a proliferation of genders. The gendered multiplicity is not remarked upon as being atypical, deviant, or anomalous in the text—this normalisation is an incisive critique of the rigid dualisms that currently ail human society. The overcoming of human binary structures like gender is another manoeuvre that makes *Meru* a posthuman text.

Divya’s corporeal imagination of the post-human creatures in *Meru* is a feminist take on the male-authored female robots of science fiction literature and films as well as reality. Female androids in popular culture are often seen as objects made to fulfil male fantasies of feminine submission and sexualisation. The female robot Rachael Rosen in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), for example, “is docile, child-like, unemotional and detached, but also very sexual. . . . She is the protagonist’s object of desire, and represents the woman who says ‘no’ but really means ‘yes’ when it comes to sex” (Wegert 111). Kate Devlin and Olivia Belton, in a highly nuanced analysis of the films *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Blade Runner 2047* (2017), note the attention paid to the sexuality of the female androids even when they are in a disembodied form (357). Though Samantha in *Her* may not exactly be a sex fantasy, she is certainly a love fantasy inspired by the desire of men to possess an object that will love and desire them (369-70). Stuart Murray gives the example of Pepper, a companion robot

manufactured by Aldebaran robotics and the Softbank mobile network in Japan and France. He describes how Mark O'Connell, in his book *To Be a Machine*, addresses Pepper:

O'Connell alternates pronoun use, with Pepper being 'it' when basic presence and function is described ('a four-foot humanoid'), and 'her/she' when focusing on the *role* he understands she/it/he has been designed for (a 'customer service humanoid' designed to serve a 'social and emotional' function). . . . When robots become emotional or subservient in any way, it appears that they 'become' female." (Murray, "Design, Engineering and Gendering" 78)

As evident from the above examples, the creation of artificial beings is often marked by "a male fantasy of the female form" (Wosk 154) in androcentric science fiction. Divya counters this ideation of female robots through the depiction of post-human characters such as Vaha and Chedi in *Meru*. It is also never revealed whether the incarn (a second, human-like body of an alloy) Vaha creates to spend time with Jayanthi is male, female, or androgynous, even during the scenes depicting their intimacy. Divya's ability to write intimate scenes without focusing on sexual organs thus offers a new paradigm for depicting posthuman sexuality and relationships. Zir incarn bears a close resemblance to zir alloy body, and both of them are used to thoroughly decentre humanity. To Vaha, everything about humans feels so "strange and nonintuitive" (Divya 80) that zie has to watch human entertainment to familiarise zirsself with them. Zie is perplexed at "the feet that stayed perpetually bound to a surface" (80). Vaha's experience of life as a humanoid incarn creates further cognitive dissonance between readers and the human body they take for granted:

Zie hadn't realized that living with gravity would pose so many challenges. . . . Equally confounding was learning to use the sense of smell, a modality zie had experienced only through taste in the back of zir throat. . . . The single eyelid posed challenges, too. Not only could zie not fully block bright lights, zie

had to remember to keep dropping the lids to keep zir eyes moisturized. (130)

The attempt to learn human speech, gait, and behaviour in general, shown in humorous detail through Vaha's incarn, also defamiliarises and exposes the normalisation of ableism in human society. Divya's foregrounding of a posthuman disability consciousness is thus evident from her portrayal of alloys. Another element adding to the post-humanism of alloys in *Meru* is that they are conceived by Divya as having the option of multiple embodiments. Vaha, for example, has the body zie is born with, along with a humanoid incarn that zie creates for the mission to Meru. This incarn plays a key role later in integrating zir memories with Vaha's alloy body after the injuries zie sustains from zir fight with Kaliyu. Vaha is then able to remember zir life with Jayanthi and the future zie envisioned with her and their child. This process deconstructs the "singular, normative and coherent self" espoused by humanism (Murray, "Design, Engineering and Gendering" 117). At the same time, the interaction between Vaha's alloy body and the incarn, and the relationship between Vaha and Jayanthi, epitomise the "interconnections, messy histories, blurred origins, borrowing and adaptations, cross-overs and impurities [and] dependency and mutuality across species" that are paramount for any critical posthumanist methodology (Nayar 30).

Chedi, a conscious megaconstruct that can house up to fifteen hundred humans, is another example in the text of a posthuman creature that defies all human constructs. Her preferred pronoun is "she," and she is frequently described by Sunanda as a "mother hen. She likes to pick up stray humans and give them a home" (Divya 247). The juxtaposition between her clearly mechanised body and motherly nature is striking. On the one hand, "Chedi has a nested-cylinder design. A massive block of ice formed her outermost layer, then came the level Jayanthi was on, and finally, above her at Chedi's core, an artificial sky and light source" (248). On the other hand, she feels "like a living biome" (248). This portrayal of Chedi is a posthuman alternative to the normative construction of motherhood steeped in the binary gender stereotypes of human society.

In addition to gender, sexuality, material body, motherhood, characterisation, and narrative, as discussed above, *Meru* is also a

posthuman text at the level of language. Not only does Divya use a multiplicity of queer pronouns, parents are not labelled as mothers or fathers. Alloy parents are referred to as “makers,” while human parents are referred to simply as “parent.” When Jayanthi finds out that she is pregnant, for example, an “internal chant” begins in her brain: “*I’m going to be a parent. I’m going to be a parent. I’m going to . . .*” (255; italics in original). This gender-neutral vocabulary for parents is another step towards a posthuman community that defies human constructs.

The management of Earth and humans by alloys in *Meru* has clear neocolonialist overtones. The alloys take resources not available elsewhere in the Solar System from Earth in exchange for taking care of their human ancestors and restoring the planet’s environment. While humanity voluntarily handed over leadership to atone for their mistakes, the alloys regulated humanity to the point of making them ambitionless and non-greedy over centuries of genomic editing. The prohibition of space-related and genetic studies careers to humans confines them to a life of agriculture, art, reproduction, and raising children. Rather than ruling by force as happened in historical colonial projects, the alloys literally create the perfect docile subjects through biotechnology. Transhumanist ideology has thus created novel forms of colonialism in *Meru*.

Jayanthi’s evolution from wanting to be like alloys to standing up to them for human rights is a postcolonial journey. The necessity of leaving room for random mutation to avoid genetic stagnation, no matter how advanced alloys become in genetic engineering, means they can be subverted. By refusing to take gene therapy for her Aspiration and Avarice Disorder and sickle cell anaemia, Jayanthi defies the alloys’ attempt to keep humanity subservient. Though her chronic illness causes her suffering, it also provides her a different vantage point into her society. She is an outsider in her society not only due to her chronic illness, but also due to the technologically enhanced features her parents designed her with. She has a “bodym” like alloys – an information network that provides the body’s metrics to those who have access. Her parents also gave her an emchannel – which is the natural, nonverbal form of communication for alloys. It allows her to understand rudimentary phoric (the language of the alloys) and connect her brain directly to devices. Being neither

completely human nor completely alloy, Jayanthi is largely shunned by both. She understands clearly that her radically different embodiment is seen as a transgression in her society:

They had never felt comfortable with her circumstances—a human child born to two alloys, given emtalk capabilities, and lacking a surname. . . . she occupied a liminal space. Of Earth but not like other humans; of alloys but unsuited to life in space.
(Divya 16)

Jayanthi is posthuman in more ways than one. She is ostracised for having a non-normative body, disabled due to her chronic illness, and ambitious in a human society that has virtually erased disease and ambition. This posthuman existence “generates valuable experiences, insights and often unexpected modes of access to cultural discourse and critique” (Barker 4) that eventually give rise to Jayanthi’s postcolonial consciousness and disillusionment with alloy governance.

At the age of twenty-two in the beginning of the novel, Jayanthi is an adult by human standards. However, Hamsa sees her as a child “compared to [his] two hundred and eighty-seven years” (Divya 5) of life as an alloy. Due to the difference in mortality, technological advancement, and value systems, all alloys perceive humans as ungrateful, self-destructive children dependent on alloys for survival and protection. As Pushkara tells the Meru Exploration Committee, “I saw firsthand the damage humankind will do if left to unfettered consumption. . . . We have expended so much effort to provide human beings a good life on Earth, a balanced one that respects the planet” (338). This equation of humanity with children is upheld till the end of the text, where Jayanthi acknowledges the past mistakes of her ancestors:

In the previous millennium . . . humankind committed terrible mistakes. We hurt ourselves; we hurt other forms of life and consciousness, including Earth and Mars. . . . Like children, we needed protection from our own behavior. . . . We needed to remain constrained until we learned new values. (394)

Children grow into adults and become independent, but that development is denied to humans by the alloys in *Meru*. Their childhood is seen as perpetual, so the alloys adopt a paternalistic and condescending approach to humans. This was precisely the justification used by European colonialists, as Barker observes: “By naturalizing colonial subjects as ‘permanently childlike’, European imperial powers were able to assume the role of ‘permanent guardians’, masking their rapacious ambitions to achieve global sovereignty under the rhetorical banner of a duty of care” (7). Sunanda, one of the rogue humans who live on the megaconstruct Chedi capable of sustaining humans during space travel, explains this colonialist rhetoric to Jayanthi:

As long as [alloys] have humans on Earth to take care of, they continue to have unlimited access to Earth’s resources. If we leave . . . the population on Earth will shrink. Fewer alloy services will be needed, and unless they amend the compact further, they’ll have to proportionally reduce what they extract from the planet. (Divya 270)

The alloys live on the principle that all matter is conscious and has equal value. Accordingly, planets have consciousness too, and harm to all forms of consciousness must be minimised. With this logic, the alloys refrain from actively modifying any new planets they find in the universe, especially if they harbour any kind of life. However, this refrain from extracting resources from other planets is possible only because they take the resources they need from Earth. The principles that alloys use to justify the condescension of their ancestral humans are therefore based on an extractive economy targeted towards Earth. This extractive colonialist structure is sustained by the parent-child rhetoric they impose on humanity.

The colonised child was medically represented as physically and/or mentally disabled, which meant that this child would not be able to mature. The absolute pathologisation of ambition for humans and its complete normalisation for alloys in *Meru* reduces human impact on the planet, but at the same time “consolidate[s] the conditions required for ongoing [alloy] dependency” (Barker 8). The Alloy Era is thus constructed by pitting humanity as the degenerate

other against which alloys are civilised, rational, and superior in the same vein that the colonising self is constructed against the colonised other. Moreover, “the body that needs to sleep, be fed or that can be subjected to violence and feel pain . . . is seen as inferior to a posthumanist consciousness of pure thought” which the alloys believe they possess as a race (Murray, “Design, Engineering and Gendering” 114).

Though Hamsa is in favour of expanding human settlements into outer space, he too harbours the same paternalistic attitude towards them—just to a lesser degree. His condescension and patronising are evident when he is telling Jayanthi off for demanding more freedom for humankind: “by your biological nature, you need to consume material goods to survive, and you have a deep-seated instinct for accrual. We’ve worked hard to help you overcome that. How would we control this additional freedom granted to you?” (Divya 347). Alloys see themselves as rescuing humanity from themselves, much like the saviour myth used by Western colonial forces in history. In spite of all the misgivings he has about humanity, Hamsa still uses Jayanthi for his political campaigning. For him, the rhetoric of treating humans as children under alloy care translates into charitable support. He makes Jayanthi the poster girl for his campaign to allow human settlements on Meru due to her sickle-cell disease, just like “the figure of the non-western disabled child [is] repackaged and redeployed by charities and news media as an image of pathos . . . that draws attention to ‘Third World’ crises” (Barker 10).

In a society where the utter lack of ambition and eradication of disease from humanity is forcefully normalised by the alloys, Jayanthi’s Aspiration and Avarice disorder and sickle-cell anaemia disrupt the colonial regime of alloys. Despite the pathologisation of human ambition, Vaha is able to recognise the similarities between alloys and humans easily. When Jayanthi shares her “ambitions, dreams of being a tarawan, contributing to the Nivid” with Vaha, zie responds that it “sounds like a reasonable goal, one that many people I’ve met would share with you” (Divya 97). Contributing a discovery to the Primary Nivid is, in fact, a goal shared by most alloys including Vaha. In addition to denying gene therapy for her Aspiration and Avarice Disorder, Jayanthi also refuses treatment for her sickle-cell anaemia—a disease that has been eradicated from human society. She

is satisfied with the treatments she receives as they make her life manageable, illustrating that disability does not need to be debilitating with access to the right resources. Further, her disease is precisely what makes her a good fit to live on Meru because the excess oxygen in its atmosphere would mean her cells are not oxygen-starved. The alloys are against human settlement on Meru despite knowing that it would not need to be terraformed if it was populated with humans who had sickle-cell disease. Thus, it is through Jayanthi's disability and transgressions that the ruptures "in hegemonic or authoritative renderings of 'nation', 'power' and 'normalcy' [in The Alloy Era] are made visible" (Barker 14).

Throughout her journey in space, Jayanthi understands the extent and pervasiveness of the alloy prejudice against humans. She realises "her parents had never taken her off-planet. Hamsa had indulged her tarawan studies, but not her ambitions. They only let her go to Meru because it was an easy way to advance Hamsa's agenda" (Divya 271). Apart from displaying her Bildungsroman, this scene also depicts her disillusionment with the alloy regime: "*maybe alloys are just as selfish and flawed as humans*" (271; emphasis in original). Her journey throughout the universe therefore nurtures her postcolonial consciousness. Rather than proving the alloys right, she subverts the stereotypical associations of dependency and neediness with children. When both Vaha and Kaliyu abandon her on Meru, the alloys assume she would die within days due to the lack of alloy support. Instead, she manages to get herself off of Meru while being pregnant and survives when the megaconstruct Manib leaves her to fend for herself in a spacesuit with limited oxygen in the vacuum of space. She stays on Chedi, a friendly megaconstruct that houses several rogue humans in space, for a few months, but goes to the Primary Nivid despite knowing the hostility she will face there. Moreover, when no one is able to find Vaha, she is the one who convinces Kaliyu that they can find zie together. Her actions throughout the text dispel the myth of childlike dependency of humans on alloys.

Jayanthi successfully questions the colonial regime established by the alloys in the public statement she makes during her trial at the end of *Meru*: "Who decides when children no longer need constant oversight from their guardians? If our protectors . . . continue to

restrain us in the name of misdeeds long past, then like overbearing parents, they are abusing their power. I believe that alloys have fallen into this trap” (Divya 394). Jayanthi’s own conduct and belief that the evolved humanity of her time can proceed in a more sustainable, respectful, and caring manner than her ancestors make her posthuman. She represents Divya’s imagination of the value system of a truly posthuman humanity. She takes the utmost care not to contaminate Meru in any way and follows every protocol given to her to ensure the planet’s safety.

Despite his claims of concern for Meru if humanity were allowed to settle there, it is Pushkara himself who, aided by a gullible Kaliyu, ends up contaminating the planet in an effort to sabotage the experiment. He orders Kaliyu to launch a device containing organic matter on Meru and blame it on Jayanthi to ensure that the Meru Exploration Committee will shut down the project for violating the safety protocols. When Jayanthi comes across the device, however, she seals it along with the contaminated soil in sample bags and puts them in Vaha’s womb.

Jayanthi’s refusal to take gene therapy challenges the stereotypical representation of disabled characters in fiction. Because disability disrupts the norms of bodily perfection which must be complied with to qualify as a human citizen, disabled characters typically either die or are cured by the end of the text to restore the status quo. In line with postcolonial fiction that refuses to provide a narrative resolution in defiance of the Western literary canon, Jayanthi neither dies nor gets cured in *Meru*. She faces the consequences of her actions while continuing to advocate for humanity. This narrative can therefore be seen as decolonising disability.

Despite having all the ability in the universe, Vaha is not able to live up to zie’s full genetic potential due to the environment of zie’s upbringing. Vaha’s injuries further show that ability is highly transitory even with all the technoscientific advancement at zir fingertips and thus cannot be taken for granted. Zie comes to peace with being disabled as the experience freed zie from the traumatic clutches of zir maker’s disappointment. Rithu’s patience and support during Vaha’s recovery and relearning how to fly instils confidence

in zie. Zie tells Jayanthi: “The exoskeleton, the broken wing—they’ve freed me . . . I know what I want for myself, and that’s to help you and, one day, all of humankind. (Divya 385).

Rather than a dreadful and pathologised impairment, Vaha’s disability then becomes “a source of embodied revelation” that offers zie an alternative perspective with which to approach zir life (qtd. in Barker 24). Vaha’s story in *Meru* is one of continuous disablement—first as zie learns how to live as a human within a human incarn, and then as zir original body is severely injured which results in loss of some function. Although it is humans who are seen as frail by the alloys, Vaha’s portrayal ruptures that narrative and depicts the impermanence of an able body, no matter how technologically advanced a society may be. Similarly, despite struggling with a chronic illness, Jayanthi is able to achieve a huge feat for humanity—mainly because she found the support she needed. The plurality of “physical, cognitive, sexual, social” forms that exist in *Meru* therefore make it evident that “disability is defined by the practice of prejudice rather than the straightforward fact of difference” (Murray, “Design, Engineering and Gendering” 113).

The things that count as a disease among humans show the extent of the restrictions placed on humanity by alloys under the guise of caring for them. Rather than expelling deviant bodies from society, alloys have the technology to force them into conforming, but making it seem voluntary—much like manufactured consent. Amidst all of the constraints enforced on humanity, a body with Aspiration and Avarice Disorder exposes just how disruptive non-normative bodies can be to the narrative of the necessity of human confinement to Earth propagated by the alloys. From a larger cosmological perspective, Jayanthi is not disabled but rather uniquely able for survival on the planet Meru without needing to terraform it. Her material difference in the form of sickle-cell anaemia allows her to witness the hypocrisy of alloys when it comes to ambition and care, providing her with inimitable knowledge not accessible to normative bodies. This knowledge plays a crucial role in her bildungsroman, as she ultimately refuses to abandon her community even for love. When Vaha suggests running away, she tells zie:

Alloys are fallible. Constructs, too. You're not better than humans; you're just better suited to living with less. There are other human beings who want what I want. . . . If we run away, then I'm abandoning them all. I—I can't be that selfish. Not even for us. (Divya 377)

Jayanthi and Vaha, therefore, “are active, not passive, participants in the narratives that surround them, and shape their lives, on their own terms, on a daily basis” (Murray, “Disabling the Human” 29). The romantic relationship between Jayanthi and Vaha can be seen as a posthuman vision of how relationships and romance might flourish in a society with multiple embodiments, while accommodating for disability, chronic illness, and plural genders. It defies compulsory heteronormativity in its rejection of a binary gender for Vaha as well as Jayanthi's clear rejection of heterosexuality. In fact, her sexuality is left ambiguous in the text as she is depicted in sexual relationships with Vaha and Sunanda, both of whom are gender non-conforming. Jayanthi's skills in genetic engineering also enable her to bypass heterosexual reproduction and conception as the reproductive process is completely separated from sexuality.

Jayanthi's time on Meru makes her certain that a human population with the same sickle-cell mutation as her can thrive there, just like her. Pushkara and Kaliyu's attempts to sabotage the human survival experiment on Meru, however, push her into accelerating phase two of the project, which was meant to evaluate whether a second generation of humans can flourish on the planet. Combining Vaha's and her own DNA, she designs an embryo which would inherit her disease via uniparental disomy. There are twenty-three pairs of human chromosomes, and a healthy baby inherits two copies of each chromosome pair—one from the father and one from the mother. Uniparental disomy is the abnormal condition in which a baby receives both copies of a chromosome from the same parent and none from the other parent. In some cases, this genetic state can lead to untreatable disorders such as Angelman syndrome—characterised by impaired speech and intellectual disability, and Prader-Willi syndrome—characterised by obesity and chronic overeating (Bethesda).

In an essay titled “Prenatal Diagnosis: Where do We Draw the Line?” Anita Ghai and Rachana Johri draw on three studies that interviewed mothers. They cite one such interview with Sudha, the mother of a four-year-old boy, who was certain she would have chosen abortion had she found out that the foetus might be disabled. Having seen her mother’s friend with an intellectually impaired son, she realised how much the child and the mother have to suffer (105). Another mother was told by her doctor that the baby’s heart might be defective. According to this mother, “To bring up that child is the responsibility of a lifetime. No one else will take care [of the disabled child] especially after you die. . . . If you don’t know, then you cannot help it; but once you find out, then don’t take up the responsibility” (qtd. in Ghai and Johri 106). Since the blame for birthing a disabled child and the brunt of caregiving work falls on the mothers in a patriarchal society, they prefer to terminate the pregnancy if they can help it. Drawing upon another study which interviewed visually impaired girls from the ages of sixteen to eighteen years, Ghai and Johri delineate upon their contrast in opinion from that of mothers of disabled children. When asked what advice she would give to a woman who might have a disabled baby, a seventeen-year-old visually impaired Radhika said in the interview: “There are good and bad traits in everyone. I would tell her not to abort the child, but help the child to develop an identity, to teach him/her how to live in this world” (qtd. in Ghai and Johri 109).

Jayanthi clearly affirms Radhika’s viewpoint in *Meru*. Having been provided access to the best available treatments and resources, Jayanthi lives a fulfilling, productive life that underscores the pitfalls of an ableist society. In choosing to give birth to a child with the disabling chronic illness of sickle-cell anaemia, Jayanthi issues a direct challenge to “dominant social constructions of both motherhood and childhood” (Ghai and Johri 101). This challenge is all the more disruptive to the society she lives in because of the pervasive practice of genetic engineering and artificial gestation of every new being that is born in it. The desire to abort a defective foetus is engendered by the normativity of able-bodiedness. Jayanthi’s disillusionment with the alloy society, along with her experiences on Meru, foregrounds the embedded ableism in alloy society. Her action of genetically designing an embryo that will

inherit her illness fractures the narratives of human inferiority and frailty propagated by the alloy society. She tells Vaha: “I have sickle cell disease. On Earth, it was a burden, and I had to manage it. On Meru, it keeps me healthy, and someone without this genetic variant—like you—has to deal with constant hyperoxia” (Divya 174). The improvement in her health on Meru shows Jayanthi that disability and chronic illness are highly contextual and not always inalterable – in her case, it is literally a matter of where she is living. Residing on Meru overturns the negative connotations of disability for Jayanthi as she is able to experience for herself the alternate possibilities that could be, if only she was not constrained by the alloy laws. As she says in her public statement to Mithva, the judicial construct:

Perhaps if released from their fetters, humankind will come up with a fourth alternative. . . . and not commit the same errors that we made as a younger society. . . . that human beings are capable of more than they are presently allowed. . . . that human genetic variance will allow us to adapt ourselves to the environment of planets like Meru, which have a sufficiently similar ecosphere to the habitable zones on Earth. (Divya 394-395)

Divya thus explores through her speculative fiction the possibility of a posthuman society where gender and ability do not become limitations. Jayanthi’s experiences enable her to make a well-informed reproductive choice—a choice that she reaffirms when she comes to terms with the possibility that she might have to raise her child on Earth and watch them suffer the same way she did. She asks herself at first: “Didn’t she owe her child a better life than that?” (Divya 272). But she soon realises that humans “should have room to grow and change and explore,” (273) rather than be defined by their physiological limitations. And this maturity is evident in Jayanthi herself, as she manages to keep her child safe throughout pregnancy while working toward her ambitions, with the required resources to manage her biological restrictions. Through this realisation, Jayanthi resolves one of the major reproductive decisions faced by disabled and chronically ill women—whether to have children who would inherit their condition or not.

Jayanthi's journey stands as a sharp critique of the stereotype not only of human inferiority in *Meru*, but also of disabled people as being unproductive members of society and therefore perpetually dependent in general. Subverting the criteria of eligibility for becoming a tarawan, Jayanthi finds "a way to insert disability thinking into the processes of engineering," (Murray, "Design, Engineering and Gendering" 91) and thus critiquing "the material realities of disabled people's interactions with technologies" (Kafer 105). Kafer notes that cyborg discourses, like that of Haraway's, "universalise the experience of disability, removing it from the realm of the political" (106). Instead of renouncing the cyborg altogether, however, she "argue[s] for a continued struggle with the figure, using it to stage our own blasphemous interventions in feminist theory" (106). In having a child with sickle-cell anaemia, fathered by gender non-conforming Vaha, Jayanthi "suggest[s] the possibility of crip futurities, futurities grounded in something other than the compulsory reproduction of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness" and heteronormativity (106). By taking the agency to include herself in the genetic engineering process, Jayanthi embodies a grounded critical posthumanism informed by feminism as well as disability studies.

Conclusion

Divya's *Meru* offers a new creative paradigm for posthuman studies that engages with contemporary debates on gender, sexuality, body, reproductive autonomy, ableism, and colonialism. It challenges the assumption of human exceptionalism, while simultaneously portraying a posthuman society that transcends beyond rigid socially constructed binaries. Jayanthi and Vaha, as individual characters struggling with disability and chronic illness, as a non-heteronormative couple, and as a non-human family unit, postulate a posthumanism for Indian English speculative fiction informed by disability consciousness, gender neutrality, sex positivity, and postcolonial resistance.

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