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Mythic Hybridity, Ritual Embodiment, and Cyborg Ontology: Disability as Alternative Knowledge in Indian thought

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Abstract— This paper advocates that disability narratives function as alternative epistemological sites when read in dialogue with Indian mythological traditions, Kerala’s ritual performance culture, and Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory. Haraway’s critique of the three foundational Western binaries—human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical—has often been interpreted as emerging exclusively from late twentieth-century Western technoscience. However, Indian cosmological imagination has long articulated hybrid, composite, and augmented embodiments through myth and ritual. By placing Malini Chib’s *One Little Finger* alongside figures such as Ganesha, Narasimha, and Ardhanarishvara, and the transformative performance tradition of Theyyam, this study challenges the assumption that cyborg ontology is purely Western. Disability, understood as technologically and relationally mediated embodiment, resonates deeply with Indian traditions of sacred hybridity. The paper demonstrates that disability destabilizes ableist constructions of normalcy while simultaneously revealing continuity between posthuman theory and indigenous epistemologies of transformation.

Keywords—Disability Studies; Cyborg Theory; Indian Mythology; Theyyam; Embodiment; Binaries

I. INTRODUCTION

Modern Western humanism defines the human as autonomous, rational, bounded, and self-sufficient. This ideal body—productive, independent, and normatively functional—emerged alongside Enlightenment rationalism and industrial capitalism. Within such a framework, disability becomes legible as deviation from statistical normalcy. Lennard J. Davis argues that the concept of “normal” developed historically through nineteenth-century statistical thinking, producing disability as a measurable departure rather than a natural condition.

Disability Studies has challenged this paradigm by demonstrating that disability is socially constructed through cultural expectations of productivity and independence. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observes that disabled bodies have frequently been reduced to spectacle or metaphor instead of recognized as epistemic subjects.

Mitchell and Snyder further identify “narrative prosthesis,” the tendency of literature to use disability as symbolic device rather than lived experience.

Yet Indian cosmological imagination presents a radically different ontology of embodiment. Mythological narratives frequently depict hybrid, altered, and non-normative bodies as sacred and powerful. When disability narratives are read alongside these traditions and in conversation with Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory, a new interpretive possibility emerges: disability as alternative knowledge rather than deficit.

In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway identifies three foundational binaries structuring Western metaphysics: human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical. The cyborg emerges through the collapse of these distinctions. The human/animal boundary destabilizes when evolutionary continuity and technological mediation undermine human exceptionalism. The organism/machine distinction dissolves through biomedical and cybernetic integration. The physical/non-physical binary erodes in digital networks where information circulates beyond bodily limits.

Haraway’s cyborg is therefore a political metaphor for hybrid identity. However, cyborg theory is often treated as a product of Western technoscientific modernity. Such a claim overlooks parallel imaginaries in Indian thought. The figure of Ganesha (Ganapathi) offers a compelling example. After decapitation, an elephant head replaces the human one. This bodily reconstruction does not diminish divinity; it establishes him as the remover of obstacles and deity of wisdom. The human/animal boundary collapses in sacred hybridity. Identity survives radical bodily alteration. Similarly, Narasimha, the man-lion avatar of Vishnu, dissolves species hierarchy. Ardhanarishvara merges Shiva and Parvati in a single body, destabilizing gender binaries. These mythic embodiments demonstrate that Indian cosmology has long accommodated composite identity. Hybridity signifies power rather than deficiency.



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Kerala's ritual performance tradition of Theyyam provides a living enactment of such hybridity. The performer undergoes transformation through elaborate costume, body paint, headgear, and ritual preparation. Flesh merges with pigment, fire, metal, and sacred narrative. The use of stylized or artificial eyes (poykkannu) in certain forms symbolizes augmented perception. The body becomes an assemblage of organic and constructed elements. Within Theyyam, all three Harawayan binaries collapse. The performer inhabits a liminal position between human and divine, sometimes invoking animal energies. Ritual technologies integrate into bodily presence, challenging the organism/machine divide. The material body becomes a vessel for metaphysical manifestation, dissolving the physical/non-physical distinction. This is ritual cyborgism grounded in sacred transformation rather than digital circuitry.

Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* offers a contemporary articulation of technologically mediated embodiment. Living with cerebral palsy, Chib communicates through assistive devices. Her "one little finger" symbolizes minimal movement expanded into expressive agency. The communication device is not an external tool but extension of cognition. The organism/machine boundary dissolves as voice emerges through technological interface. Chib's embodiment also destabilizes the physical/non-physical binary. Speech circulates beyond muscular limitation. Identity becomes distributed across networks of care, technology, and social interaction. The assumption that humanity depends on bodily independence collapses.

Reading Chib alongside Ganapathi and Theyyam challenges the notion that her cyborg embodiment is derivative of Western posthumanism. Instead, it resonates with indigenous traditions of composite being. To situate cyborg ontology exclusively in Western modernity risks reproducing colonial epistemic hierarchy: theory in the West, myth in the non-West. Indian traditions demonstrate that relational embodiment and boundary dissolution long predate digital technology.

Disability, therefore, is not an imported posthuman condition. It is continuous with cultural histories that recognize transformation as meaningful.

Rosi Braidotti's posthuman philosophy reinforces this perspective, positioning the human as dynamic assemblage rather than fixed essence. When disability is read through this broader lens, it emerges as an epistemological resource. It reveals that autonomy is relational, embodiment is networked, and identity survives transformation. Disability destabilizes ableist constructions of normalcy while aligning with Indian epistemologies that value hybridity.

By bringing together Haraway's cyborg theory, Indian mythological figures, Kerala's Theyyam performance, and Malini Chib's disability narrative, this paper demonstrates that cyborg ontology cannot be confined to Western technoscience. Hybrid embodiment has long shaped Indian cosmological imagination.

Ganapathi's reconstructed body, Narasimha's liminality, Ardhanarishvara's fusion, Theyyam's ritual augmentation, and Chib's technological mediation collectively dissolve rigid binaries. Disability thus appears not as deficit but as a relational mode of being deeply resonant with Indian thought.

Hybrid embodiment is not an anomaly. It is enduring inquiry into what it means to be human.

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