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THEMATIC BLOCK: UTOPIA AND DEMOCRACY

Shankari Chandran's *The Barrier* (2017) and the Complex Stakes of Decolonizing Dystopian Writing

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the Australian-Sri Lankan writer Shankari Chandran's novel *The Barrier* (2017) as a dystopian novel, exploring how it sets up stakes around pandemics and the political use of the Ebola virus and vaccines in a near-future world divided by a barrier between East and West. With its many twists and turns, the novel, I argue, critiques an unequal and dystopian global order, with both Eastern and Western Alliances participating in injustices. The novel makes a powerful decolonial claim, based on the sacred text the *Bhagavad Gita*, for faith (not organized religion) as a generative human capacity, and compellingly entangles this in its plotline. I analyze this from the perspective of the complex stakes of decolonizing knowledge as well as dystopian fiction, and argue that Chandran's work is part of a wider lineage of South Asian women-authored utopian and dystopian writing highlighting the importance of inclusivity and faith. (BB)

KEYWORDS: dystopia; pandemic fiction; decolonial; South Asian fiction; Australian fiction; women's writing

Introduction

Australian-Sri Lankan writer Shankari Chandran's novel *The Barrier* (2017) is a piece of dystopian and pandemic fiction with strong elements of a political thriller, which poses unsettling questions concerning faith and global inequities. Chandran, a human rights lawyer by profession, has said in an interview that a friend once told her that she tries to "write and right . . . wrongs through my [that is, Chandran's] fiction" (Heidemann 20). This effort shines through *The Barrier*, which sets up stakes around pandemics and the political use of the Ebola virus and vaccines, in a near-future (2040) world divided by a barrier between East and West. With its many twists and

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turns, the novel, I argue, critiques an unequal and dystopian speculative global order, extrapolated from the present, with both the Eastern Alliance and the Western Alliance (who rule respectively the eastern and western parts of the globe), participating in injustices. The novel makes a powerful claim for faith as a generative human capacity, weaving this theme intricately into its plotline. My analysis approaches it through the lens of the complex stakes of decolonizing knowledge and decolonizing dystopian fiction. I argue that Chandran's work is part of a wider lineage of South Asian utopian and dystopian writing, often women-authored, highlighting the importance of faith and spirituality as possible drivers of justice, work that has decolonized knowledge and utopian and dystopian fiction.

The Barrier is a dystopian novel, a thriller, and a science-fiction work set in the year 2040. Its fictional world is divided into the Eastern and Western Alliance after World War Righteous, which took place from 2020 to 2025. Ebola swept the world in this war. In terms of narrative strategies, the novel features major outbreaks of virus pandemics, set in the past of the novel, sometimes evoked through flashbacks, and in its plotline plays with the threat of re-eruptions of the Ebola virus. After an Armistice Accord is signed, two mechanisms are put in place to prevent a repetition of war: the Immunity Shield, a global vaccination program administered by the World Health Organization, and the Information Shield, ensuring that only approved information can flow between the two Alliances. However, in the Eastern Alliance, the vaccine that the inhabitants get has a component not present in the Western Alliance, namely the Faith Inhibitor. This prevents religious faith from developing, and when this Inhibitor is administered, it is kept a secret from those who are vaccinated with it. Agent Noah Williams from the Western Alliance is sent to Colombo when there is suspicion of a fake vaccine being developed, one that neither protects from Ebola nor has the Faith Inhibitor. The main suspect, virologist Dr Amir Khan, is in Sri Lanka. The department creates a story—an outbreak of a new strain of Ebola in Colombo General Hospital—to send Noah and his team in. Noah, as well as Agents Garner and Crawford, pose as health organization delegates investigating the new outbreak. This gives Noah a reason to work closely with Dr Khan, who, in turn, is trying to work out how the virus got into the hospital in the first place. Sri Lanka in the novel is ruled by the dictator Rajasuriya, whose brother is a General: the brothers are represented as corrupt, murderous, venal figures.

Shankar Chandran: The writer's context

Chandran is from the Tamil Hindu minority population of Sri Lanka, and a migrant who lives in Sydney, Australia, having also spent some years in the UK. The Sri Lankan civil war, in which the Sri Lankan state was pitted in battle against groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and the terrible sufferings of people, not least Sri Lankan Tamil minorities, form a major theme in Chandran's novels such as *Song of The Sun God* (2017), *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* (2022), and *Safe Haven* (2024). Arguably, mistreatment by post-colonial states of their own citizens is also a theme in *The Barrier*, which is set largely in a speculative, future Sri Lanka.

After Chandran won the Miles Franklin award for *Chai Time in Cinnamon Gardens*, she said,

> I don't ever think I won the Miles Franklin . . . I think we won the Miles Franklin. My parents and all their sacrifices won it. My husband and all of the shit he has to put up with when I am writing. Generations of Chandrans won it. I have a publisher who fights for me, an agent who for 10 years couldn't get me anywhere. But she stayed with me—and she won it. We won it together. (Kale)

Chandran thus speaks of a collective, one in which her Sri Lankan heritage and family, including her husband, and a wider social collective including her agent and publisher, figure: people who have supported her in her battles against the discrimination faced by writers of color in Australia. Chandran's novel *Song of The Sun God*, a historical novel with Sri Lankan protagonists, was originally rejected for publication in Australia; it was first published by Perera Hussein, a Sri Lankan publishing house, in 2017. The writer then made the decision to change the protagonist of her next novel, *The Barrier*, into a White man before submitting it to publishers, who accepted the book (Diviney). In her novel *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens*, Chandran weaves into the story a critique of mainstream Australia's failures to offer literary voice to non-White writers. Maya, one of the protagonists of the novel, an Australian migrant who hails from Sri Lanka, found as a young writer that no literary agent considered stories told from her South Asian migrant perspective saleable. In response, she created Clementine Kelly, a White outback woman who stars in romantic crime novels. Maya published entirely under the pseudonym Sarah Byrne, a reclusive writer, who becomes a bestselling author.

In contrast, Chandran publishes as an Australian and Sri Lankan writer. In *The Barrier*, she creates a White male protagonist, Noah Williams, the son of a theology academic who instilled in him an understanding and empathy for religions such as Hinduism, but Noah still remains deeply implicated in the machinations and unethical geopolitical order governed by the Western (and Eastern) Alliances.

In an essay on how she writes, Chandran discusses her anger. But she also manages to fuse spirituality, writing, rage, discomfort, and the connective work of writing, as this excerpt from that piece shows—and as we shall see, *The Barrier* does.

> In Sanskrit, one of the ancient languages of Hindu doctrine, the word for heart is *hrd* or *hrdaya*. This word can be translated as heart, mind, or soul, and it is often used to refer to the innermost aspect of a person or being. . . . Hindus have been taught through the greatest story ever written—the *Mahabharata*—that there is formless Divinity inside all of us and around us, and that this is our true and shared nature. Our true purpose is to realise it. Trapped in a cycle of birth and death, we can free ourselves through right conduct, devotion, pursuit of knowledge, and control of the mind and body. Unfortunately, I am not very good at those things. Instead, writing is my prayer and meditation. Writing, like praying and meditating, connects me to something pure and strengthening. I am not so much writing from the heart, as writing towards my heart. . . . The shock of the real, the honouring of family and ancestry, the anger of a deeply broken world. I write through anger to connection. (Chandran, "Writing from My Heart" 4)

One of the premises of *The Barrier* is that a formless divinity exists both within and around us, a conviction key to its plea for decolonizing worldviews. The world is deeply broken, which evokes anger, and part of Chandran's mission as a writer is to articulate the sense of that brokenness and anger. The quest for epistemological decolonization comes to the fore also because colonization and imperialism keep the world broken, as Chandran's near-future fiction shows. Based on the *Bhagavad Gita*, a part of the Hindu epic text the *Mahabharata*, Chandran puts forward a view that all living forms, from vaccine to human, are potentially divine and are journeying towards formlessness.

A decolonial framework for analyzing the dystopian novel *The Barrier*

"De-colonial thinking presupposes de-linking (epistemically and politically) from the web of imperial knowledge" (Mignolo 20): decolonial knowledge questions the dominance of Eurocentric forms of knowledge, often connected with colonial and imperial ways of looking at the world. Rather, it often looks to non-Eurocentric epistemologies, represented in this novel by the worldview that emanates from the Bhagavad Gita. This decolonial vision is intrinsically connected to the critique of the machinating, exclusionary, corrupt, and murderous geopolitics of the Eastern and Western governments as represented in the novel, where the West maintains dominance with the help of ruthless Eastern powers such as the rulers of Sri Lanka.

Dystopian fiction depicts a "non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (Sargent). As Gregory Claeys writes, however, "utopia and dystopia evidently share more in common than is supposed. Indeed, they may be twins, progeny of the same parents" (7). Mathias Thaler argues that dystopian fiction such as Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* "sustain[s] a hope that is constrained by the memory of violence and suffering, yet is powerful in its aspiration to mobilize oppositional agency" (617). This is also true of *The Barrier*. As I have argued elsewhere,

> [s]ome of the most pressing intellectual, social, political, and cultural topics of our time, such as colonialism, imperialism, movements for women's liberation, masculinity, the culture, politics, and economies of indigenous and pre-modern peoples and tribes, nation states as imagined communities, and globalization, are illuminated when approached through rich concrete universals embedded in utopian/dystopian texts. (Bagchi, *The Politics of the (Im)possible* 5)

Chandran's novel shows how issues such as imperialism, nation states, and (unequal) globalization can be deployed in a dystopian novel with thriller-like contours.

Written by a woman empathetic to human suffering, the novel features key women characters—both human and post-human—including Ayisha Khan, the late wife of Amir Khan and herself a scientist, and the Artificially Intelligent Laboratory Assistant Devi, coded as female, who

ultimately self-destructs. These characters help create a world marked by profound female suffering, contributing to the novel's feminist sensibility, which both acknowledges and critiques that suffering.

Chandran is also a woman writer of South Asian heritage: South Asia is a region encompassing Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Maldives, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. The sovereign nation states of present-day South Asia are heterogeneous, but have common histories, including rule by and/or encounters with Portuguese, British, French, and Dutch colonialism. Faith and religion also continue to be highly important in these societies.

Chandran's work over a decade as a social justice lawyer clearly influences her work as writer, as she herself has stated (Metcalfe). She, I would argue, is in the lineage of South Asian writers such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932), who, in critiquing imperialism, offers an alternative form of decolonizing knowledge, which leads to opening pathways to alternative power relations. The South Asian, Bengali Muslim writer and educator Hossain, who delighted in writing speculative fiction and essays, challenged both colonialism and patriarchy. Her oeuvre is a very good example of work that decolonized utopia (Kuiti 241). Hossain did not believe in essentialist and purist notions of pasts, presents, or futures, and rather sought to combine resources available from West and East for fiction and for education (see Bagchi, "Towards Ladyland"). She was a founder and leader of a school that ran an imaginative curriculum that included music and Bengali. Hossain's novella *Padmarag*, which delineates a female utopian community including a school, also envisions a curriculum teaching students to value rather than deride their own histories (Hossain et al. 32).

In Hossain's feminist utopian short story "Sultana's Dream," in the dreamed feminist utopian country of Ladyland, the dreamer hears the Queen of Ladyland say:

> We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts as much as we can. (Hossain et al. 14)

The critique of the British empire is clear here, as well as the claim to a decolonized, unpredatory knowledge. In contemporary South Asia, and in

her diaspora too, debates and speculations around viable and desirable futures for society play out, based on arguments with embedded debates about the nature of historical and socio-economic development, decolonizing knowledge, and what values we want inscribed into our futures. Fictions such as Chandran's, which are culturally partially affiliated with South Asia, employing utopia and dystopia as modes, often play with such themes.

In her interview with Heidemann, published in 2020, when asked about the Tamil concept of "oor" or place of origin of a family, Chadran replies:

> I think all people need an oor. I think that's a characteristic of human beings and human nature. And I think that's a good thing . . . I feel that my oor is my people. And when I say "my people" here I don't mean Tamil people. . . . I would also add, and I'm very insistent on this with my children, that we understand community not just as the community of the place or even the country we live in. Our failure to understand and respect that and live according to that is the source of many of our global problems. There is a foreign policy in one country that creates a refugee crisis for a country somewhere else. It's cause and effect. It's a shared and fragile ecosystem. (Heidemann 24)

In *The Barrier* Chandran links the ongoing refugee crises to a broader lack of shared interconnectedness, framing this as part of her critique of the structures of dominance and hegemony created by colonialism, neocolonialism, and imperialism. Chandran further talks about how in her first novel she was "constrained by history" (Heidemann 21). But, as she admits, *The Barrier* brought a change for Chandran, who says about this novel, "I was in 2040. 2040 hasn't happened yet. I had full licence to write whatever I wanted. It was liberating" (21). In terms of generic strategies, *The Barrier* is a speculative future history and shows a dystopian world in which key characters, such as Noah Williams and Amir Khan, believe that people should be able to create their own *oor*, not based on ethnic or national or religious identities, but on cross-cultural, cross-religious movements of ideas and peoples. If one thinks of the thematic and aesthetic strategies used in the novel, the barrier of the title between East and West sweeps through the novel, which questions such divisions created by war and power. One of the novel's key narrative methods is the frequent use of flashbacks, such as the one in the opening episode of the book, which evokes a scene from the World War Righteous, set in the Sivanadana Caves (which I analyze later in

this article). These moments also foreground the theme of memory, important in this dystopian novel critiquing erasures of heritage, faith, and spirituality.

A review of *The Barrier* states that Chandran's novel reads like "a thought experiment as Chandran uses her sandbox to investigate deeper philosophical issues around religion and faith and the role these play in human society and development. . . . *The Barrier* provides a way to explore the world of totalitarianism, religious extremism and sectarian conflict" ("*The Barrier* by Shankari Chandran"). I concur.

Playing with the contagion narrative

Chandran stated that in *The Barrier* she examined "what would happen if nature or disease and religious wars converged to destroy the world" (Metcalfe). The contagion or outbreak or pandemic narrative has been analyzed by scholars such as Douglas M. Haynes. Chandran's novel, which references past Ebola pandemics and sets up the threat of their re-emergence in the main narrative line, shows how the Western Alliance deliberately unleashes Ebola on populations in the East, whether during World War Righteous or the micro-outbreak of the disease in a hospital ward in Colombo, in countries such as Sri Lanka. In this way, Chandran's novel critiques the stereotype in our contemporary mediatized world of Ebola as associated with non-Western parts of the world, notably western Africa (where there were outbreaks of the disease, as in 2016), a view which perpetuates neo-colonial, otherizing stigmas.[1]

The spatialization of the world in *The Barrier* is dystopian, with "two separate alliances, each one divided into sectors. Along the borders between the two sides, there were Security Militarised Zones and armies that prevented the movement of people, and the Information Shield, which prevented the movement of knowledge from one side to the other" (Chandran, *The Barrier* 55). With the movement between West and East ordinarily banned, evoking the Cold War's Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall, and with the Faith Inhibitor designed to eradicate the human instinct towards faith and religion only administered in the East, the novel depicts how the Western Alliance powers, who are the dominant rulers of this speculative imperium, attempt to decimate pre-imperial knowledge.

The Barrier, with its clear critique of migration fears, attempts to restrict movement, and hostility toward religions associated with the non-West, is especially relevant to our times. In the dystopian world of *The Barrier*, where neither the East nor the West is free of villains, Noah, who is

no angel himself, begins to question his own beliefs and the part he plays in the work of the Department of Biological Integrity, which employs him. In Chandran's novel the East is at first blamed for religious wars erupting all over the globe, then, after the West first vaccinates its own population against Ebola, and after the West lets Ebola spread in the East, eventually the East is offered vaccination.

Vindicating faith in *The Barrier*

In the Prologue to the novel, we see Noah operating as part of the armed forces of the West in World War Righteous. Here, in an episode taking place at the Sivanadana Caves at the northern tip of Sri Lanka (the name is fictitious, though the real life Sigiriya Caves may have been the inspiration), the *Mahabharata* enters the story, when the characters find a Hindu temple carved out of a vertiginous rock face at Sivanadana. "A stonemason had become a storyteller, carving every scene and subplot of the *Mahabharata* into the wall" (Chandran, *The Barrier* 6). The Kauravas and Pandavas, warring cousins, fought a war for a kingdom in the *Mahabharata.* Commenting on a particular panel, where lord Krishna is gesturing to the Pandava prince Arjuna (who is recoiling from war), Noah says that

> Hinduism says we are bonded to this cycle of life, death and rebirth. But we yearn to be free of it. Man's true nature is a divine energy. This moment in the war here . . . . It's when God tells us the way home. (8)

This invocation of the *Bhagavad Gita* is completed with the massacre that shortly follows this dialogue. The *Bhagavad Gita* can be read from a decolonial perspective, to which I return at the end of the article. Presumably composed in the first or second century CE, it is an episode in the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata.* Occupying a part of the sixth book of the epic, this text is in the form of a dialogue on a battlefield between Krishna, a god, and prince Arjuna (belonging to the clan of the Pandavas), who has misgivings about fighting and potentially killing so many, including the Kauravas, who are his cousins. Among many of his now famous arguments, Krishna sees the soul (or form, in Chandran's parlance) transmigrating from one body to another and eventually finding liberation or release into formlessness. That one should not desire the fruits of action, but rather engage in action without such desire, is another of the key messages of the Gita. World War Righteous and the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata* thus dialogue in Chandran's novel, with

Krishna's message of humanity's divine energy, and the urge to break free of cycles of rebirth and death, pulsing through Chandran's story. The knowledge offered by the *Bhagavad Gita* to Chandran's vision in *The Barrier* critiques Eurocentric and imperial-colonial epistemological frameworks. Chandran also brings a striking and innovative perspective in her decolonial adaptation of the *Bhagavad Gita*'s message, since in *The Barrier* we are encouraged to think of human and non-human forms, whether vaccine or virus or Artificial Intelligence, as interconnected flows of life forms carrying divine energy.

Noah's perspective throughout the novel is divided: his recognition of the injustice and unfairness of many of his orders conflicts with his inner sense of the futility of such wars, violence, and oppression. The following passage reflects his point of view:

> The Faith Inhibitor targeted and damaged the part of the human brain that generated faith. People stopped feeling faith. They stopped yearning for and seeking a loving, vengeful and powerful God. A Memory Inhibitor was also added to the vaccine so that people no longer remembered the ancient, lost ideas.
> Religion. The Sixth Virus. The virus of the East. As an agent of the Western Alliance, Noah had been there during the Great Purge when the West made sure that all reminders of religion were excoriated from the East. (Chandran, *The Barrier* 35)

Amir and Aisha Khan, both virologists, resisted the vaccination with the Faith Inhibitor—and Aisha was shot by the dictatorial ruler of Sri Lanka, Rajasuriya, whose brother is a General: the brothers are represented as corrupt, murderous, venal figures. They decree by law that people who are "not like us," such as Muslims, are to be branded "so they would remember whose country they lived in" (Chandran, *The Barrier* 160). This makes it clear that only some people, the mainstream and majority, have a right to full and equal membership of the polity and society in this future Sri Lanka. The soldiers under Rajasuriya "walked through villages and cities, destroying buildings, books and artwork" (159), disposing of the "antiquated icons and delirious ramblings of the previous generations" (159). Here, in this dystopian novel set in the future, the critique of the destruction of heritage and the erasure of cultural memory is palpable.

General Rajasuriya, like his brother, makes it clear to Noah that he sees the West as hypocritical, and no better than him and his dictatorial brother. "The general laughed. 'The irony is that you hide in the shadows of

black ops and black sites so that your leaders can claim the quicksand of a moral high ground they don't deserve"' (Chandran, *The Barrier* 159).

This is also Chandran's clear-sightedness in the novel, where neither the Eastern nor the Western powers would be able to sustain themselves without each other's unethical conduct of politics. The dictator's future Sri Lanka is not a decolonized world, with decolonized knowledge, but rather a brutal and exclusionary world. When Noah looks at the dictator as if the latter were a monster, Rajasuriya does not leave it without words. "Because I dispose of people who disobey me, because I keep slaves, because I admit that I hate Muslims? Your government does all of that and more. Different methodologies and different marketing" (Chandran, *The Barrier* 128).

In the backstory of the novel, different religious groups fighting each other give rise to World War Righteous, after the outbreak of which many people are killed. Sahara, an agent of the West, remembers that "[f]orty-three thousand Muslims had died in the first week of World War Righteous. The rate had slackened eventually. Even bigots have to rest" (Chandran, *The Barrier* 133). The novel critiques the killing of innocent people, and the geopolitical cynicism and indifference to human suffering among powerful figures in both Eastern and Western Alliances that allows such a dispensation. As mentioned earlier, *The Barrier* also reveals that in fact the Ebola pandemic, contrary to the West's claim, was not an intrinsic product of the East: it was the Western powers that unleashed the virus there. Noah had learnt, partly from his father, that "Faith never led to slaughter. Religion did. . . . Or rather, mankind's use of religion as a weapon of mass and minor destruction did" (70). Noah thus keeps a secret faith in faith.

In a previous article on many modernities and South Asian utopian writing, I examine the work of South Asian women utopian writers—some, like Hossain, also writing in the dystopian mode—and argue that they retool and recreate religion to enable the inclusion of marginal social groups, combining local and transnational idioms and resources (Bagchi, "Many Modernities" 218). The present article on contemporary fiction by Shankari Chandran, an Australian author entangled with South Asia through her Sri Lankan Tamil heritage that is a major theme in her writing, shows that such fiction has striking continuities in these respects with their foremothers. In the complex stakes of decolonizing utopian and dystopian writing, Chandran, like Hossain, does not take recourse to essences and purisms. Using a thriller-like plot dynamic, she deploys the plot devices of viruses

and warfare to critique imperialism, neo-colonialism, and dictatorial regimes.

The Barrier's thriller-like plot line has a key character who is an AILA (Artificially Intelligent Laboratory Assistant) named Devi, with the help of whom virologist Amir Khan had evolved a superbly effective vaccine against Ebola, called the Devi Vaccine (Chandran, *The Barrier* 102). The Devi Vaccine can protect those vaccinated with it against unforeseen mutations, "even weaponized ones" (220). Meanwhile, Khan knows that he will die of an illness within a few months, but Devi has catalogued all his knowledge, and he hopes that through her, his plan of sharing all his knowledge with the world can come to fruition. It is Devi who, after Khan has been killed, relays his last advice to Noah, and injects Noah with the Devi Vaccine. Noah's little daughter had died, and this haunts him: Khan reminds Noah how important it is "to remember the happy times we were given," to keep on holding on to the "memories" that "can't be eradicated" (278). After this, Devi gives herself a command to delete her files, and thus self-destructs, but the storyline suggests that Khan had had allies, who will keep on furthering his projects.

Chandran writes of the Devi vaccine that it "is sentient. It adjusts to the virus mutations and changes its own structure to fight it. It has a life, a will of its own—it is conscious" (Chandran, *The Barrier* 219). Noah's father, even while dying, had invoked the *Bhagavad Gita*, that persistent presence in *The Barrier*, and said, "'Noah, we are more than the forms we inhabit—whether it be this body or a virus. Look inside—our divinity yearns to be free, to merge with the divinity all around us. Don't let form restrain you. We are limitless. Read the Gita, son. It's all in there" (256). Noah's dying father had in fact also given his son a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Chandran's own words on writing from the heart, quoted earlier, seem to be echoed here.

Conclusion

The novel's affirmation of alternatives to the colonial and imperial dystopian order depends on recognizing all life forms as divine, however mutable or lowly they may appear to be, from vaccine to human, a recognition that is crucial to its decolonial vision. This is also the key place of hope in the novel. The vaccine created by Khan carries the stamp of a mandala, a "tool that was supposed to create a sacred space and guide man towards his inner-self" (Chandran, *The Barrier* 53).

> *It is beautiful*, Noah thought. It [the vaccine] was a circle inside a square. Inside the circle was a geometric symphony of shapes; a complex series of connected and overlapping triangles that created a mesmerising pattern of stars—stars within stars within stars. A universe. (52; italics in the original)

The tiny vaccine thus resonates in its shape, as we hear in Noah's words, to the stars in the cosmos. The Devi vaccine is emblematic of the anti-imperial, anti-aggressive, decolonizing worldview that is Amir Khan's, and Noah's father's, and Khan's friend Jack Neeson's: the latter has "faith in . . . something more than life and death" (Chandran, *The Barrier* 304).

As we have seen, this occurs in a novel that does not endorse any religious fundamentalism or the exclusion of people of any religion from rights and dignity. Chandran's inflection of the message of the *Gita*, from the *Mahabharata*, lays emphasis on the connectedness and divinity of all forms of existence, from virus to vaccine to human to robot. The novel's articulation of hope and decolonization also functions along these axes: it shows hope that humanity would recognize our interconnection to all forms of being, eschew parochial wars, violence, and discrimination, and keep faith in a broader, all-encompassing Nature, and in evolution along great swathes of time. *The Barrier* is thus a distinctive decolonial dystopian and pandemic novel.

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Note

1. See Haynes for a critique of the neo-colonialist worldview to be found in Richard Preston's influential non-fictional thriller *The Hot Zone: A Terrifying True Story*, 1994, a work that looks at containing outbreaks of viruses such as Ebola in places such as animal laboratories in the United States of America).

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