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Examining the Vulnerability of Posthuman Care in the Tamil Context

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Abstract

While hypothesizing morality as an "active virtue" that is universal, the ethics of care positions human at the top of a perceived hierarchy of beings. Humans then are at the centre of existence and the rest (non-human, flora, fauna) are subsumed under the same. Posthumanist theory seeks to decentre human from the autonomous centre. It de-exceptionalises human existence and death removing him from the Cartesian duality emanating from an anthropocentric approach. One important arena impacted by posthumanism is the ethics of care. This paper examines the influence of posthumanism on the ethics of care within the context of the Indian society. It specifically examines this paradigm through the lens of posthumanism as reflected in the Tamil movie, *Koogle Kuttappa*, set in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The paper would attempt to make some derivations based on the discourse around the film.

Keywords: Centre, Posthumanism, ethics, care

While making a generic binary between the 'one-caring' (feminine) and the 'cared-for' (masculine) Noddings asserts that "we want to be moral in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring." She calls the caring attitude "fundamentally universal" that can be "universally accessible". Though the issue of gender bias is self-evident in Noddings' proclamation, relegating care under the ambit of feminine, what is of particular significance is the current debunking of the binary between the human and the non-human and its impact on care-giving and care-receiving.

Postmodernism displaces the subjective self from the centre of rational thinking existence. Postmodernism seeks to correct this imbalance of modernism by acknowledging the relational nature of existence. Man is not vested with unlimited potential to change the world. This postmodernist displacement of the subject is anticipated in Nietzsche and Heidegger and later in the psycho-analytical theories of Jacques Lacan. If Modernism is marked by realism, authoritarian narration and absolute homogenous subjectivity, postmodernism is marked by destabilising these ideas, celebrating heterogenous plural subjectivities and rereading heterogeneities expelled to the margins. The "I" is then unfixed, raising questions about identity, representation and subjectivity. Posthumanism goes a step ahead of postmodernism and decentres human from the autonomous centre of existence. Posthumanism follows

through the postmodern questioning of the humanist model of subjectivity. It rejects anthropocentrism and human autonomy, eroding boundaries between the human and non-human, the living and non-living, the mind and matter. This has gained increasing currency in the context of advancing technology that creates bionic bodies, clones, cyborgs etc. thus challenging the traditional norms of what it is to be human.

But is it simple/desirable to destabilize the autonomy of the rational/emotional human? This question becomes especially troublesome when we examine the critical field of ethics of care. Humans have been told that their ability to care is one of the distinctive features that separate them from the non-human/non-living. It is crucial to examine the implications of posthumanism to care-giving. This paper examines the influence of posthumanism on the ethics of care within the context of the Indian society. It specifically examines this paradigm through the lens of posthumanism as reflected in the Tamil movie, *Koogle Kuttappa*, set in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

The ethics of care embodies the moral aspect in human relationships. But this "active virtue" seems to be largely relegated to the feminine since the ethic of caring arises "out of our experience as women, just as the traditional logical approach to ethical problems arises more obviously from masculine experience" (Noddings 8). The moral burden of the ethics of care, that separates human from the rest, seems to be on the feminine. The responses itself to the ethics of care stand divergently different from philosophical responses to the Kantian or utilitarian approach that generally underscores impartiality. The ethics of care relies on affective responses with its emphasis on inter-personal relationships. Consequently, the human condition is not examined through the lens of justice but mitigated through the framework of interdependence and vulnerability of the subject. Needless to say, that the ethics of care is deeply entrenched in the anthropocentric view of the world that perceives a unified or homogeneous humanity that aspires to virtue. While the idea in itself is problematic in a posthuman world, a critical ethics of care underscores the exploitative nature of care that often seeks to marginalise, dominate and disenfranchise.

Posthumanism seeks to redress this imbalance by staggeringly uncoupling 'care' from 'human' while exploring the potential of alternative means of posthuman care. There are various arguments that support this perspective. A posthuman ethics of care aims to offer a non-anthropocentric perspective embracing non-human and non-living entities within its purview. This approach highlights the intricate connections and mutual dependencies among all forms of life within complex socio-ecological systems, thereby elevating the concepts of care and moral consideration beyond a strictly human context. Again, the posthuman ethics of care deconstructs hierarchies and binaries such as human/non-human, mind/matter, nature/culture among others. Its objective is to deconstruct hierarchical frameworks that favour certain beings over others, thus perpetuating dominance and exploitation. Furthermore, the posthumanist ethics of care underscores environmental sustainability and social justice with its emphasis on the redistribution of care responsibilities within communities. It recognizes the degradation of environment and marginalized populations and seeks to redress this imbalance. It also acknowledges that technological improvements in the current society that has eroded the boundary between the human and the non-human and its impact on care. It calls for critical reflection on the ways in which technology shapes and mediates care practices, as well as the potential for technology to enhance or undermine care relationships. And so, finally, and most importantly, it reassigns the meaning of vulnerability. The posthuman ethics of care acknowledges the inherent vulnerability and interdependency of all beings, rejecting the notion of fully autonomous and self-sufficient individuals. Instead,

it emphasizes the importance of recognizing and responding to the needs, vulnerabilities and dependencies of others within relational contexts. Overall, the posthuman ethics of care offers a relational and inclusive approach to ethics that challenges conventional human-centered perspectives and calls for a more compassionate and ecologically attuned ethic of care that extends to all beings within interconnected webs of life.

Posthumanism sees bionic bodies as an extension of the corporeal form. The cyborg simultaneously is a reflection of the advanced technological development the human race has reached and an index of human fear of the disappearing human, leading to the projection of the emotionalized cyborg or human robot. This human care robot provides care to the old and the ailing. It is essential at this point to delineate perspectives of care. While in the West, Care (or 'dependency' work) is predominantly the domain of society's minoritized populations: immigrants, people of colour, migrants; in India, Care becomes an emblem of sacrificial obligation offered at the altar of familial love but mostly born by women in the family. The care-givers in the West including personal nurses, nannies, caretakers and support workers are poorly paid while the familial care-givers in India are unpaid. Both scenarios indicate a systemic/exploitative nature of care that seeks to disenfranchise. Though care work is associated with the ethics of virtue, this devaluation of the care work in the west makes it a prime candidate for roboticization while the Indian scenario is slightly different. While the degradation of the female care-giver is subsumed under familial obligation and virtue, the situation is compounded by the unavailability of carers in Indian homes where most members are earning their keep abroad (maybe even as the above-mentioned immigrant carer/nurse). This unavailability or unreachability of care-givers become the reasons to embrace roboticization in an Indian context. Exploitation and unavailability of care givers then become the twin necessities on which rest the introduction of the care robot.

Media depictions that imagine the role of robots in delivering care function act as important instruments for reflecting on and analyzing the ethical, aesthetic, and political aspects of posthuman caregiving. One such representation is the 2022 Tamil film, *Koogle Kuttappa,* directed by the duo Gurusaravanan-Sabari. The film examines the ethical dilemmas faced by the expat in relegating the care of elderly parent to a robot and the struggles of the parent who feels abandoned by their children. The film becomes quite significant in the context of the Tamil society where many able-bodied humans are employed abroad or have moved out of the state in search of better job prospects. The film serves as a commentary on the anxiety experienced by the aging community of the society who, despite residing in grand residences financed by expatriate wealth, find themselves devoid of close family members to provide care support. Sabari-Saravanan's film examines this predicament concerning human care, the potential for posthuman care and the ethical and moral challenges that arise from it.

The" active virtue" of care represents a fundamental approach to morality that is intrinsic to human existence. It undeniably serves as a core principle of human life especially in Indian societies where it becomes a primary concern setting itself apart from the western influences that neglect their elderly and appear inclined to place them in old age homes. This also becomes a rousing recommendation for marriage and procreation in India as "Who else will take care of you in your old age?" While this evidence of human vulnerability cannot be disregarded what can neither be dismissed is the complexity of 'location' in the contemporary global world nor the complex social and subjective nature of care. The film *Koogle Kuttappa* revolves around Subramani Gounder, a cantankerous old man who assiduously avoids new-age technology- he does not own a smart phone, refuses to modernize his house and does not even own a television much to the chagrin of his son and the amusement of the villagers. The

absence of the feminine to provide care is duly noted in the film as there are no references to Aadhityan's mother. Maybe it is fear induced by this absence but Subramani keeps his only son, Aadhityan, a mechanical engineer, close to him, not allowing him to apply for jobs away from home, wanting him to care for him during his old age. Subramani represents every elderly Indian who has failed to move with the advancements of the computer age and often find themselves having to antithetically depend on the younger generation for help with mobiles and apps.

Aadhityan gets a job at a Robotics firm in Germany and leaves for Germany after a showdown with his father. While abroad, he is guilt-ridden about his father and worries about him constantly. Driven by guilt over his inability to care for his father directly he contemplates resigning from his job. He is introduced to the idea of posthuman care by Tharani, his girlfriend. She tells him about the robotic home nurse who took care of her father, ailing from Alzheimer's, in Sri Lanka. Aadhi returns home with the latest Android Robot developed by his firm, to care for his father. The film now shifts to the human-robot tussle as Subramani initially refuses to engage with the robot. Slowly the robot insinuates into all parts of Subramani's life who becomes strongly attached to it. The non-human patience displayed by Kuttappa while dealing with Subramani is a testimony to the possibilities of robotic care un-impinged by human emotions and turmoil. Human qualities are ascribed to the android who is named Kuttappa (meaning short man) and is wrapped in clothes to cover his 'nakedness'. Subramani starts treating the robot as his son. Aadhi in the meanwhile realises that the android robot has a glitch that makes it kill those to whom it provides care. Aadhi and Tharani rush to Coimbatore but Subramani refuses to relinquish Kuttappa to them. He decides to visit a temple with Kuttappa through a forest. Kuttappa asks Subramani to abandon him in the forest since he is there just to assist him and not to love him. Subramani refuses to abandon Kuttappa. Aadhi finally locates them and in a dramatic series of events Kuttappa attacks him, trying to strangulate him. Aadhi is rescued by his father and they leave for home. Subramani, in the last shot of the film, is seen mistaking his son for the robot and whispering his name, Kuttappa.

The film highlights several aspects of care-giving. On the one hand, it plays on the fear of every individual of being replaced by a robot. Subramani's love for Kuttappa is complete so much so that he is worried that Kuttappa might suffer from the evil eye and in a comic, yet endearing scene, consults an astrologer and gets a *raksha* (a scared thread) to protect him from evil. This humanizing of a robot by an apparently gullible old man underscores the vulnerability felt by both the father and the son. On the other hand, the care given by Kuttappa is comprehensive. The robot succeeds where various home-nurses and servants had failed. Kuttappa is non-humanely patient with Subramani's grouchy ways, and non-judgmental when he helps Subramani connect with his ex-lover, Pavithra.

Care-giving becomes a major concern in third-world nations like India where most of the adult population has migrated to first-world nations for a better economic future. The financially sound expat is unable to provide direct geriatric care to their elderly parents. The unreliability of human caregivers, the cautionary tales of murdered helpless parents and the demands made by care agencies add to the woe of such expats. The film questions the ethics of human care and the assumption that good care means necessarily human. But there are not easy conclusions to be made. The open-ended conclusion of the film allows its viewers to interpret the ethics of care from their perspective- Is human care the best care? Would allowing robots into the highly affective arena of care lead to a roboapocalypse? More

importantly, the film signals the fear- Would care robots reduce human love to a cipher? It certainly opens up the larger debates around the ethics of affective robots designed for care.

Posthumanist ethics of care seem to indicate a blurring of the man/machine distinction. It indicates not replacing human care, rather, transcending human limitation, it emphasizes its integration with machine thus providing non-judgemental, quality care. The posthumanist philosophy itself views human as co-evolved with non-human/non-living forms of bodies. It chooses to de-exceptionalise human existence, proposing a continuum rather than a hierarchical perspective. Maybe it is time to rescue care from a completely moral affective ambit of virtue ethics. But it would be similarly impossible to confine care to a completely utilitarian framework, considering that human relations are ontological in nature. While the existence of a form of "universal caring", "accessible to all human beings", may not be true, the idea of an ideal non-human centred caring without affect seems to be equally far-fetched and an affront to the interdependence that is fundamental to human reality.

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