Disabling the Abled: Queries Posed by Android Kunjappan's Infiltration of the Human World

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Abstract

Humans have forever strived to make their lives easier and more comfortable. From the invention of the wheel to electricity to modern posthuman cyborgs the aim was to improve the quality of human life. In this process, humans with 'lesser' abilities were ignored or marginalised. But the ethically charged question of who identifies and describes the abled and disabled remains unresolved even today. The question becomes even more poignant when disability is attached to the elderly. Does diminishing motor, cognitive or social abilities call for transhuman interventions? In an attempt to homogenise, transhumanists ignore human diversity. As a result, undesirable assistance is thrust upon the elderly initiating a new model of social disability. The existence of a fully functional community is possible only through all-inclusive social dynamics that cater to various identities and abilities. The paper focuses on the problems posed by geriatrics-related enabling by humanoids. How much of a human can we create, replace, or restructure? The paper focuses

on the portrayal of the novel mode of friendship that Bhaskaran, a seventy-plus human, tries to establish with Kunjappan, a humanoid, in the Malayalam film Android Kunjappan Version 5.25 by Ratheesh Balakrishnan Poduval. With the infiltration of the androids, humans are forced like Subramanian in the movie, to scrutinise emerging human-machine relationships in a new light. Keywords: Disability Studies, Transhumanism, Ageism,

Transactive relationship, Humanoid Nursing Robots (HNRs)

In today's world, man and machine exist side by side. The company of machines has made human lives easier and more comfortable. Human beings are unique 'able' creatures who invented machines to assist them. But these machine partners were never considered equivalent to humans. With the advent of transhuman enhancements, this status quo has been trampled. Among the many ideas signified by Transhumanism, this paper problematises the theory's conviction that technological interferences are essential social requisites to overcome the physical limitations and needs experienced by humans. Without a doubt, machines are today an integral part of human existence. It is difficult to imagine a life without mobiles, computers, washing machines, mixers, or grinders. Contrary to this assumption the text chosen has at its centre Bhaskaran Poduval who has successfully lived without the assistance of the above-mentioned machines. The only assistance he requires is the constant companionship of his son in his ageing years. But due to certain selfish ideals and the youngster's intrinsic need to explore his limits the son Subramanian appoints an android robot in his place to care for and befriend his father. The complications this transhuman interference activates form the plot of the movie chosen.

The interface between disability, ageism, and transhumanism identified in this movie justifies the use of the tools provided by transhumanism and disability studies to analyse this text. Studying disability is "a prism through which one can gain a broader understanding of society and human experience" (Linton 118). The focus is on geriatrics-related enabling by humanoids. The attempt

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to mass produce Humanoid Nursing Robots is problematised in the Malayalam movie Android Kunjappan Version 5.25 by Ratheesh Poduval. Though presented with touches of humour the movie poses serious concerns regarding the standards prescribed for a normal, aged adult human body. Disability studies is a critical lens that views disability in the context of cultural, social, and political variations rather than through the lone lens of medicine or psychology. Transhumanism is a perspective that is both philosophical and scientific at the same time. It also questions the ethical consciousness encountered while dealing with an android human. The paper reads how the natural decline of health and managerial skills during ageing is viewed as a disability and how the modern progressive world tries to correct it with the assistance of technology. In this paper, transhumanism is identified as a quasi-medical ideology that tries to initiate a lot of therapeutical and human enhancement strategies.

The 2019 Malayalam release Android Kunjappan Version 5.25 by Ratheesh Balakrishnan Poduval captured the attention of young and old viewers alike. Talking about the film, the director Rathesh Poduval reveals: "Kunjappan was born out of my desire to explore the alienation mobile devices are creating in our society. It was inspired by the observation that nowadays people travelling in trains rarely speak to their co-passengers like we used to in the past. All of us are glued to our screens" (Aswin). For Ratheesh, the android in his movie epitomises the totality of all technological gadgets that keep the modern world engaged. The loneliness and resulting trauma felt by Bhaskaran form the central emotion of the film. The cast of the film includes familiar faces from the Malayalam film industry like Soubin Sahir, Suraj Venjaramoodu, Sooraj Thelakkad, Saiju Kurup, etc. Kendy Zirdo, an Arunachal Pradesh actress, plays the female lead in the movie. Except for the humanoid, affectionately called Kunjappan by the locals, all the other characters portrayed are realistic and relatable. Though thematically positioned from an ethical debate rattling the scientific world, the script intrinsically blends into the triumphs, trials and tribulations of a set of villagers in Payyanur, a rural village in Kerala. Unlike other popular science fiction movies, this authentic rural backdrop demystifies the milieu and normalises the interactions of the villagers with the Robot.

A science fiction movie, the film received critical acclaim and was a commercial success. The movie won three Kerala State Film Awards including the Best Actor award for Suraj, who essayed the role of Bhaskaran Poduval. The movie opens with Subramanian being pestered by his ageing father. The pair love and understand each other but want different things in life. "Have I told you not to ride a motorbike?" Bhaskaran reprimands his 35-year-old son. Subramanian retorts "Are you taking medicines as advised?" (14: 47-14: 52). Due to his father's irritable, interfering, egoist nature, Subramanian is made fun of by the villagers, insulted by neighbours and is unable to follow his dream of working in the city. In his introductory scene, Bhaskaran is disrespected and talked back to for making unwarranted opinions at a funeral in the neighbourhood. His son, Subramanian, is asked to take him away before he causes more trouble. This paper attempts to identify disability as a trope that underlies the thematic concerns of the movie enabling a new theoretical examination. A trope is a recurring image or idea that unifies a text. Extend of ableism when considered as the dominant trope opens the text for a figurative analysis. Further, a discursive reading addresses Bhaskaran's peculiar behaviour and demands as attempts to resist the chronological categorisation of the 'old' to resist the narrative of decline.

Human beings' physical and psychological dependence on androids, robots, cyborgs, medical HETs (Human Enhancement Technologies), etc., has increased in the past fifty years resulting in an intensified human-machine interface. Transhuman interventions are being tested to improve physical inabilities, cognitive powers,

and reproductive capabilities, and are even used to detect and rectify hereditary imperfections in the unborn foetus. "Transhumanists believe in the perfectibility of the human, seeing the limitations of the human body (biology) as something that might be transcended through technology so that faster, more intelligent, less disease-prone, long-living human bodies might one day exist on Earth" (Nayar 16). The increased use of humanoids in society, especially domesticated robots to help the elderly population, forms the premise for the discussions in this paper. Do humanoids enable or disable the elderly? At this juncture one is drawn to Rudyard Kipling's words of warning in his poem *The Secrets of Machines*:

We can see and hear and count and read and write!

... ...

But remember, please, the Law by which we live,

We are not built to comprehend a lie,

We can neither love nor pity nor forgive,

If you make a slip in handling us you die! (lines 12 and 37–40) The machines themselves claim that they are to be used with caution and are very inhuman in their approaches. This warning reverberates through the movie which begins and ends with scenes that exhibit rogue acts of robots as they go into self-protective modes. Without realising the impending complications, the protagonist's son entrusts the care of his ageing father to a machine.

Gerontologist Robert Butler coined the term ageism to address the prejudice and discrimination against seniors. Ageism Studies highlights how age is used as a proxy scale to rate qualities like competence, capability, or attitude. The villagers gathered at a tea stall taunt Subramanian, who wants to take Bhaskaran to Bangalore when he gets a job. They ask: "Are you taking your dad along to Bangalore? Did he get a job there?" Yes, prompts another villager: "There as a computer engineer. It is not a joke; Bangalore is a hub of engineers. Let his dad be one too. There are so many elderly engineers around. Old doctors

and engineers are the most sought-after ones" (10: 09-10: 18). This displays the reluctance of the public to assimilate the ageing Bhaskaran. They involuntarily connect ableism and ageism. Derogatory labels, comments, public mockery etc are the first signs of social exclusions. In the decline stages of their life, it is a rude and cruel shock when the aged are treated as differently abled. The trauma caused is of a different sort than that faced by individuals with other types of disabilities. Ageism is among the "most socially condoned, institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world" (Nelson ix). Ableism is a theory that calls into question the hypothesis that all bodies require 'fixing' if not functioning normally at all ages. Our bodies change over time and react to the environment in new ways.

Disability researcher Fiona Kumari Campbell refers to ableism as the "ideology of a healthy body, a normal mind, appropriate speed of thought, and acceptable expressions of emotion" that emphasise an impossible ideal of normality and in a way bifurcates humans into those who are normal and "the aberrant, unthinkable, underdeveloped, and therefore not really human" (13). The elderly population is mostly viewed as different and as a nuisance by modern families and society. As the film portrays, a lack of understanding of the technologies of normalisation like the use of modern gadgets, and systems of communication further disables the elderly population. Subramanian's actions stem from the assumption that diminishing physical and mental capabilities due to ageing has disabled his father. Does ageing cause disability? No, disability is not an inevitable part of ageing but the odds of experiencing disability increase with age. Simi Linton describes Disability Studies as a field that "explores the critical divisions our society makes in creating the normal versus the pathological, the insider versus the outsider, or the competent citizen versus the ward of the state" (2).

Bhaskaran is a normal competent insider. But unknown to themselves without outward malice and in subtle ways, Bhaskaran is discriminated against by Subramanian and the society. Disability is currently studied from three approaches – medical, social and cultural. Medical impairment or related disabilities are now not treated as the sole cause of diminishing capacities. The society also poses a few impediments to individuals with disabilities and indirectly supplements the creation of new ones too. The social model of disability identifies systemic barriers, derogatory attitudes, and social exclusion, which make it impractical for disabled people to attain their valued potential in society. These circumstances become qualifiers and quantifiers of discrimination and difference and generate new identity categories. Old people do not consider themselves incapacitated. However, the prevalent morbidity, functional limitations, and cognitive impairment that are usually highlighted by the predictors of perceived disability are found in the elderly population.

Bhaskaran has always been self-assertive and lived life on his terms. Bhaskaran is picturised as washing clothes, cooking, cleaning, gardening, attending funeral functions, etc. He cooks and serves food for his son. He has lived so far without the assistance of machines. He does not use modern gadgets like mixers, grinders, washing machines, mobile phones or the television. The peculiarities of this septuagenarian protagonist are revealed through the dialogues of the maid Karthiyayini:

He does not like food ground in the mixer or grinder. He wants his tea at four- and three times medicine on time. He is temperamental. So, I must keep my voice down and never talk back. Moderate salt no sugar and no singing. So, I shouldn't sing ... I have come across many a demon. He is barely the worst. (22:32- 22:52)

Though he does his daily chores his debility is revealed when he has a fall, and the doctor is summoned. The doctor informs that Bhaskaran needs care and rest and there is very little to be done medically. He asks Subramanian to get some external help to look after his father. The doctor treats Bhaskaran like an invalid talking loudly to him,

trying to sweet-talk the old man, etc. Bhaskaran's sharp retorts surprise the doctor and put the doctor in his place. The scene helps to reveal how the medical community also follows a stereotypical routine in their treatment of the elderly public and in the process unknowingly promotes a negative environment for the elderly population. It is to overcome the uncomfortable scenario that Kunjappan is appointed to replace human servants.

In the film, Kunjappan is a robot programmed by an Indian scientist Subramanian Poduval, presently stationed in Russia, to assist his ageing father Bhaskaran Poduval. The paper reads Bhaskaran Poduval as a representative of humanism who is disabled by the interventions of the robotic assistance provided by Kunjappan, a humanoid. Transhumanism is an offshoot of Humanism. Both streams of thought aim to improve human conditions-one by cultural upliftment and the other by technological assistance. As the movie opens one finds Bhaskaran physically abled, socially, and culturally well-settled and self-willed in his approach to life. His daily routine, religious affinity, interactions with friends and his nephew, etc bear witness to this. Android Kunjappan on the other hand is a humanoid robot specifically designed to help the elderly. It follows a set of instructions coded in him. Bhaskaran, a seventy-plus elderly abled citizen tries to override his loneliness and difficulties with the assistance of his new android companion. Unlike his son, this machine obeys all his commands without question. In a way like Dr Faustus, Bhaskaran enters into a secret pact with Kunjappan and tries to materialise his hidden fantasies and wishes. Very soon he becomes dependent on the machine not wanting it ever to leave his side. Revealing his emotional trauma when asked to return the robot to the company, Bhaskaran tells his son:

That piece of metal scrap has taken care of me for the last three or four months. Despite all my antics he fed me, bathed me, made me laugh. He never disobeyed me or talked back to me nor has he scared me till now ... it was he who made me feel alive. For you, he might be just a machine that does household chores. But for me, he is my son ... He cannot replace you either can you replace him. (1:57:13-1:57:59)

But Bhaskaran is shocked when Kunjappan itself explains its humanoid condition. "I am programmed to assist you. I am not human... They will take me back and my memories will be erased," says Kunjappan (2:10:22 – 2:10:42). By the end of the film, Bhaskaran is seen to lose his ableism and sense of identity and becomes a psychological wreck.

There is no trace of disability in Bhaskaran except for his sense of loneliness and fear of death. The untimely death of his wife and later that of his father causes Bhaskaran to lean on his only son for companionship. This yearning becomes an obsession as he ages. When Subramanian wants to take up a job in Hyderabad Bhaskaran asks, "What about me then?" (15:20). He instructs his son to "take up a job that would let you sleep in your own house" (8:35 - 8:37). The paper identifies Bhaskaran as healthy because he has no serious physical ailments. But he is in an "unadaptive environment" (Hahn 60). Bhaskaran demonstrates how social barriers and inappropriate treatment cause disability. The film portrays an old man struggling with disease and loneliness, making him stubborn and irritable.

Disability studies rejects the purely medical sense of disability for its emphasis on limitations on physical activity and efficiency. Due to biomedical preoccupation with limitations and inabilities, no attention is paid to the 'possibilities of modifying the environment ... or alternating the expectation that all men and women are required to possess a full range of physical, mental, and emotional capacities to qualify for membership in the human community. (Hahn 59–60)

His ageing, physically different body needs attention and care. Subramanian wants to explore the world. He is willing to take his father along. But it is not easy for the old man to follow his young son around. So, he feigns diseases or creates problems whenever Subramanian gets a job offer. Subsequently, Subramanian fed

up with his mundane life and father's tantrums appoints a maid and leaves for Russia.

In Russia, Subramanian comes to know about humanoid assistants, basically robots, built by his company. His girlfriend also talks highly about the robot who looked after her father during his last days. At Payyanur, his father had dismissed the maid and was hospitalised. Subramanian is stuck between his promising career and his love for his father. His company, Kyoto Dynamics suggest using a robot and encourages him thus: "But why would waste your life in a village doing a job that someone else can do?" (36: 17– 36: 19). They offer, as a trial run for four months, a robot that is customised to look after elderly persons. Subramanian programs the robot to function according to his father's needs. None of the maids or helpers he had appointed had been able to please Bhaskaran. Subramanian puts everything he knows about his father into the data system. This enables the robot to assimilate well and quickly into the structured social environment in which Bhaskaran lives. Disability is not always the impairment of the body the lack of an adaptive environment also prevents the body from engaging in a full range of tasks and actions. In such cases, the milieu can be described as a "disabling environment" (Hahn 64). The presence of Kunjappan 'enables' the disabling environment or so it seems during the initial phase of the relationship. Bhaskaran is shown as engaging in more productive activities than before.

On its arrival, the robot introduces itself as Version 5.0 by Kyoto Dynamics a Japanese company that specialises in robotics. The villagers and in due course, Bhaskaran also start thinking of this Robot as a human companion, a member of their village. The computer never fails to remind them of his coded knowledge and never speaks of himself as a human. It is the overimaginative comfort and love deprived humans who mistake the robot's pre-programmed daily chores for love and kindness. They dress him, care for him, and protect him as if he is one of their kind. The robot according to its programmed instructions plays

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chess with Bhaskaran, sings, visits temples, goes shopping, and helps the old man with medicines, exercises, and many other routine activities. The whole village is satisfied and adapts to it. Prasannan, Bhaskaran's nephew even declares: "A robot here is better than a son in Russia" (1: 09: 43 – 1: 09: 44). So it is a terrible shock when Subramanian comes asking to return the robot. "We need to return it. We were given it for four months...Neither the government nor the company will allow it. I don't have the permission for it. All the other robots from the batch have failed. This will harm you for sure," he tells his father (1: 59: 52–2: 00: 03). Just like any parent Bhaskaran refuses to believe that Kunjappan whom he loves like his son will harm him. He tries to escape with the robot into the wild - retreating to the lap of nature. The robot resists because it has not been programmed to do so. This is the final straw in Bhaskaran's disablement.

Kunjappan keeps repeating that a robot will never hurt its master. But the scene at the beginning of the movie shows otherwise. The movie begins with a glimpse of the fatal turn the robot is capable of. Bhaskaran, like many others, was an experimental human on whom the Version 2.5 batch robots were undergoing a trial run. It is difficult to say who was on trial – the machine or the human. The machine can be reprogrammed but Bhaskaran chances of recouping are almost nil. In his delirious state, he calls his son Kunjappan the name he used to call his robot confirming his disabled mind. On the other hand, the paper does not use this text to generalise transhuman interfaces. In the select movie itself, there is the mention of two other sets of elderly humanoid relationships. In the first case, the elderly person dies due to natural causes. The Hitomi's family still remembers how well the robot took care of their father. "He was Papa's best friend," says Hitomi. (35:13). In the second case the humanoid malfunctions and kills the elderly person it was supposed to care for. The machine went into self-defensive mode. These portrayals enable the director to juxtapose and highlight the exceptional bonding between the film's central duo - Bhaskaran and Kunjappan. The movie tries to rectify the misguided interpretation of the society especially the younger generation to categorise ageing humans as abnormal.

Foucault's concept of abnormality discussed in his lecture Abnormal also finds an echo here. Foucault discusses criminals and their unsuitable qualities that make them socially inadaptable. Looking at Bhaskaran one quickly notices his peculiar behaviour, mannerisms, and stubbornness making him an abnormal being. When Kunjappan arrives, he refuses to accept him as an insider. "Consider it as a child" requests Subramanian. His father retorts: "I am a burden to my own child, and now I must do with a machine. I don't want anyone here man nor machine" (41:22 - 41:43). But once left alone with the machine, he becomes an incompetent dependent citizen. It is Prasannan who first notices the degenerative changes in his uncle. He is surprised when Bhaskaran prepares Kunjappan's horoscope, dries his hair, makes him wear a mundu, and displays agitated behaviour when separated from Kunjappan. The robot was assigned to care for Bhaskaran, but Bhaskaran without any compulsion looks after Kunjappan just like his son. They play chess, go to the market, sing together, talk about love, read the newspaper, etc. On being separated from the robot he is so delirious and confused that he calls Subramanian, Kunjappa... shocking his son and the audience. The scene reveals the extent of Bhaskaran's delusions.

The discussion regarding the interface between disability studies and transhumanism is a vibrant and volatile arena. Morality, ethics, and religion all intersect. The film shows a temple scene in which Bhaskaran seeks permission for Kunjappan to enter a temple after the robot recites portions of the Hindu scriptures. But does a robot really comprehend the data coded in him at any level? This paper projects transhumanism as a stream of thought that has benefitted from commercialising disabilities. Kyoto limited in the movie represents the capitalist world. The Indian authorities have "signed an MOU in Japan to import 50 such Robots

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across in the next 5 years ... This is just a trial run" (1: 38: 01–1: 38: 02). Transhumanists seek the support of disabled people because they form a huge consumerist group. Most disabled people use assistive technology or prosthetics and are willing to modify their bodies and environments. But in the text, unfortunately, an unwilling Bhaskaran is left in the care and companionship of a humanoid which is still under research. "Two out of four machines that went for the trial run have failed. If anything happens to your father we have to stop our business ... We are done. It is for your own good" informs the director of Kyoto Dynamics asking Subramanian to return the robot immediately (1: 38: 51–1: 30: 02). Is Bhaskaran a guinea pig the corporate giants use to test their products?

Cessation of love, attention, respect, and patriarchal control over family members reinforces the elderly's perceptions of the loss of their power. Fear of death and hope for happiness and companionship are universal feelings that are not restricted to the elderly alone. Life and the body itself become treated as an object. The loss of independence, characterised by the ability to live, act, and travel without assistance is lost, fuelling the fear of dependency on senior citizens. These situational occurrences are expertly portrayed in the movie giving a visual adaptation of the condition and trauma suffered by elderly people. This paper tries to establish that "the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (Davis 1). It portrays how stereotypical notions about age and socially derogatory labels diminish the self-perceptions of one's capacity to fulfill social roles. It is at this junction that the transhuman devices interfere. There is a merging of environments, systems, and bodies moving rapidly towards a posthuman condition. In their effort to improve quality of life, Transhumanism becomes a disciplinary action that overrides the individual's basic right to live without crutches.

The human body is dropping its biological definitions as more

people benefit from pacemakers, brain implants, defibrillators, retinal prostheses, exoskeletons, and several other enhancement mechanisms. The prototypes are first tested on humans before they are massproduced. One must accept that monetary gain is not the lone agenda of transhuman interference. There is a genuine interest in human upliftment. Many improve or regain a healthy and comfortable existence through such inferences. Transhumanists consider the disabled body as an enemy that can become more adaptable by mechanical interferences. But many question the propriety of using an ageing normal adult body to capitalise upon. Kunjappan embraces the so-called three pillars of transhumanism- super-intelligence, super-longevity, and superwellbeing. Bhaskaran is the exact opposite. As the movie progresses the machine malfunctions and causes harm to Subramanian. On the other hand, Bhaskaran despite all differences of opinion and odds aids in the rescue of his son. The limitations of the rational brain are placed in opposition to the human intellect. The movie breaks the conviction that machines can replace humans to assist other humans without any glitches.

Clarifying and concluding the trans-machine thoughts and confrontations are Hitomi's words: "This is only a machine programmed by somebody. This is not like us, humans" (2:00:30 – 2:00:38). The concept of mass production of robots capable of assisting humans during their old age is highly relatable to the present generation who find it difficult to spare time to look after their ageing parents. The film questions the lack of human intelligence and empathy in human-produced machines. The human world is infiltrated with machines in more ways than one. Genetic engineering, cryonics, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology collude to disable humans. The film portrays how like our household and social media gadgets, robots are also becoming an indispensable part of our lives. From romance to ethical debates on religion, humanoid Kunjappan complements Bhaskaran in all activities of his life. He becomes the son Bhaskaran hoped Subramanian would

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metamorphose into. The episodes with Soudamini show how humans in their desperate loneliness are now left only with computers to share their innermost secrets. The film is shot from an Anthropocene point of view and concentrates on the emotional turmoil and threat to human life posed by humanoids. The film advocates improved understandings and the installation of policies that guarantee the physical and mental well-being of humans in an age of humanoid infiltrations.

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