

# An Interrogation of the Post human Ethics of Care in the Malayalam Movie “Android Kunjappan Ver 5.25

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## ABSTRACT

Posthumanism as a critical discourse, decenters the human in a postmodern world. Its diverse approaches and perspectives deconstruct the anthropocentric ideology, restructuring human integrities and identities in the contemporary technoculture. One important arena impacted by posthumanism is the ethics of care. This paper examines the posthumanist ethics of care in the Indian society. It specifically examines this ethicality in the light of posthumanism as reflected in the Malayalam movie, Android Kunjappan Ver 5.25, set in a village in Kerala.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, ethics, care, android

## I. INTRODUCTION

Posthumanism embodies the actualization of postmodernism's interrogation of the human subject. Postmodernism's scrutiny of the humanistic aspect of subjectivity resonates in the diverse forms of posthumanism. Posthumanism emerged in the early twenty-first century and perspectives on posthumanism range from its impact on the domain of health (Cohn, 2017), archeology (Fernández-Götz, 2021), education (Toohey, 2021) and spirituality (Ferrando, 2016) among others. Posthumanism challenges the hierarchical positioning of humans over other life forms, while simultaneously refuting the notion of humans as self-governing and completely delineated entities. Instead, it posits human itself as “an assemblage, co-evolving with machines and animals. It also calls for a more inclusive definition of life, and a greater moral-ethical response, and responsibility, to non-human life forms...” (Nayar 8). Posthumanism aims to refute the humanistic model of the Western Enlightenment that places humans at the centre of existence. It critiques humanism's anthropocentric, rationalistic, Eurocentric and patriarchal assumptions that marginalise not just most of human population but also other life forms. One important arena impacted by posthumanism is the ethics of care. This paper examines the posthumanist ethics of care in the Indian context. It specifically examines this ethicality in

the light of posthumanism as reflected in the Malayalam movie, *Android Kunjappan Ver 5.25*, set in a village in Kerala.

As a philosophical perspective, posthumanism challenges traditional notions of what it means to be human within the framework of technological advancements and evolving social systems. The traditional boundaries between human and non-human entities, such as animals, machines, and artificial intelligence erode under a posthuman interrogation and cease to exist as hermetically sealed forms. It encompasses a wider array of perspectives ranging from a critique of technological determinism, concerns about social justice and examination of the consequences of human actions on ecology. It also examines the ethical implications associated with technologies such as artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and biotechnology that challenge traditional understandings of human agency and responsibility. One such intersection between posthumanism and ethics is the ethics of care.

The ethics of care embodies the moral aspect in human relationships. The ethics of care is divorced from Kantian/deontological and utilitarian/consequentialist ethical theories that emphasize generalizable standards and impartiality but instead emphasizes the importance of affective responses in human 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.

A posthumanist analysis of the ethics of care attempts to uncouple 'care' from 'human' while exploring the potential of alternative means of posthuman care. There are various arguments that support this perspective. Firstly, a posthuman ethics of care seeks to provide a non-anthropocentric perspective that extends beyond the human to encompass non-human entities such as animals, ecosystems and even artificial intelligences. It underscores the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life forms within complex socio-ecological networks while rescuing care and moral consideration from occupying a purely human ambit. Secondly, the posthuman ethics of care critiques hierarchies and binaries such as human/animal, nature/culture, and mind/body. It seeks to dismantle hierarchical structures that privilege certain beings over others and perpetuate systems of domination and exploitation. Thirdly, this approach advocates for environmental sustainability, social justice, and the redistribution of care responsibilities within communities. It seeks a redressal of systemic inequalities that affect marginalized populations and lead to environmental degradation. Fourthly, the approach recognizes the ethical implications of technological advancements and their impact on relationships between humans and non-humans. 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.

Into such a posthuman ecosystem is introduced the *hobot* or the human care robot that 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.

Speculative representations that envision the provision of care by robots serve as valuable tools for contemplating and examining the ethical, aesthetic and political dimensions of posthuman care. One such representation is the 2019 Malayalam film, *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25*, directed by Ratheesh Balakrishnan Poduval. 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 Keraliya society where most able-bodied humans are employed in Gulf countries or have moved out of the state in search of better job prospects. The film then is a reflection of the anxiety felt by much of the aging community of the society who might dwell in big palatial homes funded by expat money but lack immediate familial relatives who would care for them. Poduval’s film examines this crisis in human care, the possibility of posthuman care and the ethical and moral dilemmas it throws up.

Care is an approach to morality that is basic to human existence. It is definitely a central tenet of human existence. The concern becomes primary median in Indian societies that contemptuously set themselves apart from distinct ‘western influences’ who do not care for their elderly and seem eager to confine them to 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 *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25* revolves Bhaskaran Poduval, 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. He keeps his only son, Subramanian, 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. Bhaskaran 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.

Subramanian gets a job at a Japanese Robotics firm in Russia and leaves for Russia 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 Hitomi, his girlfriend. She tells him about the robotic home nurse who took care of her father, ailing from Alzheimer’s, in Japan. Subramanian returns home with an Android Robot Version 5.25, developed by his firm, to care for his father. The film now shifts to the human-robot tussle as Bhaskaran refuses to engage with the robot. Slowly the robot insinuates into all parts of Bhaskaran’s life who becomes strongly attached to it. The non-human patience displayed by Kunjappan while dealing with Bhaskaran 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 Kunjappan (meaning short one) and is wrapped in a *mundu* to cover his 'nakedness'. Bhaskaran starts treating the robot as his son. Subramanian in the meanwhile realises that the android robot has a glitch that makes it kill those whom it provides care for. Subramanian and Hitomi rush to Kerala but Bhaskaran refuses to relinquish Kunjappan to them and runs away with the android to a forest. Kunjappan asks Bhaskaran to abandon him in the forest, which he refuses to do. Subramanian finally locates them and in a dramatic series of events Kunjappan attacks him, trying to strangle him. Subramanian is rescued by his father and they leave for home. Bhaskaran, in the last shot of the film, is seen mistaking his son for the robot and whispering his name, Kunjappan.

The film flags various important aspects of care-giving. On the one hand, it plays on the fear of every individual of being replaced by a robot. Bhaskaran's love for Kunjappan is complete so much so that he is worried that Kunjappan 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 Kunjappan is comprehensive. The robot succeeds where various home-nurses and servants had failed. Kunjappan is non-humane patient with Bhaskaran's grouchy ways, and non-judgmental when he helps Bhaskaran connect with his ex-lover, Soudamini.

Care-giving becomes a major issue especially 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.

This does not indicate supplanting human care but hybridizing and augmenting it. Critical posthumanism challenges the notion of human exceptionalism and calls for a reassessment the human-centric perspective that has traditionally been regarded as the unquestionable benchmark for care. The fact remains that the ethics of care cannot anymore be solely placed under the ambit of virtue ethics which is then juxtaposed against a utilitarian framework. The posthuman existence in a postmodern world, questions the ideology of human nature as normative while interrogating the purely regulatory role heretofore assigned to the ethics of care.

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