Life and (non)Living: Technological and Human Conglomeration in *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25*

Arya P J[1], Bhuvaneswari R[2]

[1]Research Scholar, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vandalur - Kelambakkam Road, Chennai - 600127, Tamil Nadu, India

[2]Associate Professor, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vandalur - Kelambakkam Road, Chennai - 600127, Tamil Nadu, India

Correspondence: Bhuvaneswari R, Associate Professor, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vandalur - Kelambakkam Road, Chennai-600127, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

In post-modern society, we (humans) share our space with machines. Though there is no doubt in the efficiency of the machines there is always a doubt in their reason. Machines being programmed cannot exercise reason like humans. Their assistance is limited to the commands designed by the engineer. The Malayalam movie *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25* pictures the limitations and advantages of one such robotic creation. The movie narrates the tale of an old man and his association with a robot which becomes his solace and companion. The film questions the association between humans and machines. It raises the fear of constructing and destroying the boundaries between the machine world and the human world. This article attempts to use the concept of cyborg introduced by Donna Haraway in 'Cyborg Manifesto'; though Haraway uses the concept of a cyborg from a Feminist perspective, the paper attempts to look at the relationship between man and machine using the concept 'cyborg'. This fusion of the living and non-living is sceptical and this anxiety is presented in the film. The film also captured the naivety of the commoners who are new to the monstrous world of machines. The paper's primary aim is to list how cyborgs transgress the limitations set by society. Another objective is to discuss the anxieties of the post-modern world when technology and life hold hands. The article considers the film a futuristic art that leaves a message to the viewers; cyborgs will become an inevitable facet of the human world.

Keywords: cyborg, Donna Haraway, machine, post-modernity, android

1. Introduction

Blurring the binaries, boundaries, and bondage is always revolutionary and has an enthralling effect on people. Donna Haraway in 'A Cyborg Manifesto', published in 1985 exploded the intelligentsia with her idea of cyborgs as an alternative to end binary distinctions in society. Thus, Haraway is often described as a Feminist Cyborg Scholar. According to Haraway, a "cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism" (Haraway, 2016, p.3). Donna Haraway uses the metaphor of a cyborg to break the boundaries of feminist and western phallocentric thoughts. Haraway considers cyborgs as a creature of the post-gender world; a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. According to Haraway, cyborgs are simultaneously humans and machines. She thinks that her writing about cyborgs gives her pleasure to notice how the very concept of cyborgs creates confusion in the boundaries.

The article attempts to use the concept of cyborg as explained by Haraway in 'Cyborg Manifesto' to analyse the Malayalam movie *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25*. However, the paper is limited only to the idea of the cyborg as explained by Haraway and thus avoids the feminist and socialist aspects attributed to the 'Cyborg Manifesto'. Thus, the focus is only on the meaning given to the term 'cyborg' by Haraway. The paper also tries to locate how the cyborg in the film *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25* transgresses the boundaries and standards set by the Kerala society pictured. The paper also inspects the aspects that machines and humans differ.

2. Methodology

The term cyborg was first proposed by Manfred E.Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in the September 1960 issue of the journal *Astronautics* in an article titled 'Cyborgs and Space'. In the postmodern world, the human psyche gets confused with the

enormous scientific advancements that blur existing distinctions in society. Machines, robots, humanoids, and cyborgs are terms that are closely associated. One term is evolved from the other by adding more aspects or features to the existing term. Machines were invented to ease human actions. A more advanced version of machines was seen in robots. Humanoids are machines that resemble humans. A cyborg can be a machine, a robot, or a human with technological implantations. Gregory Castle in *A Literary Theory Handbook* (2014) writes:

> 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' (1985) and *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991) counter idealist conceptions of human beings with a vision of the cyborg, a new model for describing the relationship in postmodernity between nature and science. Haraway argues that this vision is especially valuable for socialism and radical feminism, for the cyborg model opens subjectivity to hybrid collaborations with the non-human (animal, technological) world. (*A Literary Theory Handbook* p.339)

Donna Haraway uses the term cyborg to refer to a cybernetic organism that is gender-neutral and transgresses all boundaries. It is a creature of science and fiction that can question existing reality. "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism. In short, we are cyborgs" (Haraway, 2016, p.7). Haraway considers cyborgs as a posthuman, not just a transhuman. She uses the concept of cyborg as a metaphor to refer to the present condition of humans whose bodies are open to modifications and technological implantations.

According to Haraway, a cyborg possesses the values of a traditional human subject (living entity). However, a machine to date can never replace a human in certain aspects. This contrast between the living and non-living is questioned in the film *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25*. In postmodern society, cyborgs have become an integral part of human lives. Even though a machine helps in making our lives easy, there is always a condition where a human can only resolve the problem. For example, in this film, the Android is programmed in such a way that when there is a threat detected it is automatically placed in a self-defence mode that it will attack the person irrespective of whether the person is attacking or not. This failure in the programming can result in the death of the human assigned to be cared for. Thus, there are times when we realise that androids and machines are only non-living entities that can only aid human necessities but can never replace human reasoning. This thought leads us to Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* and the fictional character of Victor Frankenstein and the monster created from pieces of a human corpse. The concept of Frankenstein's monster is reiterated by Haraway in 'Cyborg Manifesto' when she describes a cyborg.

> The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private...Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg doesn't expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden…The main trouble with cyborgs...is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism. (Haraway,2016,p.9)

3. Writings on Cyborg

Manfred E.Clynes and Nathan S.Kline introduced the term 'cyborg' in the article titled 'Cyborgs and Space', which appeared in the journal *Astronautics* in 1960. In this writing, they explained the advantages of using cyborgs so that humans can explore. Clynes and Kline give the example of a rat with an osmotic pump beneath its skin so that it acts as a cyborg, it is a combination of biological and technological aspects.

Seith Giddings wrote a chapter for *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy* (2016), titled 'Cyborg'. In this chapter Giddings traces the meaning and the origin of the word cyborg and then analyses Haraway's influential essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs". Giddings then gives a short note on the major cyborg characters that appeared in popular culture including films. Giddings then goes on to trace the meaning of the word cyborg and thus refers to N Katherine Hayles's differentiation of actual cyborgs and metaphoric cyborgs. He analyses Haraway's writing as the initiator for debates on technology and culture.

Donna J Haraway in 'A Cyborg Manifesto', explores the man-human–machine continuum. She uses the term cyborg as a cultural metaphor to refer to the present situation where human bodies are subjected to different technological modifications as a part of medical and mechanical needs. Her concept of a cyborg reconfigures notions of a traditional human subject. Donna Haraway is credited with other works like *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields, Primate Visions, Simians, When Species Meet, Cyborgs, and Women, The Companion Species Manifesto,* and *Modest_Witness@ Second_Millennium.*

In 'Cyborgs and Communication' (2000), David Gunkel provides an idea of what is a cyborg, "the cyborg exceeds the concept of the human. It does not remain a mere enhancement or augmentation of 'human nature',...an ideological implosion of the concept of the human" (p.336).

> The cyborg, if we follow Haraway's formulation, is not just an enhanced or augmented human being.

It is simultaneously more and less than what has been traditionally defined as human. It is the product of an erosion of the concept and definition of the human. This erosion promotes communication between the terms of a categorical distinction, resulting in the thorough contamination of one by its other. For this reason, the cyborg is neither human nor its dialectically opposed other, that is, that in opposition to which the concept of the human has been initially defined and delimited (i.e., the animal and the machine).

On the contrary, the cyborg comprises a monstrous hybrid, or what Siivonen (1996)calls an "oxymoronic undecidability" (p. 227) that, like the feminist "metiza" of Gloria Anzaldua (1987) or Trinh's (1991) postcolonial "inappropriate/d other," is situated in between conceptual opposites' or, as Derrida (1979) might articulate it, is "living on border lines." In this way, the cyborg, in affinity with other figures and strategies of postmodern criticism, short-circuits binary logic, which constitutes one of the cornerstones of Western thought. ('Cyborgs and Communication',2000, p.335)

The article also remarks on Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline's article 'Cyborgs and Space' as a speculative essay that discussed the idea of manned space flights in the future.

Gregory Castle's *Literary Theory Handbook* (2014) includes short notes on literary and cultural studies theories and theorists. The work provides an introduction to readers regarding the choice and selection of literary and cultural theories for their research.

In *Posthumanism in Digital Culture: Cyborgs, Gods and Fandom* (2021) Callum T.F.McMillan analyses the terms transhumanism and posthumanism. McMillan defines the term transhumanism as the alteration and improvement of the body; a union between Technology and Science. The text also analyzed the transition from the human to the post-human period.

From Apes to Cyborgs: New Perspectives on Human Evolution (2020) is a book by Claudio Tuniz and Patrizia Tiberi Vipraioon on the history of the evolution of humans and the connection between the brain and mind. As the book concludes, the writers raise their opinions on the future of humans and the risks of artificial intelligence.

Humanizing the Posthuman in Powers, Wallace, Gibson, and Delillo (2016) is a Ph.D. thesis by Ahmad Ghashmari that investigates the relationship between humans and machines, the interrelationship between technology and humans, and also the presence of human agency in Techno culture. The thesis concludes that posthumanism does not bring an end to humanism instead it leads to a reappropriation of certain ideas that can bring in an embracement of the living and the non-living world.

4. *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25*

The Malayalam movie *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25* was directed by Ratheesh Radhakrishnan Poduval and was produced by Santhosh T Kuruvila. The national award-winning actor Suraj Venjaramood, Soubin Shahir, Kendy Zirdo, and Saiju Kurup played the lead roles in the film. The film can be described as a futuristic film that prepared the audience to think. The film was released in 2019 and earned several awards. It narrates the tale of an old man (Bhaskaran Poduval) and his son (Subramanian also known as Chupan) a mechanical engineer, who lives in Payyanur, a place in Northern Kerala, a land of cultural prosperity and political fanaticism. The old man throws occasional tantrums to keep his son in the village however the son leaves his father to the care of home maids to join his new job in Russia. This takes the story forward resulting in the son's return only to introduce the Android machine which becomes the old man's perfect caretaker. The film attempted to question the boundaries laid by humans and their doctrines. The introduction of Android in the village spurred discussions among the commoners and they started to spread rumours that appear like truth. Android machine becomes the talk of the village, it is given an identity, and the boundary between man and machine is seen blurred here. It became a cyborg in the minds of the villagers. The villagers started to consider it as a human, they talk to it, take care of it and even visit it as a guest. However, tragically the old man gets emotionally attached to the machine and he started considering the machine as his child. This results in the old man losing his sense of the real world only to end himself in a miserable state.

The film pictures a conflict between Science and the psyche of individuals. The mind and body duo of the old finds it difficult to accept Science and reality. The old living and the new living confuse the old man. The new aspects of Science like the Android machines bring curiosity in the naive villagers who think of the machine as a cyborg with human traits. The villagers endearingly give names to the Android machine. At the same time, with the arrival of the Android, Poduval learns new technological aspects like reading the newspaper online, video calls, online bill payments, etc. The old man, Bhaskara Poduval even takes the Android to the astrologer to prepare its horoscope. The following conversation between Bhaskara Poduval and his nephew Prasanan brings out the innocence of the old man who cannot comprehend technology and advancements in society.

> Prasanan: Hi Uncle! Where did you go?
>
> Bhaskara Poduval: To the Astrologer.
>
> Prasanan: Why?
>
> Bhaskara Poduval: Got his horoscope checked. Got a sanctified amulet for him...to ward off the evil eye. Let's go.
>
> Prasanan: Is everything else...alright? (*Android Kunjappan,* 2019*, 1:26:13-1:26:37)

There is yet another scene in the film which pictures the old man taking the Android to the tailor to get clothes stitched for it. Thus at this point in the film, we can connect to Bhaskara Poduval's mind, a man in his late sixties trying to comprehend the advancements of Science with his limited knowledge. Another heart-touching scene occurs when Bhaskara Poduval wipes off the raindrops on the head of the Android endearingly.

Thus, in addition to making our lives and living easy, the world of machines at times can bring catastrophic results for those who cannot comprehend the human and scientific aspects. The ignorance of the commoners is well presented in the film through various scenes and one such hilarious scene occurs in the temple when the villagers and priest stop the Android from entering the temple saying it is a foreigner and not a Hindu. The old man replies by saying it is made by his son, so it is a Hindu. Immediately the machine switches on its screen and puts up the pictures of Hindu Gods and starts chanting Sanskrit verses. Such scenes make viewers reflect and rethink the established notions in society. Ironically the Android machine used in the film was not real; there was a man inside the machine. The producers of the film revealed it only after the release of the film. The film however was able to stir thoughts in the minds of the audience regarding such a futuristic machine that can replace humans and their religious and gender affirmations to an extent. However, on the other side, certain instances remind us that machines are scientific objects that make work easy; they can never exercise reason like a human. Technology needs to be advanced to reach such a level wherein it can completely replace a human.

5. Living and Non-Living

There is an instance in the movie where the Android finds the earthly remains of the old man's father and wife as trash similar to ash. From this point, the film raises questions to spectators: Can machines or androids exercise reason like humans? Can a cyborg completely replace a human? Can the living and the non-living co-exist harmoniously? The movie thus raises speculation about whether there is an essential difference between reason and intelligence.

> Android: The cessation of life processes...occurs only in living organisms for various reasons including ageing, suicide, murder, disease, accident, and starvation...is known as Death. This does not apply to a Robot.
>
> Bhaskara Poduval: Many who have thought so have gone on to become photographic memories...and roadside busts for crows to shit on. You won't be different either. (*speaks mockingly*)
>
> Android: One can erase me. My memory could be deleted (*Android Kunjappan,* 2019, 1:27:18-1:27:43).

This conversation quoted between the robot and Bhaskara Poduval brings out the attempt of the makers of the film to bring out the difference between the living and the nonliving. This supposition is cleared as we watch the final scenes of the film. The non-living machines cannot exercise reason like humans; intelligence is also limited to the programmes encoded.

6. Conclusion

The film *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25* created a spur in society by raising discussions on the use of androids to replace human assistance for the bedridden, old and needy. The film highlighted the complications associated with the implementation of machines in human lives. There is a question of how robots can replace humans in all spheres of life. This is indeed answered in the film when the father leaves home with the android machine when he came to know that his son is going to take the Android away from him. The father finds it difficult to understand that the Android is only a human-made machine (non-living) that is programmed to perform in a particular way. His reasoning is limited to the knowledge he possesses. His old age weakens his reality and rejects accepting the fact that the android is a non-living entity and that it is a thing, not a human. He developed fatherly instincts for the android. Towards the end there is a scene in the film where the old man hallucinate his son's head in a helmet as the android and calls it affectionately 'Kunjappa' like how all the villagers addressed the robot. The film addressed this threat that technology holds for the old and naive. They lack a sense of the real and imaginary and develop a bond with the machine resulting in an emotional breakdown. This might even lead to a psychological breakdown as the movie suggested through the last scene. The film thus provides a critical analysis of scientific advancements and at the same time raises concerns over certain aspects when machines completely take over human action. The film thus ends on a sceptical note, leaving the audience to reason and figure out a possible solution to such technological interventions in society. Like Haraway described, a cyborg crosses boundaries

defined by humans and at the same time is a fusion of aspects, a hybrid, mixed state of being with an ambiguous fluid identity; hence, it is always better to have a hybrid state of living where life becomes complete with the union of the living and the non-living.

References

Castle, G. (2014). *The Literary Theory Handbook*. John Wiley & Sons.

Clynes, M. E., & Kline, N. S. (1960).'Cyborgs and Space'. *Astronautics*.
    https://web.mit.edu/digitalapollo/Documents/Chapter1/cyborgs.pdf

Gashmari, A. (2016). *Humanizing the Posthuman in Powers, Wallace, Gibson, and Delillo*.
    https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=kent147855115808631&disposition=inline

Giddings, S. (2016, October 23). Cyborg. *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy.*
    https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect190

Gunkel, D. (2000). We Are Borg: Cyborgs and the Subject of Communication. *Communication Theory*.
    https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00195.x

Haraway, D. J. (2016). A Cyborg Manifesto. *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press.
    https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.003.0001

McMillan,C. T. (2021). *Posthumanism in Digital Culture: Cyborgs, Gods and Fandom*. Emerald Publishing.
    https://doi.org/10.1108/9781800431072

Poduval, R. B. (Director). (2019). *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25*. India: Amazon Prime.

Senft, T. (2020). Reading Notes for Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto. *Research Gate.*
    https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343787096_Reading_Notes_for_Donna_Haraway's_Cyborg_Manifesto

Tuniz, C., & Vipraio, P. T. (2020). *From Apes to Cyborgs: New Perspectives on Human Evolution*. Springer Nature.
    https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36522-6