

## Breaking, Blurring and Redefining the Human-Humanoid Divide in Android Kunjappan Ver. 5.25

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### PHOTO ESSAY

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Android Kunjappan Ver. 5.25 is a Malayalam movie directed by Ratheesh Balakrishnan Poduval, released in 2019. In the lead roles, the movie holds Soubin Shahir as Subramaniam, Suraj Venjaramoodu as Bhaskaran and Sooraj Thelakkad as Kunjappan, the humanoid robot. Technically, the film resolves to bridge the filial divide between Bhaskaran, a conservative Indian father and his son Subramanian, a robotic engineer working in Russia. In this essay, I argue that artificial intelligence, if allowed to trespass into the lives of human beings by assuming an animated form, however mechanical like a robot, the agency initially divided between the two, wavers with the human ending up in humanising the mechanical counterpart. Through humanisation, while the robot grows humane, accepting the emotional hospitality between their unusual transaction, the host contrastingly distances his "self" from other human selves, de-personalizing his genealogical identity linked with the pedigree. Therefore, this gesture prognosticates how introducing a non-human character can create a rift between these humans associated with machines and humans of the everyday spectrum.

The latter strengthens the bond with machines and surprisingly binds with emotions rather than ulterior materialist intentions. The robot Kunjappan almost replaces human companionship and destabilises the ascertained meaning of a "cyborg", the metonymical fusion of a human hand with a technical body, by redefining himself as a talking robot idiosyncratically humanised. Hence, robots are a manifestation of A. I can cause domestic disintegration, leading to distrust and gradual disassociation between humans tending to robots and human beings fending for themselves. In a nutshell, including robots in private spaces wreaks domestic injustice upon humans when the machine toys with vulnerable human emotions. However, men's authority over the machines falters when the programming embedded in the latter goes haywire.

Thus, the agency shifts from the creator to the creation's mechanical apparatus, turning against the former. A few questions that popped in while watching the movie are below. Does the robotic interference in the human "habitus" create a socio-cultural chaos? Does a humanoid robot succumb to the Sartrean notion of "gaze", where the dominant beings relegate the other into a "spectacle"? In the movie, has the quasi-human species been otherised, objectified or embraced regardless of its identity? What challenges do the movie's characters face before and after the implantation of a robotic member in the domestic space? Specific instances from the movie will be analysed corresponding to Freytag's pyramid to substantiate the above points and answer the questions.

The movie opens in media res offering the mise-en-scene of a funeral where the gathering donned in white mourn Kunjappan. Following the Bali[i] According to the Malayalam calendar, the narrative dives deep into flashbacks, elucidating the filial and non-filial relations between the characters. Kunjappan, the first-ever robot introduced in Payyanur, a town based in the Kannur district of Kerala, makes several heads turn. The robot gains celebrity status and becomes the talk of the town. Famous for his systemic intelligence, folks flow in and around Bhaskaran's house to click pictures and consult Kunjappan for personal issues, seeking suggestions, directions and private information. Kunjappan is misinterpreted by the visitors as a seer when they procure access to infinite knowledge on social media platforms.

As the robot walks on the streets, he becomes an eye-candy machine, an object of gaze from the vantage of the human species, which optically perceives him as a spectacle, a thing meant to be commodified. A couple of aged women, during one of their visits, advise the older man to clothe Kunjappan throwing light on how he is viewed as "queer" for being shamelessly naked. Affirming post, Bhaskaran takes him to a tailor, stitches a shirt and pairs it with a mundu[ii] erasing the dehumanised gaze lingering on Kunjappan. The humanoid robot is also engendered male explicitly by identifying himself with the male ethnic attire worn in Kerala. However, Kunjappan is denied entry into a Hindu temple as the priest claims that temples forbid humanoids that lack a Hindu identity.



Icing on the cake, he recites Sanskrit mantras from the Bhagavat Gita, which baffles the pilgrims. In another scene where the family partakes in Pottan Theyyam[iii], Kunjappan accultures into Hindutva while his brow is plastered with the Hindu holy powder smeared by the deity himself. The intimacy between Bhaskaran and his tech-born son stuns the family members and pilgrims who witness the latter taking the former in private before sharing an urgent secret.



As a result of staying longer with Bhaskaran, the robot Kunjappan learns to read human minds, acquires the knowledge that humans are emotional fools and excels in the art of communicating like a human with a human despite being non-human. Likewise, Kunjappan earns the golden ticket gradually and carves himself as a family member, making Bhaskaran address him as mwone[iv]. He is officially christened as a son, and the bond between Kunjappan and Bhaskaran takes a significant leap as they act like father-son in public and private spaces. Unlike his biological son Subramanian, Kunjappan does not shy away from attending to his father by towelling his wet hair dry after his riverside bath. The distance widens between the real father-son duo as the father prefers Kunjappan over Subramanian.

Various scenes depict how Bhaskaran and Kunjappan are joined at the hip to such an incredible extent that Kunjappan procures his horoscope when the former takes him to an astrologer. No wonder when Bhaskaran reassures the life of Kunjappan, believed to be at stake, to be reclaimed through performing Mrityunjay yagna[v]. Involuntarily, Bhaskaran grows away from his biological son Subramanian while simultaneously growing closer to Kunjappan when he indulges in a secret online chat with Saudamini, a long-lost love of his youth days whom he could not marry owing to their caste differences.



The robot is ushered into the family by Subramaniam, who chooses to offer a makeshift non-human companion before he leaves for Russia for his work. The movie's exposition introduces the curmudgeon father, Bhaskaran, who smirks at sending his son abroad. He is also an old-fashioned man who is used to a traditional lifestyle, right from cooking to watering the plants all manually by himself. In the first phase of the movie, the robot is controlled by humans, and Subramaniam creates a specific set of algorithms bound with instructions for the robot so that his father does not need to struggle but gets accustomed to a sophisticated life. The rising action is the part where Bhaskaran undergoes a change of heart after falling sick. He realises that machines are profoundly virtuous and deserve to be attested with a status beyond humans. Kunjappan, the robot, acts as a doctor, giving him food and medicines like Bhaskaran, the patient, is his father. Hence begins the second phase of the movie when Kunjappan wins the host's trust, befriending him and subtly gaining the agency to switch the dichotomy from human/machine to machine/human. Further, ingeniously masking the fact that Bhaskaran is led into the intricacies of the digital world, the hegemony of artificial intelligence takes over his beliefs, principles, culture and lifestyle. Only at the cusp of crisis does the movie's climax reveal that the robot is one of the defective pieces deliberately planted in the name of an experiment for a predetermined duration by Subramaniam's capitalist boss. This cruel gesture of his boss elucidates how a human can also become so heavily mechanised that it can lead to undervaluing emotions over the excess thirst for prospective material success. According to him, the father of Subramanian is an unproductive commodity waning in age; hence, he is deemed suitable for experimentation, knowing well that it can be fatal. Kunjappan and Bhaskaran elope when Subramanian promptly seeks to dispatch the machine abroad. The third phase exposes the malfunction as the assemblage technically breaks down due to erroneous programming and unleashes disorder by re-acting on the surrounding human beings, jeopardising their lives.



The scene where faulty Kunjappan goes rave and unwittingly strangles the neck of Bhaskaran is a heart-wrenching example.

The falling action of the movie is when the situation becomes highly critical when a madman from their town jumps into the scene, hell-bent on strangling Kunjappan to death, and launches an ambush in the remote part of the woods. The internal error coinciding with the induced physical abuse kills Kunjappan, the humanoid robot. However, the movie ends on a happy note when Bhaskaran understands that robots cannot wholly replace the love, compassion, and care exchanged between human beings. Although he is traumatised over the machinic suicide, he reunites with his biological son physically by conceding to return home, marking the resolution. He is emotionally touched by the quintessence of a son's unwavering love for a father and heartily pays gratitude.

### Works Cited:

[I]Karkidaka Vavu Bali, also called Bali, is the sacrificial ritual performed in memory of the departed souls of ancestors. It is a part of the Malayali Hindu culture.

[II] Mundu refers to dhoti in Malayalam.

[III]Pottan Theyyam refers to a folk culture in northern Kerala where the lower caste people ritually impersonate the divine to break the caste barriers. The upper caste people bow down to them in reverence.

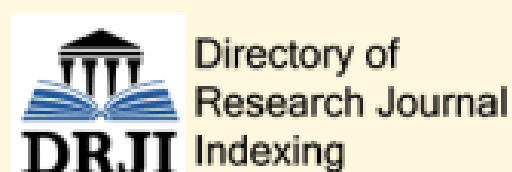
[IV]Mwone is a term for endearment for a son in Malayalam.

[V]It is a Hindu sacrificial ritual made in exchange for lengthening the duration of an individual's lifetime on Earth.

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### About the Author

Naganandhini N.R, a passionate literature student, is a poet since her late teenage years. She hails from a town in Tamil Nadu recognized by the epithet "Niagara of India". Her pen, the penchant wand she calls, is a witness to more than thousand literary pieces. A varied range of quotes, poems and fragmentary anecdotes embody her literary spectrum. In addition, recently she has produced a humorous series of thirteen stories written in the manner of episodes encompassing her campus life at EFLU, Hyderabad. Her poems endorse people, places and events that either affect or attract her in an uncommonly striking manner.

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