Article
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Reading Dystopia and Reality from *Alphaville* to *Android Kunjappan*

"The dystopian is always and essentially what in the language of science fiction criticism is called a 'near future': it tells the story of an imminent disaster -ecology. Over population, plague, drought, the stray comet or nuclear accident-waiting to come to pass in our own near future." Fredric Jameson.

The sci-fi film *Alphaville* was perhaps the first film depicting the scare of computer and related applications of artificial intelligence (AI). Godard depicted the early phase of computerization in France in 1965 and the film was shown in Kerala in 1980s while we (the film lovers) were hurrying from one place to other to attend the film festivals conducted by the cultural activists and film societies. Perhaps *Alphaville* was the precursor to the postmodern dystopian films. At that time Godard was well known with his new techniques of jump cut introduced in *Breathless*, paving the unorthodox filmic approaches and breaking the traditional moral codes. Indeed, the philosophical and cultural mood of Paris was conducive to encourage film makers like Francois Truffaut and Jean Luc Godard to indulge in unseen and unfamiliar visualizations. The presence of Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir with the astonishingly new styles in life and philosophy had exerted influence on Godard. Actually, the intellectual climate in the post-war France was oscillating between Marxism and Existentialism. It doesn't mean that the intellectuals of Paris moved towards right wing political approaches. On the other hand, they wanted to fill the lacunae and move towards a more democratic and inclusive left. The attempt of Godard in his films was to dismantle the traditions by introducing the unfamiliar ways of life and images. *Alphaville* exhibited his commitment to a new bio-political perspective by filming the techno-centered world to come in the future and the inherent dangers of monolithic positivism.

The foresight of Godard depicted in his *Alphaville* has nowadays become somewhat real with artificial

intelligence and related technology playing prime roles in global economy and politics. The gradual fading of political utopia with the dismantling of socialist states along with the rise of techno capitalism has produced pessimistic and appalling creative discourses in many parts of the world. The utopian optimism of the past had a role in the creation of resistance movements and socialist approaches throughout the world. The sweeping changes in technology and political arena has created ambiguities and ambivalences in the cultural activities and creative products. Such aporias have been problematized in theory by scholars in many parts of the world. The pessimism and fright of the new world order has given rise to politics of revivalism as well as aporetic dystopia. The dystopian narratives illustrate the antagonistic aspects of the dream world. George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* was written in 1949 as a reflection towards the totalitarian undemocratic attitudes of the state and the party. The protagonist of the novel Winston Smith meets a girl called Julia and thereby subjected to unbearable oppressive haunting by the ruling party. Similarly, Lemmy Caution in the *Alphaville* falls in love with a girl called Natacha who doesn't know the meaning of love and further developments show the calamities inherent in the fully automatized world to be established in future. Instead of political totalitarianism that Orwell pictured the film focuses on the totalitarianism of technological progress. The warning message of *Alphaville* gets theorized only in 1980s with the publication of Francois Lyotard's *Postmodern condition, a report on knowledge*. The first chapter of the book was on IBM and the whole arguments focused on epistemological and ontological issues resulting from super computers and the economy that controls them. Although the film *Alphaville* was released too early to predict the hazards of the technology centered world the viewers widely accepted it because of the unique filmic style Godard alone could express at that time. Indeed, the criticism of the positivists were there in vogue because it was so early to accept such a catastrophic development before 1970s.

The democratic perspectives of society suffer in between utopia and dystopia since the realities of organic existence need freedom to exist and survive without being mutilated by the horrors of any kind. Human life is not only rational but also emotional. The intellectual discourses in France after the second world war had the aporetic character oscillating between socialism and individualism on the one hand and technological development and organic life world on the other. Although Roland Barthes didn't accept Godard's invitation to act as the professor in *Alphaville*, the invitation reminds us the intellectual climate wherein the sci-fi *Alphaville* was filmed. The techno centered world creates a parallel system of artificial intelligence with its own logic and glossary. Indeed, the creation of such artificial intelligence are presumed to be within the control of human intelligence. Unlike other machines the production of artificial intelligence has led to rapid changes in the production process itself. The production and reproduction of objects has been changing the politics of our aesthetic and ethical perspectives. The inland/outland binary and the logical/illogical binary in the *Alphaville* clearly indicates the necessary outcomes of production of artificial intelligence. The replication of production and reproduction leads to the accumulation of too much wealth and the melting of much of the profane codes of life world. *Alphaville* problematized the inhuman aspect of newly arising technological world controlled by artificial intelligence.

The prescience and allegories in the sci-fi *Alphaville* posit one of the cardinal issues before the future world to come with all huge master computers and the consequences in different realms of life. One who is searching the meaning of **love** in the film and the one who was shot dead since he "**wept when his wife died**" represent the inhuman discussed by Francois Lyotard after some decades. Indeed, the inhuman is non-emotional and automated individuals strictly following the dictates of the technological world. He or she follows the either/or method of binary marking, accepting or rejecting one or the other on the basis of assessment of success or failure. Then the success or failure of the accumulation of wealth becomes the measure of good and evil, the truth and

untruth. The reduction of the human to modes of efficiency and expediency to attain profit and amass wealth based on the ideology of "development" has become the part and parcel of techno-capitalism. All emotional and ethical judgments become obsolescent in the eyes of technocratic order. Alpha 60 is the computer that controls the system in the sci-fi film determining the social behavior and creating the new social order unknown to the pre-computer world. The corridors of the glass and metal buildings house those who are devoid of emotional sensibility. The neon lighted city as a whole towards the nightfall appeared as a peculiar space for those who keep away from the social etiquettes. The scene of people being executed because of their "illogical behavior" is the key to enter the story of the full movie. What is being done illogically by human beings is the deeds or expressions such as weeping or caressing as and when they had occasions to behave emotionally. Godard actually expresses the fear of a future world without poetry and conscience and in that way puts forth the warning towards the utopia of the so-called developed state of existence. The dystopian narratives become politically progressive since the blind utopia of development ignores both human beings and nature.

At present the whole world has been witnessing a totally computerized techno capitalist social order and the ideology of technical development has become more aporetic than ever. Each and every corner of the world experiences the dilemmas of the technological development. Not only developed countries but also third world countries have been creating the new technological social order despite prevailing illiteracy, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, hunger etc. In this regard Marx had presumed the inevitability of developing the mode of production and the fact that the capital has the power to accumulate as well as to traverse boundaries. Unlike early capitalism the tecno-capitalism or the high capitalism of the post-industrial phase has led to globalization without boundaries. The boundary of fetishization has become schizophrenic. (*Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari).

Kerala has certain unique features compared to other states in India. Kerala despite its underdeveloped economic production has also become part and parcel of the new economic order and globalization. Such a development occurred through the Kerala's work force distributed across the world. First of all, the blue- collar workers from Kerala left to the Arabian gulf countries and later the newly educated technocrats went to the Western countries and US. Consequently, a kind of postmodern pastiche began to appear in the cultural arena and the films also started to bear the marks of these changes. As Deleuze and Guattari rightly pointed out only capital and labor matters in the newly developed situation where the horizon of capital seems schizophrenic or cynical.   In such a world a technocrat from an underdeveloped village of Kerala moves towards the most developed economic production as it is unveiled in the film, *Android Kunjappan*.

Android Kunjappan Version 5.25 directed by Ratheesh Balakrishnan Poduval is a Malayalam film released in Kerala in 2019. The dystopian film was well received and became commercially successful. The film presents a robot just like the computer Alpha 60 in the *Alphaville*. As stated earlier Kerala is a unique state with high literacy and full-fledged consumer culture. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that all the consumerism and market functioning depend wholly on the money brought from outside. (That is why Kerala economy is often referred to as Money Order economy.) The protagonist of the film *Android Kunjappan*, Subramanian also called as Chubban is compelled to go abroad to find a job with his degree in mechanical engineering. His father Bhaskara Poduval does not want his son to go away from home as he will be left alone because his wife has already expired. Anyway, like many of the Keralites finally Subramanian also leaves the country with his father's partial consent to serve in a Japanese robotic factory situated in Russia. Subramanian had to find out a solution to look after his father save him from his loneliness. While working in the robotic factory in Russia his fiancée suggests him to take home a robot so that his father will be pleased to get all the required assistance from it. Subramanian agrees with her and takes home the robot and thenceforth starts the

dystopian story in the idyllic village. Subramanian exhibits a kind of ambivalence since he couldn't resist the new economic order and in a way his father, Bhaskara Poduval despite his insistence on tradition also innately wished his son to be part of new economic order. That is why his nephew reminds him that Subramaniam was sent by him to study Engineering knowing that the job opportunities for such education are lacking in Kerala. Otherwise, he would not have sent him to become a mechanical engineer with no job opportunities for such technocrats in Kerala. Besides the nephew adds that had he been sent to engineering studies his father would have died in gutters without getting any attention. The ambivalence is a kind of game arising out of bad faith and sending a false message to the community that they are committed to maintain the tradition. The commoners sitting in the tea shop discuss such jokes as to make the spectators laugh and they being the real sufferers of the new economy are being used as the source of amuse and objects of mockery. Actually, the elite of the traditional feudal society maintain the central stage with the marginalized remaining where they had to in the past. The poor and the oppresses become poorer and more agonized and the traditional elite remain elite organic intellectuals.

The question of love as an emotion and the process of accomplishing the emotion becomes the subject matter of discussion in and outside Bhaskara Poduval's house. The use of machines enables man to do lot of things without any sweating. The machine is even capable of replacing human beings. "One of the most spectacular developments during the 13.8 billion years since our Big Bang is that dumb and lifeless matter has turned intelligent. How could this happen and how much smarter can things get in the future? What does science have to say about the history and fate of intelligence in our cosmos?" (Life 3.0 Max Tegmark, 2017). The robot arriving in the village and the outcome denotes the doubts and questions lingering around artificial intelligence all over the world. However, the film brings forth the aporetic postmodern social neuralgia with the juxtaposing of local life and folklore. From early modernity onwards, the problem of machine

alienation and industrialization had been topic of debates in culture and philosophy. In *Modern Times* Chaplin did it in a meaningful way to impart the sense of becoming man a mere cog in the mechanical world rather than an intelligent worker in the massive production unit. Now that things have changed in such a way that machines have started to act as thinking beings and production and reproduction of the commodities have turned to a new juncture. The robot arriving in the village creates an unbelievable atmosphere. G. Aravindan had filmed the arrival of electricity in the village as a bad omen and dangerous event in the cinema, *Oridathu* (1987). The story of the film *Oridathu* was the efforts done to bring electricity to a remote village and its aftermath. Aravindan despite his craftsmanship had imbibed the spirit of feudal past and somehow being averse to modernity. The electrification of the village leads to lot of deaths from birds to man and the change in the temple lamppost to electric light spoils the serenity and peaceful existence of the village. The film *Oridathu* got so many awards that might have influenced the like-minded nostalgic judges. Although the Kerala has all the potential to develop economically the state remained economically underdeveloped since the ideology of the nostalgic past being consistently perpetuated an anti-development mind-set by the organic intellectuals hailing from the elite feudal class. Anyway, presently the left government of Kerala seems to have broken this nostalgic revival spirit produced by such elites. The nostalgia of the poor, oppressed, subaltern, women and transgenders are different from those elite feudal intellectuals and artists. They instead would remember the walls that existed in between people, the dark and unlit pathways their forefathers had to traverse after the dawn to dusk labor in the paddy fields, the kerosene lamps feebly lighting and the smoke in their huts as well. They might remember the coconut leaves thatched huts leaking while monsoon and their poverty ridden past where they were even denied temple entry. Aravindan as done in his other films *Pokkuveyil* (Twilight,1982) and *Kanchana Sita* (1978) in *Oridathu* also neglects the social fabric and ideology wherein social interactions and alienations take place. Unlike G. Aravindan Ratheesh Balakrisnan Poduval take care to avoid the contempt

of modernization and modern values. Instead Poduval creates an ambivalent aporetic situation wherein man is caught in between technological and scientific progress and the traditional values. The film jumps to the paraphernalia of artificial intelligence (AI) from the archaic value systems of the village.

Indeed, the machines especially robots bring some kind of alienation due to the lack of human touch. Bhaskara poduval exhorts his son that love is not duty, it is an emotion. Before leaving the home, Subramanian tries to provide a servant at home to fulfill the needs of his dad. After all his dad rejects the offer insisting on the emotional attachment between son and father. When he brings the robot from Russia his dad, Bhaskaran shouts at it and refuses to accept its presence at the first sight. He sees it as something made of metal without flesh and blood and hence imply the lack of human emotions. The dystopian narratives depict the pessimistic aspect of the technological development such as the Jurassic park with the freight of an all-engulfing monster to come in the future. The robot also finally leads to a catastrophic end. The film could attract the spectators since it has all the elements of a postmodern aporias. The caste, rituals and the folk life are embedded in the discourses of the new globalized era. Bhaskara Poduval is always concerned with the caste hierarchy and his son accordingly introduces even the robot as belonging to the upper caste of Japan in a mocking way. It is simultaneously mockery and assertion of the tradition of caste system.

Subramaniam introduces the robot to his dad and the robot responds by calling him Mr. Bhaskaran. Here Bhaskara Poduval transforms into a global citizen accepting the new secular codification. In Alphaville there was a computerized world with new codification and logic and those who violated the coded principles were considered illogical and thereby led to execution. The normal pre-computer life-world was branded as outland or foreign land and the person arriving from outside was treated as dubious character. Bhaskara Poduval who does not like grinding corns in mixie, cleaning clothes with washing machine and such household tools gets accustomed with the Robot as soon as he loses his

suffixed caste identity and transformed into Mr. Bhaskaran. With this change he even talks about a world without caste and religion to be solemnized in future. The recently released film *The Great Indian Kitchen* also problematizes the stubbornness of the male members of the society insisting on traditional etiquettes and such beliefs in machine free kitchen leading to the suffering of the women. Mr. Bhaskaran's nephew who is always a helping hand to his uncle on seeing and wondering before the robot introduces himself to the robot specifically insisting that he is Poduval. By suffixing the caste titles such as Nair, Nambiar, Poduval, etc., the upper caste people of Kerala emphasize their superior position in the hierarchy of caste society. The director of the film too uses such a suffix and exhibits his status in the social structure of the pre-modern society. The social reform movements and various Kerala renaissance movements focused on the elimination of caste and in this regard Sri Narayana Guru, Ayyan Kali, Chattambi Swami and many others fought cultural war in the public sphere to get rid of caste malice.

The unique development of Kerala commenced with the early 20th century renaissance movements and the left political forces coming to power through ballot in 1957. The so called "liberation struggles" (Vimochana samaram) against the left govt in 1959 led to the suspension of the state govt. by the congress led govt. of India. The so- called struggles were led by the orthodox feudal and communal elements of Kerala to escape from the land reforms introduced by the first elected left govt. of Kerala. Here it becomes relevant since the revival and strengthening of traditions and caste really got a second occasion through the struggles undertaken by communal and caste political unity and coalition against the left. As a corollary the left progressive reform movement had to retreat and resort to a very slow pace and even stuck to some extent. By adding a scene to mock at the recent women's movement for Sabarimala temple entry the film erases the real political forces behind the retrogressive movements.

Subramoanian after assembling the robot and set it to work walks with it/him and shows each and every part of the old house so that the robot should get

accustomed with the locations within the house in order to get acquainted with all the required assistances to his dad at the house. It includes kitchen and backyard of the house. Meanwhile Subramaniam takes him to the room meant for pooja, and tells him it is the room for pooja. Immediately the robot retorts who is pooja, again in the tune of a ridicule. Subramaniam shows the urns containing his mother's mortal remains as ashes to be flown into the sacred rivers and the rejoinder from the robot becomes a mockery. When the robot provides such replies as ashes are good and useful as fertilizers the robot and its utterings become an anti-thesis to the tradition and belief. The aporias of the postmodern society with people oscillating between tradition and modern scientific views have been serving the witty pleasures of the audience. Bhaskaran and his son lives in a globalized village with the amenities of technological development and simultaneously bear the weight of caste suffixing Poduval with the proper names. However, this ambivalence is frequently reminded by the dialogues. All such mockeries are cloaked in self esteem and pomp of the caste ridden past.

Actually, the process of "thingification" or reification as described by Fredric Jameson (Fredric Jameson, The Cultural Turn, Verso,2009) is the social attitude in a commodified society. It becomes a kind of approach to the workers, especially the weaker section. It occurs in such a society where having replaces being. The horizon of commodification reaches the peak. Every relation is mediated by the object with which social status is measured. Herbert Marcuse had discussed the way the servants working in the kitchen become just "things". The adults in the houses mention them not by name but as "this", "that"., etc. (Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man). Before the arrival of the robot servants were brought to the house to assist Bhaskara Poduval. The humor related to her dialogues and retortions actually reflect the feudal reification persisting in the country side. Everybody laughs on seeing the servant sleeping and snoring on the chair as if she has committed a foolish act. She has not done any mistake except taking a nap while she was free. The elite people can't bear with such acts of the weaker section even though they relentlessly talk on class prejudice. Economy

and technology alone do not change the socio-cultural approaches. The advent of train brings the possibility of travelling together, but never the togetherness of the mind. Mahatma Gandhi was kicked out of the train in South Africa due to the racial prejudice and hatred fostered by the ideology of color supremacy. The caste system in India is more gruesome and inhuman in building the prejudice. The worries about the caste of the servants as well as the robot really send the message that Bhaskara Poduval never wanted the lower castes to enter the house. Despite all the wellbeing situation prevailing in the villages the age-old caste system and the allied etiquettes are simultaneously maintained in the society.

The people in the village are mystified to see such a costly machine serving the old man as good as a human being and their earlier derision and mockery turn into a kind of wonder and veneration. When the son, Subramaniam returned to take back the robot and starts his erstwhile routines, his father Bhaskara Poduval and the neighbors become worrisome. When Subramaniam asked his dad to put off the robot, his dad asks," whether it is a machine to be put off", implying that it has become a humane presence with which he could comply with. More over he did not hesitate to say that it has become his "son" and he wanted it to follow him where ever he goes. It is the robot that helped him to chat with his old fiancée through the face book. While Subramaniam helps his dad to bathe in the nearby pond the woman peeping from the neighborhood terrace whispers, "wherefrom Bhaskaran gets so much money to bring new robots." Here the peeping women knowingly or unknowingly displaces the son of Bhaskaran with the machine as if in a dream. When Subramaniam does the work earlier carried out by the robot the onlookers downgrade/upgrade him to the costly robot/machine. The binary of man/machine gets erased at a particular juncture in the house and it leads to new conflicts. Subramanian wanted to take back the robot as his boss compels to return it. Towards the end of the film Bhaskaran absconded the house with the robot in order to hide the robot from his son and to avoid it being taken away. Bhaskaran's attachment with the robot and its service along with its lineage of Caste/Religion etc., alludes to the fetishism while the

unexpected end with the injuries by getting strangled by the robot signify the pessimistic and fright ridden situation of the technological boom. The robot does not fail to utter the slokas from Bhagavat Gita to prove its Hindu upper caste identity. Most people visiting Kerala temples do not know such slokas and the scene with the chaos related to the temple entry of the robot again asserts the reclamation of the pre-modern caste values.

The tragic end of the film signifies the anxiety and fear towards the creations of machines with artificial intelligence (AI). There was an outland/inland binary in Alphaville whereas such a binary vanishes in the Android Kunjappan. The machines with AI have started appearing in the villages and during the first phase of Covid-19 pandemic spreading across the world the news about a similar robot working in a hospital in the same district of Kerala to serve food and medicine to the patients appeared in media. Subramanian's boss in the Japanese company had made it clear that the robot was sent for advertising rather than sale. The hate or mockery towards the machines lasts only until it reaches within the hand-stretch. Instead of maintaining the logic of machines and artificial intelligence in a separate sphere as done in Alphaville Mr. Poduval's film tames the machine in such a way as Buddha was tamed to fit the caste system in the history of our country. The stories of globalization in India are not as homocentric as Dipesh Chakraborty conceived. The stories of globalization have become vivid and multi-polar in India. In the Indian context it takes the turn to reconcile with pre-modern values; the Prime Minister's letter to the local governing body, Panchayat alludes to the pro-corporate, pro-techno rule with the mixing up of all inhuman orthodox aspects of the feudal past. While the local government or the Panchayat haunts the machine and its owner, the Prime Minister of the country sends the letter to save it along with its owner Bhaskara Poduval. While the local govt. seizes the robot and penalizes the owner of the robot the Prime Minister of the country by sending the fax message rescues the robot and Bhaskara Poduval and thereby comply with the dominating ideology of the present ruling class in India. The innate dilemmas of the ruling hegemonic ideology find expression in two ways in the film, one as nostalgia of a golden past and secondly as the dystopian danger inherent in machines. Both of them keep the country under manual scavenging to slavery of women in the domestic life. The absence of dialectical approaches towards toward technological developments freezes the mental and physical progress of the life world.

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