

Ontological Reconfiguration of Human: A Posthumanist Reading on the Movie *Anbe Sivam*

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the positioning of human through a posthumanist reading on the Tamil movie *Anbe Sivam* (2003) directed by Sundar. C. The paper argues that the film works as a catalyst to elucidate the ontological social change beyond the mere activism. The film decentres the notions of autonomous human and presents the relationship of human with another human and animals. Though the movie echoes humanistic perspectives apparently, it brings out the relationality of the humans. Consequently, the paper demonstrates the interconnectedness that nurtures the existence of humans. Through a close reading, the paper centres the discussion on the representation of immanence on the ground of interdependence as the film posits love, compassion and empathy. It draws the theoretical concepts of Rosi Braidotti, Gilles Deleuze and other few theorists to support the study as the south Indian film is placed in the western contemporary concept posthumanism.

Keywords: Ontology, posthumanism, interdependence, immanence, existence.

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Introduction

Anbe Sivam [translated to English as 'love is God'] (2003) is a Tamil language movie directed by Sundar. C. The actors, Mr. Kamal Hassan and Mr. R. Madhavan are the protagonists of the movie. The movie is about a journey from Odisha to Chennai taken by the two prominent characters, Nallasivam and Anbarasu. It becomes a life- changing travel for the latter. The transformative journey unveils the relational existence of humans with other humans and animals through the character, Nallasivam. His character is portrayed as a person who lives with physical disabilities after a traumatic accident. He has a scarred face and walks with a limp. He is delineated as a profound humanitarian. On the other hand, Anbarasu is depicted as a self-centred capitalist in the beginning of the film. Later, he pursues the path of his friend, Nallasivam. According to Sujatha Narayanan, script assistant of the movie, "*Anbe Sivam* is a milestone film for all of us...It's the first film in Tamil cinema to show a beautiful bond between two male friends who come from extreme backgrounds and embrace different ideologies" (The Indian Express, 2019).

The film also encompasses the themes like communism, altruism and atheism. Through the depiction of these themes in the film, it is evident that the humans are the relational beings and they cannot function as one whole entity. It suggests a view that the humans are interdependent. The view point raises a question for an examination that how does the film portray the human being as a relational subject and decentres the human autonomy. The research adopts the posthumanist theory to study the film *Anbe Sivam* to elucidate the interconnectedness of human with other beings.

Posthumanism is a multidisciplinary critical theory which decentralises the concept of human as the centre. It reinforces that a human is not a single entity. Humans are interconnected with ecology, animal and technology. Ontological reconfiguration in posthumanism is a shift that emphasis that human is bounded with the other binary and non-binary beings of the world.

In one of the seminal works of posthumanism, *The Posthuman*, Braidotti mentions that there are three major strands of Posthumanism. First comes from moral philosophy; second comes from science and technology and critical posthumanism as the third strand (Braidotti, 38). The research suggests a philosophical shift to the film to study on the ground of interdependence through immanence in the posthumanist framework. Posthumanism does not assume a human, individualised self as the 'deciding factor' of main subject. It rather envisages what she would call a transversal inter-connection or an 'assemblage' of human and non-human actors (Braidotti, 45). The research foregrounds the idea that a human is not a single and separate entity as mentioned in *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism*, "...as a multiplicity of immanent ideas that seek to reset our perspectives in order for us to come to terms with our relations and our interconnections and thereby be more humble about ourselves" (1). Scholars like Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway and many others have contributed to the theory. Rosi Braidotti in her book, *The Posthuman* (2013) clearly points out the idea of the theory as, "...the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of

common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (i).

Broadly, posthumanism is often read on the grounds of technology and science. Many studies have focused on the intervention of culture, technology and gender in the films. There are only a few researches actively engaged posthumanism view to the south Indian movies in particular. Many scholarly interactions have been performed on the basis of communism and Marxism in the movie *Anbe Sivam* which advertently focuses on the anthropocentrism. There remains a gap for the study of ontological perspective on the film *Anbe Sivam* by bringing together the western theory posthumanism to a south Indian movie in a close reading.

Immanence in the Posthumanist thought

The virtual medium plays a vital role in the presumption of an ideal man's image. Historically human body is represented and staged as a defined image. Anything which is beyond the ideal image of human is considered to be 'monstrous'. They are considered to be 'sub-human' too (Romanska, 2019). Nallasivam is an independent person who travels every place with a prosthetic leg. The interdependence of human and non-human dissolve the boundaries and they are produced as a 'cyborg, a hybrid of machine and organism' (Haraway, 454). Nallasivam's body becomes a part of posthuman condition where technology creates a kinship with the identity of a human. Anbarasu and Nallasivam have an unpleasant introduction with each other at the Odissa airport where the former assumes the other as a terrorist because of his disability (*Anbe Sivam*, 00:02:30-00:05:00). Anbarasu is portrayed as an immature; self-centred and an arrogant person. Nallasivam is a compassionate person who helps others consistently. He places 'love' above everything and he believes that love can change anything and any person in good terms. Love is a natural emotion which lies within every human. It is presented as an ontological principle for relational existence as said by C. Nussbaum in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), "...emotions shape the landscape of our mental health and social lives" (1). The film outpours many scenes intact to portray love above everything. Anbarasu is an oblivious person but grounded on ethics. He loses his bag to Uthaman who deceives with his personality. Anbarasu's representation on giving importance to socially accepted appearance presents his entire self of his identity. He has a stigmatised mind about the appearance of an individual. It also represents his capitalist frame of mind as he works for a television advertisement company. The media looks and portrays a perfect image of a man. Stigma represents a view of life; a set of personal and social constructs; a set of social relations and social relationships; a form of social reality (J. Davis, 149). He believes Uthaman to be an honest person through his outward appearance. Rather, he argues with Nallasivam and denies his opinions invariably. He has a profound discourse with Mr. Uthaman who later steals his luggage in the train journey (*Anbe Sivam*, 01:52:46-01:57:00). Nallasivam or Mr.Nalla spends money for him to get back to Chennai. The character, Anbarasu can be cited for his transformation and the entire journey from Odissa to Chennai reveals his identity has not been flexible. He transforms from a stern person to a kind-hearted person. Nallasivam's compassion beyond his disability breaks the marginalised idea of an ideal man. Anbarasu too acknowledges in the later that "we should not judge people by their looks" (*Anbe Sivam*, 01:59:35- 01:60:01).

"...difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as 'others'. These are sexualised, racialised, naturalised others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies. We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others" (Braidotti, 3). Braidotti contends the Eurocentric dialogues of an ideal man and questions the acceptance of marginalising the humans based on their differences in race, sex and other factors. The idea is resonated by the character Nallasivam. Anbarasu positions him as 'other' whereas Nallasivam places himself in the equal position with his ethical and relational encounter.

In the movie, there are two predominant ambulance scenes. After a tragical accident, Nallasivam is rushed to the hospital where he has been survived by the machine. His body is distributed between a machine, ambulance, oxygen supply and doctors. "...autonomous machines are bound to make life or death decisions and thus assume agency" (Braidotti, 44). His body loses an autonomy and relies on other factors and being. The autonomy is transferred to other factors. The injured body exposes the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors where ethical responsibility is shared through dependency (Braidotti, 2013). Venessa, is an elderly compassionate nun who played a vital role in the rehabilitation of Nallasivam. He comprehends that the nun's humanity gave him light to survive. In another ambulance scene, a ten-year-old boy's life is in critical even after the intervention of medical support. The boy gets seriously injured in a train accident. Vanessa is desperate to get AB negative blood group to save his life. fortunately, Anbarasu agrees to donate his blood after a substantial conversation. But the boy dies despite their efforts. Anbarasu questions the existence of God as he shed tears for the departed boy's soul. Nallasivam indicates Anbarasu as God. He postulates, "...the heart that shed tears for the strangers is God" (*Anbe Sivam*, 02:07:57- 02:08:45).

The train and the ambulance can be perceived at contrary levels. The train departs from one place and reaches its known destination while the ambulance gives an uncertainty. In the movie, *Anbe Sivam*, the contrast is rendered. Both the journeys lead to a transformation in Anbarasu's character. It can also be read on the ground of immanence which means 'residing or becoming within' (Deleuze, 2001). The transformation is within Anbarasu which has become inevitable and it is not transcendental. Deleuze rejects the idea that consciousness is transcendental. According to him, mind cannot be considered different from body and proposes that all of being is univocal- one substance without hierarchy – allowing for a more open, dynamic view of existence (Deleuze, 2001). The transformation is the subject which has happened being in with relation. Anbarasu aligns with Deleuz's concept of 'plane of immanence' as it mentions that a subject is relational, becoming and existence are flat or anarchy.

Ontological Reconfiguration of Human

"Who is shiva? You and I are Shiva

Love is God! Love is God!

For theists Shiva is Love; for atheists love is Shiva

...for one who takes the path of love, there is no end

Life is a meditation" (*Anbe Sivam*, 01:38:23- 01:41:49).

Lord shiva is a supreme god in Hinduism who has no particular form. He is the consciousness, the everlasting peace and the

absolute bliss, the omnipresent, the omnipotent and the omniscient. According to people who believe in the god, faith towards God is found in every form of relationship (N.Nair, 10). Love is an emotion which is also formless. The movie equates the lord Shiva with love to present its omnipresence. Both are emerged from a relationship with other human and non-human beings. She also adds,

“Love that is pure and unselfish is the most sublime of all emotions. It knows only give, not to take. It has only sympathy, empathy and compassion and not hatred, aversion or jealousy. It is the most positive of all the feelings and is devoid of any type of negativity. It spreads positive energy everywhere and destroys all negative energy. The bhakta, through this love, realises the god, the truth, the ultimate in him” (5). The character, Nallasivam resonates the idea that deity is not transcendental and it is from within through empathy and compassion. Love is not centred to a single human and it is emerged when a human is in relation with others. Likewise, divinity is materialised through relation and interdependence and not independently.

For Deleuze, life is an impersonal power that goes beyond one's personal life or lived experience (Deleuze, 2001). It is observable through the opinions shared by the film and theorists that a human enters into a relation of mutual resonance and exchange with other domains for existence. It critically challenges the human autonomy and places a human as an interdependent subject. The research goes beyond the surface level reading of humanistic to a posthumanist perspective of the film to reveal the ontological shift grounded on interdependence and understanding of empathy and compassion. The interactions between humans and non-humans decentre the idea of human as superior being of all and it discloses the universe as the shared field of becoming as mentioned by Braidotti, “the posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity” (49). The film strongly resonates the ontological concept of immanence of Deleuze through claiming that love is God. Love is immanent and cannot be found outside a human. The research becomes essential as the world faces geopolitical wars to prove the autonomy. Invasion and

forced accessibility of one's substances are prevalent which seeks for an ontological shift from individual to co-existence. Rosi Braidotti and Gilles Deleuze help in demonstrating the decentring of anthropocentrism and claiming of ethical interdependence.

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