

Artificial Intelligence and Neural Networks in T Padmanabhan's Short Story, Makkan Singh's Death

Dr. M A Siddeek, Rehna Mol R

Abstract: This article offers a fresh reading of T. Padmanabhan's short story *Makkan Singh's Death* by examining its narrative structure through concepts associated with artificial intelligence, machine learning, and autonomous systems. Set against the emotional backdrop of the Partition of India, the story follows a bus driver burdened by loss, displacement, and memories of violence. The discussion argues that the relationship between Makkan Singh and the bus gradually develops into a symbolic model of data exchange, learning, and independent machine response. Particular attention is given to the bus as a narrative presence that appears to acquire decision-making capacity, culminating in its ability to continue functioning when human control weakens. By connecting literary imagination from the 1950s with contemporary debates on artificial intelligence, the article explores how the story anticipates questions about machine consciousness, autonomy, and the shifting boundary between human and technological agency. The analysis also situates the text within the realities of Partition, showing how personal trauma, historical memory, and technological imagination converge to create a distinctive vision of modernity in Malayalam fiction.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Partition Memory, Machine Consciousness, Malayalam Short Story

Some people say that we are living in an uncertain time in which humans become the pets of artificial intelligence. They terrify us that this age has the brain to find pleasure both in creation and destruction. The sailors of artificial intelligence are guiding the ships that navigate by itself without machines and signals of the stars!

The fear that generated here is the traumatical memories that arise from the mechanisation of modernity. It is a postmodern anxiety that the machine brain is building ways to trap humans. But it is completely a pessimistic argument.

The great artistic piece, *Makkan Singh's Death* expels these pessimistic arguments and postmodern anxieties. It is written with the most precise algorithms of short story. It is now evident that the story that was written in the mid 1950's resonates with the 'Promising Science' of artificial intelligence. It was published in his collection of stories in 1958.

It does not mean that it is a short story that anyone can write with the aid of the artificial intelligence imagination. It suggests that there is a deep learning mechanism that works in the story which communicates with human intelligence and it is behind its artificial intelligence nature. There is no significant difference between the years in which McCarthy, father of artificial intelligence coined the term 'Artificial Intelligence' and the publication of *Makkan Singh's Death*. He introduced the term to the world in a legendary summer workshop held at the Dartmouth College.

It is interesting that not only the operators of the workshop but also their specific fields later became the organs of artificial intelligence. Now, McCarthy's development of 'Lisp Artificial Intelligence', Claude Shannon's 'Magnetic Mouse' and 'Mathematical Concepts' and Marvin Minsky's expertise in 'Cognitive Science and Neural Network Researches' have become the contents for the basic text book of artificial intelligence.

At that time, McCarthy and his colleagues began their quest

towards the consciousness of knowledge that travels outside humans. It can also be interpreted as the beginning of researches that eliminated the difference between machine and humans. It was the starting point of experiments on the development of machine intelligence in which machine itself was elevated to the position of taking self-independent decisions. It was also the emergence of a cultural evolution that progressed from the consciousness of man that of the machine. The desire of McCarthy and his group to mould a machine that has the conscious intentional stance similar to humans has not been fulfilled yet. But the story *Makkan Singh's Death* echoes the realization of a machine that is able to make decisions independently and that is why the story can be labelled as the indicator of future representations of artificial intelligence.

Partition and Human mind

T. Padmanabhan has shaken the modernity of the 60's by defining how European modernity defined the Second World War. He says:

Modernity was a kind of delusional voice. Honestly speaking, it was just a mere voice. A voice completely borrowed from Europe. Life is futile; survival itself is sorrowful and these are the concepts that the proponents of modernity advocated through their stories. There is infact an element of truth as far as Europe is concerned. The writers there had experienced the ravages of Second World War. They had directly undergone the humiliation caused by famine, disease, death and survival. Their desires and hopes were shattered. The women (mother and sisters) of writers there sold their dignity publicly for just a piece of bread and a cigarette butt. They helplessly witnessed their women being raped by foreign soldiers. The modernists here did not have any such experiences.

(Story: *Makkan Singh's Death*)

This statement establishes that *Makkan Singh's Death* expresses exact modernity. It is the modernity that is expressed through the partition faced by the nation which is

as similar to the Second World War. It is the modernity that reflects the element of reality for Makkan Singh just as it is related with Europe. His head was filled with the vibrations of fearful memories of partition. His mind was loaded with the wounds of being uprooted from his homeland. He was told by Buchan Singh that the revolted killed his father by beating continuously. They had taken her away ("Preetham, what might have happened to her! May be alive.") Makkan Singh's heart erupted.

Through this story, the writer Padmanabhan is not trying to portray the pain of existential crisis of an individual. It is the pain of existential crisis of a land. It is the journey of a land that has no beginning or end which deviates from the fixed rotational path of history. The story questions whether a man can take control of this journey. The story ends with the answer, a big 'No'. It is in this explosive moment the neural network that is present even from the beginning of the story slowly unravels. The algorithms of artificial intelligence work here with utmost precision. The story develops in the form of an unconscious transaction between intelligence and machine learning.

A Travel from Jammu to Srinagar

The neural network itself is the design of the story. The characters that are depicted include Makkan Singh's life, the old mother who yearns for meeting her son, the soldier and the ticket inspector; all are from the history. They are the people whom he had encountered throughout his life. But this neural network is entirely created by the story.

Padmanabhan met Makkan Singh on a trip to Kashmir in 1953. During that period, he was studying law at Madras. Makkan Singh was the driver of a bus that started its journey from Jammu to Srinagar. The first line of the story ("When I reached Banihali, it was night.") was also written from that experience. Makkan Singh halted the bus in front of Panditji's hotel. Padmanabhan also stayed in that same hotel. He describes about the event as "When all the passengers rushed out, Makkan Singh alone lay down his head on the steering with closed eyes."

This steering is a narrative ring of his life. It is a device that takes him back to the paths travelled by the bus; a trail along the alleys of his own biography. It supports Makkan Singh's head like a pillow and remains as a controlling voice in between him and the bus. Makkan Singh's sharing of his woes is not similar to Iona Potapov's (the cab driver who lost his son) woes that he communicates with the horse in Chekhov's short story, 'Miseries'. Here Makkan Singh himself utters his woes in front of the readers. In real life, he tells the story to Padmanabhan just as he says to others also. It continues: "That night, I went to see Makkan Singh. I spoke to him in broken Hindi. At that time, he talked about the loss of his family during partition. His father was killed into pieces. They had taken away his wife. He lost everything leaving a dream of wheat grown field. Yet he lived."

Makkan Singh's Death is a real art that is moulded for this last line (or from this last line). But it is not a fictional realism. It is a realistic imagination that is shaped from the tragedies of realities. This is one of reason why now

also post modernists are not able to call it as 'hyperreal'.

Padmanabhan has written nothing more than what Makkan Singh had said or no more events are added by him about the night journey. But within the technology of the narrative of the story, we can today comprehend the mental stances of a self-thinking machine and it is an unconscious machine learning process.

Machine Learning Bus

The bus that Makkan Singh drives became transformed into a self-thinking machine and it is in a sense, machine learning. The bus is moving towards a mental stance in which there is no need for a human driver or the unnecessary of limbs that voluntarily acted according to the decisions of a human mind. It means that the bus has changed into an 'Autonomous Vehicle'. Makkan Singh's bus works on L5 (Level 5) autonomous system which is rated in the Automotive Engineers List. L5 Vehicle never demands a driver in its journey. It only needs the steering wheel if necessary.

Makkan Singh's vehicle is gradually entering in such a neural network similar to L5 vehicle that relies on cameras, radars and lidars than human eyes. It is not pictured as a virtual experience of a vehicle that travels in an augmented road. It is a bus that is run by human intelligence, listens to all the problems of humans, travels on a man-made road and enters a man-made tunnel.

The legendary story ends with the evidence of the consciousness of the bus that moves in parallel with Makkan Singh and his precious sorrows. This consciousness of the machine is an answer to the question that why the story got its title as *Makkan Singh's Death* even after the man, Makkan Singh (No, the most expert driver) never faced his own death in the story. At the end of the story, we read like this:

The memories of Makkan Singh become static. He felt extreme tiredness. He was being swept away by that current. The bus passed through the tunnel without waiting for the guard's signal.

Makkan Singh felt suffocated. The lamps that flickered in the darkness were the blinking stars from a faraway world.

As the bus passed through the tunnel, it paused slowly, the door opened and he falls off.

(Story, Makkan Singh's Death)

As he lost his memories, the vehicle that had been under his control for a long time had taken its control by itself and it slowly stopped as it crossed the tunnel. Here, the machine which is away from human control takes the role of an 'automatic emergency machine' and acts according to the decision by its brain. It is stated as the 'Promising science' of artificial intelligence. The story establishes this as Makkan Singh's 'Death'. It is in reality the death of human desires and memories to take decision. It is the birth of a self-controlled machine that moves forward without waiting for the signals of humans. It is the birth of a futuristic perspective in the history of Malayalam short story.

The Holy Driver who(that) Controls

It is not a challenge that happens in the story. It happens naturally in the story's progression through the 'road sense' given to machine mind by means of investing here and there the synthesisation of data. Its two primary indicators happen in two different events. One is when the bus passes the army camp without hitting the old man who walked the wrong side. Makkan Singh pleaded, "Uncle, take care of your life". The second incident was when he gave a sudden brake to the bus that moved towards the abyss. This denotes that the machine itself is gradually regulating the precision of the vehicle that is controlled by humans.

Here, synthesisation of data means the continuous exchanges that developed between the vehicle and Makkan Singh during their journey from Jammu to Srinagar. These exchanges unconsciously became the occasions of transferring complex matters about the vehicle's route to Srinagar and its return journey by the vehicle's mind (its artificial intelligence brain). It is called by the language of artificial intelligence as data exchange and synthesisation of data. Thus, by acquiring the road sense, the artificial intelligence mind of the bus is elevated to the position of a holy driver who controls the bus with utmost precision and skill even more than the driver, Makkan Singh. This data communication process equips the machine for 'automatic emergency braking' that happens at the end of the story.

If this machine was a link in the chain of self-driving L5 Vehicles, what would it be?

"You are probably wondering about safety. A seasoned human driver may have ten thousand hours of driving experience, but an AV may have a trillion hours of experience, because it learns from every car, and never forgets!" (Credit to Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Quifan). This is the principle behind this.

In reality, it was the principle that worked at the end of the story. Makkan Singh lost his memories and he felt very tired. When the vehicle was being washed away by the current, there took place a movement that transformed the imagination into a reflection of future consciousness. It is not a different algorithm from the law of Nature. It is a deed of a sympathetic mind that rescues the people in that vehicle by strengthening its logical reasoning self-using awareness about the events around it. Certainly, it may be read as an activity of the deep learning algorithm in the near future.

References

- [1] Ford, Martin. (2021). *Rule of the Robots: How Artificial Intelligence will Transform Everything*. London: John Murray Press.
- [2] Lee, Kai Fu and Quifan, Chen. (2021). *AI 2041: Ten Vision for Our Future*. London: Penguin Random House.
- [3] Narayanan, K., editor. *T. Padmanabhan: Kathayum Porulum* Trivandrum:Chintha Publishers, 2014.
- [4] *Padmanabhan, T. (2008). Pallikunnu . Kottayam: D C Books.*
- [5] P, Deepak. (2003). *Nirmithabuddhikalathe Samoohika Rashtreeya Jeevitham*.Kottayam:D C Books.
- [6] Renjjith, K. S., editor. *Chinthikunna Yanthram*. Trivandrum: Chintha Publishers,2024.
- [7] Romportl, Jan et al. *Beyond artificial intelligence: The disappearing human-machine divide*. Springer, Cham, 2014.
- [8] Shtulman, Andrew. (2023). *Learning to Imagine: The Science of Discovering New Possibilities*. 10.4159/9780674294790.
- [9] Suleyman, Mustafa & Bhaskar, Michael. (2023). *The coming wave: AI, power and the twenty-first century's greatest dilemma*. London: The Bodley Head.
- [10] Wooldridge, Michael. *The Road to Conscious Machines: The Story of Ai*. Pelican, 2021.

Author Profile

Dr. M. A. Siddeek is presently the honourable director of International Centre for the Study of Sree Narayana Guru University of Kerala. He worked as Kerala Sahitya Academy General Council member, governing body member of Kerala Bhasha Institute, academic member of Kerala State Library and state secretary of Purogamana Kala Sahitya Sangam. A renowned orator and a great teacher, he has edited and written so many academic and nonacademic books and received so many awards for his creative writings and scholarly articles including the best thesis award and academic excellence award from Kerala University.

Translator's Biodata

Rehna Mol R is a teacher, now working as research officer in SCERT, Kerala. An enthusiastic critical reader she is engrossed in the disciplines of education and literature. She has participated in the Kerala Sahitya Academy Camp, 'Ezhuthuvilakku' for budding writers. She holds an intense passion for translation and continuously researches the craft of translation.