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Aging Bodies and Necropower: A Critical Study of Geronticide in Tamil Films K.D. and Thalaikoothal

Abstract

This paper analyzes the act of 'thalaikoothal,' performed on ill and infirm older people in the southern part of the state of Tamil Nadu, India, with reference to two Tamil films, K.D. (2019) and Thalaikoothal (2023), which portray the horrors of the practice. A kind of involuntary euthanasia, the ritual continues to have covert social acceptance as exemplified in the films, favoring the common stereotype that marks aging bodies as unproductive and unworthy of living. Therefore, this article explores the aging bodies in the films as sites of power, controlled by death enforced through Thalaikoothal, employing Mbembe's concept of 'necropower.' It also examines the effects of the practice on the elderly, who are compelled to prepare themselves for a forced death. The study further identifies the underlying factors contributing to the prolonged existence of Thalaikoothal even in the present times.

Keywords: Thalaikoothal, aging bodies, senicide, necropower, Tamil films, Achille Mbembe

1. Introduction

Differing in nature, procedures, and aims, the act of geronticide or immolation of the elderly existed in all societies, be it primitive or industrial, states Mike Brogden in his 2001 book Geronticide Killing the Elderly (11). He provides instances of how this act evolved over time, from the Inuit people abandoning their elderly on icebergs to the ongoing rationing of medical care for the elderly in hospitals and nursing homes (11-12). According to Stephen G. Post, though sinful and amoral,

such acts of terminating the aged existed as they fell below the criteria of personhood in a senile or demented state (57).

Thalaikoothal in Tamil Nadu, India, is one such form of geronticide identified in contemporary times. Translated literally as 'showering' or 'oil head bath' (thalai- head, koothal- bath), Thalaikoothal is a kind of involuntary euthanasia[1] for the ill and infirm elderly people. The elderly are usually given a lengthy oil bath in the morning and then forced to drink glasses of tender coconut water, which causes organ failure, high fever, fits, and subsequent death within two days (Priyamvadha 71). Performed on old and frail bodies, this ritual continues to have covert social acceptance even in the present times, favoring the prevalent cultural stereotype that marks aging bodies as unproductive and, hence, unworthy of living.

There is no evidence that practices similar to Thalaikoothal existed in India from ancient times. Among the ancient Hindu scriptures or texts like Manusmriti and Yajnavalkyasmrti, self-immolation or euthanasia was meant for the people of the lower caste who were guilty of crimes such as murdering a Brahmin, incest, theft, or adultery. Apart from traditions like Jauhar[2] and Sati[3] based on the concept of dignified death, there are rare historical instances of involuntary homicides, particularly of the elderly in India (Bilimoria). However, there were practices such as Santhara[4] and Prayopavesa,[5] which aided the voluntary acceptance of death in old age by fasting. These practices gradually declined over time and are deemed illegal. In contrast, the practice of Thalaikoothal is still prevalent.

Nevertheless, the history of Thalaikoothal remains vague. There exist some speculations on its origin. Some believe it started before the British Empire when a Prince helped his ailing mother-in-law die peacefully, while others believe it began in the 1950s due to an expanding population and a weak local economy (Magnier). According to Pranav Mohan, the ancestors of the communities that practice Thalaikoothal were native Tamils and immigrant Reddys from the Nellore area of Andhra Pradesh. However, the eldest among these migrants who are still alive today remember leading a peaceful life and treating their elderly with utmost reverence. This evidence is sufficient to claim that the custom of Thalaikoothal developed within the Tamil community at some point and was not introduced by any outsiders.

Another popular assumption regarding this act of geronticide is related to the history of the Piramalai Kallar community from the Madurai district, Tamil Nadu. They were people who worked under the Tamil dynasties (Chera, Chola, and Pandya) as the guards of the villages. Later, with the decline of the Tamil Kingdom and the triumph of British rule, they had to depend on alternate means of survival and were reduced to poverty. Also, a drought that struck the villages populated by these people further affected their economy. A major solution that they practiced as part of these issues is the killing of the unproductive population, including infants, the elderly and the sick. They considered this killing a social practice, not a crime, and this continued to the next generations. This narrative could explain the popularity of Thalaikoothal in the villages of Usilampatti, Vadipatti, Thirumangalam, and Melur in the Madurai district (Priyamvadha 72).

However, it is challenging to establish an authentic history of Thalaikoothal since there are no historical documents on the practice. There also exists a dearth of literature regarding the history and origin of Thalaikoothal due to ethical reasons and the limitations of collecting data from the villagers. This is because they are concerned about and indifferent to sharing information on a practice done in secrecy. The scholars who have researched this subject have acknowledged the difficulty in providing a comprehensive answer to the origin and history of Thalaikoothal. M. Priyamvadha, Assistant Professor, Criminology Department, Madras University, who did a recent study on Thalaikoothal, notes: “The villagers are very suspicious about outsiders … They are angry since the day the world came to know about their secret” (Joseph). This statement discloses that obtaining detailed insights on Thalaikoothal and its history remains challenging.

Therefore, Thalaikoothal received scant media attention over the years. Most people remained passive supporters of the practice until it garnered public attention. The problem first made headlines in 2010 when a First Information Report was registered on the suspicious death of sixty-year-old Selvaraj. This led to the detention of a woman named Zeenath (Nafeesa). Similarly, another incident of an eighty-year-old man who escaped from Thalaikoothal, planned by his relatives, was also reported the same year. In popular media, the issue was featured in the Indian talk show Satyamev Jayate (‘Truth alone triumphs’) hosted by Bollywood star Aamir Khan. In episode 11 of Season 1, Pramila Krishnan, a reporter for Deccan Chronicle who conducted an

undercover investigation on Thalaikoothal in Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu, shared her experiences with Aamir Khan ("Satyamev Jayate").

On the other hand, from an academic standpoint, negligible scholarship exists in this area apart from a few legal and journalistic articles on the unethical nature of Thalaikoothal (Chatterjee; Singh; Jesudasan). A recent study on Thalaikoothal by M. Priyamvadha (2019) explored the sociocultural aspects of the killing of older people in Tamil Nadu, focusing on the changes in the economy and value system of the state, while Vishakha Sunger (2020) analyzed Thalaikoothal from a sociological perspective employing Emile Durkheim's functional approach. There exists a gap in studying the practice from a cultural perspective.

Tamil films like K.D. (2019), Baaram (2019), and Thalaikoothal (2023) that dealt with Thalaikoothal as a central theme provided a creative cultural representation of the practice from distinct perspectives. Baaram, directed by Priya Krishnaswamy, won the National Award for Best Feature Film in Tamil in 2019 and approached the theme in documentary style. In comparison, the other two are commercially made films. In her 2022 essay "Of Cold Baths, Tender Coconuts and Lethal Injections," Sari Kiran R. Mallam has attempted a critical reading of the films K.D. and Baaram as narratives of geronticide.

Inspired by real-life events, the two mainstream films, K.D. and Thalaikoothal (hereafter referred to as TK), offer premises for an extensive understanding of the causes of the practice in contemporary social circumstances. Therefore, choosing these films as the primary text, this paper bridges the gap of a critical cultural study of the practice. It looks at Thalaikoothal as a means of 'necropower' that operates on ill or infirm aging bodies, subjected to the power of death. It also examines the effects of the Thalaikoothal on the older characters in the films, compelled to prepare themselves for death. The paper further touches upon the intergenerational dynamics within contemporary Tamil society in the context of Thalaikoothal. Such a study would help identify the reasons behind the prolonged existence of Thalaikoothal even today, as exemplified in the films.

2. K.D. and TK: Mirroring Reality

Written and directed by Madhumita Sundararaman, K.D. or KD Engira Karuppu Durai (K.D. aka Karuppu Durai), features veteran theatre artist and professor of drama Mu Ramaswamy and child artist Naga Vishal in lead roles. The film earned a lot of positive reviews, screened at film festivals all over the world. Madhumitha won the UK Asian Film Festival's Best Director Award, and Naga Vishal won the Jagran Film Festival's 2019 Best Actor Award. As the title suggests, K.D. is the story of an eighty-year-old man, Karuppu Durai, who wakes up from a three-month coma and runs away from his home, having overheard his children planning to perform Thalaikoothal on him. He then meets Kutty, an orphan boy who lives in a temple, and the two develop an unusual bond. Later, they set off on a remarkable journey to fulfil K.D.'s bucket list. The film has an IMDb rating of 8.4 out of 10 and was well received by a wide audience. Many have mentioned it as an art form which made them aware of Thalaikoothal and hoped the film could change the perception and treatment of the elderly ("KD (2019)"). Film critic Baradwaj Rangan wrote for Film Companion that " KD is the kind of movie you wish we got more often, serious enough to be about something, yet not taking itself too seriously. It's the reverse of the cycle of existence. It begins with death and ends up filled with life."

Released in cinemas in 2023, TK is a social drama based on Thalaikoothal, written, edited, and directed by Jayaprakash Radhakrishnan, and starring Samuthirakani, Kathir, and Vasundhara. Named after the ritual, the film follows Pazhani (Samuthirakani), who struggles to take care of his bedridden father, Muthu. In the course of the film, we watch Pazhani's friends and family pressuring him to have the Thalaikoothal tradition done to his father, which results in a series of conflicts. In between, the film also explores Muthu's younger self through episodic flashback sequences. Like K.D., TK has also received critical acclaim from the audience. Logesh Balachandran of The Times of India wrote about TK as a socially relevant film that explores Thalaikoothal most convincingly, creating a significant impact on the audience.

Both these films are set in the rural villages of the Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu, where Thalaikoothal is still prevalent. They successfully mirror the reality of the lives of the people in the area influenced by culture, religion, nature, and tradition. The village Tamil spoken by the characters, the mild-loosely scripted dialogues, the costumes worn by the actors, and their unpolished acting style make these movies even more realistic and rooted in the Tamil culture.

They also help understand how a ritual like Thalaikoothal shapes the thoughts and actions of a society where the elderly are expected to die or succumb to the interest of other younger people around them once they become unproductive, diseased, or unattractive.

3. Aging Bodies, Thalaikoothal, and 'Necropower' in K.D. and TK

Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe elaborated on Foucault's theory of 'biopower' and developed the concept of 'necropower' in his essay of the same title, published in 2003. It was further developed in his book Politiques de l'inimitié, translated as Necropolitics in English in 2019. 'Necropower' is the exertion of a certain capacity to decide who lives and dies in modern times (industrialization, classification, organization), says Mbembe. For him, "to be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power"; "[t]o kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes" (Necropolitics 66). He feels that Foucault's concept of 'biopower,' which describes how people are controlled by exerting power on their bodies and lives, fails to explain the contemporary ways in which power is exercised over people by regulating their death. Therefore, Mbembe uses the term 'necropower,' expanding and revealing the limits of 'biopower.' Mbembe defines 'necropower' as "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" ("Necropolitics" 27). 'Necropower' reduces people to living dead, meaning they have no life of their own and exist solely to serve the needs of others ("Necropolitics" 40). In short, Necropolitics is essentially "about the power of death in the most literal way, either killing people or reducing them to what Mbembe calls 'the living dead' who populate 'death worlds' – spaces with living conditions which allow one to barely survive" (Dragos).

3.1. The Good Death and The Bad Death

In K.D. and TK, elderly bodies become sites of 'necropower' enforced through Thalaikoothal in many ways. For instance, in the very beginning of the film K.D., the audience is introduced to

elderly Karuppu Durai, who is in a coma, with the old lady singing a song called oppari in Tamil. Oppari is a kind of mourning song usually sung at funerals. The lines of the song are as follows:

Hands worn out with years of work,
Legs that walked miles afar
A man so handsome,
A soul so pure
Spine that bore the world's weight,
Yet eyes that always smiled
Show him the path
Let him go, where he belongs. (Sundararaman 00:05:00)

Here, the singer is complaining to their local deity for not taking away Karuppu Durai's soul, reflecting the thoughts of his family members who wish for the old man's death. It also reinforces the idea that someone who is aged and has fulfilled their presumed familial and social responsibilities ought to die since they have nothing more to offer in their life. Such a conviction might have stemmed from the Hindu belief of 'good death.' 'Good death' means the death of the aged at the right time, at the right place – ideally, one's own home, once their children are settled, their daughters married off, the conflicts within the family resolved, and their wealth is passed on (Firth 683). For Karuppu Durai's children, their father has fulfilled all his duties and desires of a lifetime. They feel it is the right time for him to die, rather than having a prolonged death in a coma, and thus decide to perform Thalaikoothal.

Here, in the guise of 'good death,' what the children intend is, in fact, the convenient death of Karuppu Durai before the wedding in the household. Sick elderly are inauspicious to the family (Priyamvadha 73). Thus, the children consider Karuppu Durai's extended life span as their "charity" which they mention during their discussions on performing Thalaikoothal and decide to do it as soon as possible (Sundararaman 00:08:33). However, ironically, this same Karuppu Durai will, in the second half of the film, be preparing a bucket list and accomplishing his last wishes.

In the film TK, Muthu is, too, in a six-month coma. Here, not only does Muthu's family think it is time for him to leave this world, but so does the whole village. This is evident when Muthu's son

Pazhani is persuaded by his father-in-law to perform Thalaikoothal on his father. The father-in-law vouches that if Muthu were capable of expressing himself, he would have asked Pazhani to do Thalaikoothal for him instead of living like a dead body. Hence, he urges Pazhani to let his father have a "peaceful death" by performing Thalaikoothal (Radhakrishnan 00:38:08). Observed as a tradition that helps those who suffer reach God, by the end we see Pazhani performing Thalaikoothal on the aged man.

Therefore, bound in ritualistic codes of 'good death,' the older bodies in both films become sites of 'necropower,' their deaths regulated by Thalaikoothal. This occurs as young bodies in the films manifest Thalaikoothal as a means to save the old bodies from the fate of 'bad death' that awaits them. In Hinduism, 'bad death,' associated with pain, violence, feces, and urine, is ominous. Though the selfish reasons of the younger counterparts are in fact what triggered the killing of these aged men by Thalaikoothal, this notion of 'good/peaceful death' becomes a pretext, making the ritual less anti-human.

Similar to customs such as giving milk or holy water from the river Ganges to the aged parents by the family members while chanting prayers for their peaceful death in Hinduism, Thalaikoothal is perceived as a customary practice to ensure the easy departure of the soul, which would help them attain salvation (Ramalingam and Ganesan 226). However, unlike other customs, which are non-lethal, Thalaikoothal has become a convenient way of getting rid of the elderly due to various other motives. In the films, by deciding to perform Thalaikoothal, the younger generation intentionally overlooked the possibility of these older men returning to life or the rights these seniors have on their bodies.

3.2. The Disposable 'Other'

Henry A. Giroux, in his work "Violence, Katrina, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," discusses how the category 'waste' no longer includes only material goods but also human beings, particularly those rendered redundant (308). In these films, the aged men are often compared to 'waste' or 'disposable matters' like that of an 'empty bottle,' which has to be rid of. This shows how the value assigned to the human body diminishes with age and decreased productivity, making aged bodies

increasingly vulnerable and subject to dominant discourses of power, which in the context of the films is the 'necropower.'

To be precise, in both films, the aged bodies are intended to be eliminated through Thalaikoothal to benefit the younger family members. In Karuppu Durai's household, anticipating that their father's physical condition and impending death might hinder his granddaughter's wedding, Karuppu Durai's children decide to take control of him by controlling his death. Similarly, in TK, Muthu being bedridden for months and Pazhani leaving his job to care for his father affects the life of Pazhani's wife (Kalai) and daughter (Rajeswari). Sick Muthu prevents the rest of the family from relocating to the city and Rajeswari's opportunity to get a better education. By the end of the film, Pazhani chooses to end his father's life for his daughter's bright future.

Such a decision to perform Thalaikoothal on these two aged men is primarily based on the assumption that they ceased to be of any value to society. These older men, being the most vulnerable ones in the household, are denied the right to live in order to preserve the lives of the privileged. Or, as Mbembe explains in Necropolitics (2019), "the calculus of life passes through the death of the Other." The existence of the 'Other' is perceived as a mortal threat or absolute danger, and only their biophysical elimination could strengthen the life potential and security of the rest (72). In the context of the chosen films, Karuppu Durai and Muthu are the ailing 'other,' whose deaths are believed to illuminate the lives of the people around them.

3.3. Thalaikoothal, Surveillance, and Changing Power Structures

Unlike Muthu in TK, who could not even resist the 'necropower' of death exercised on him through Thalaikoothal, Karuppu Durai in K.D. has the privilege of escaping upon learning his children are plotting his death. Even when Karuppu Durai flees the house, his sons continue to look for him and do not abandon their plan to perform Thalaikoothal. They hire a private investigator named Eason to track down Karuppu Durai before the wedding, thereby keeping the older man under their surveillance. Surveillance, being one of the significant methods employed to exercise 'necropower,' induces the fear of death and helplessness in Karuppu Durai. By the end of the film, he is brought

back home. Desperate to live, Karuppu Durai could do nothing but flee from his children's plot on his life for the second time. Throughout the film, Karuppu Durai's aging body operates under 'necropower' in fear of impending death imposed by his children. Though at times he feels as if he has a choice, and therefore agency, in determining whether or not he would die, his choice is non-existent due to the continuous surveillance of his family members. In the entire film Karuppu Durai is presented through this constant threat of death.

In contrast, in the case of Muthu, he does not even have the choice to resist the power exerted upon him. The kind of surveillance that operates on Muthu is antithetical in nature. He is surveilled by his son and granddaughter so they would know if he has wakened up from the coma while his daughter-in-law, his neighbors and other villagers keep him under surveillance to check if he is dead. Muthu is seen as an exhibit, an alien, or the abject with the tubes, wires, and other medical equipment sustaining his life. Rajeswari's (Muthu's granddaughter's) classmate who visits her home gazes at senile Muthu in awe as Rajeswari feeds her grandfather using a food tube. Muthu in Thalaikoothal thus becomes the oblivious victim of 'necropower.'

With the surveillance of these older men and their consequent subjection to the power of death, a change in power structures occurs among the two families presented in the films. From the discussions of Karuppu Durai's children on performing Thalaikoothal on him, it is evident that before becoming ill and slipping into a coma, he was a powerful patriarch who controlled his household. Once Karuppu Durai falls ill, his children take control of his life, body, and wealth. Something similar happens to Muthu in TK as well. Bedridden for six months, people who once respected him have started seeing him as a living corpse. This sudden shift of positions makes them subjective to the power of the much younger and able bodies around them. The relationship between the aged and young body transforms into something similar to that of the sovereign-subject relationship, where the sovereign can "define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembe, Necropolitics 80). Eventually, the sovereign, in the films the sons of the elderly men, decides to take control of them by controlling their death by performing Thalaikoothal and thereby subjecting them to 'necropower.'

Both Karuppu Durai's and Muthu's children, at some point, believe their aging fathers are diminished versions of themselves, meant to die soon. As a result, they attempt to end the lives of

these elderly through Thalaikoothal, anticipating that they would pose a threat to their own family. In other words, these films illuminate how 'necropolitics' assign differential value to human life within the same family. The closer you are to dominant power, in this case the youthfulness, productivity, and ability – the more your life is worth. The further you are away from the axes of privilege like age, wealth, productivity, health, etc., the less your life is worth, and your body becomes vulnerable to 'necropower.'

4. "The living dead and the death world": The Effects of Thalaikoothal on the Elderly Bodies in K.D. and TK

According to Mbembe, 'necropower' reduces people who are distant from social privileges to 'the living dead' trapped in 'the death world.' The reduction of people to 'living dead' makes them much more vulnerable and susceptible. For Mbembe, slave life, in many ways, is a form of death in life as it results in "loss of a 'home,' loss of rights over one's body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)" (Necropolitics 74-75).

In the chosen films, once their children decide to eliminate them through Thalaikoothal, Karuppu Durai in K.D. and Muthu in TK become 'the living dead.' Karuppu Durai leads a nomadic life as if deserted by his family on escaping his children's plot on his life. He loses the purpose or meaning of his life. Along with the other homeless, he waits for free meals served at temples. In one such scene, he keeps staring at the empty plate in his hand, reflecting the emptiness within him (Sundararaman 00:14:06). When the owner of the tea store enquires about Karuppu Durai's identity, he responds, "I am just a nomad, passing by" (Sundararaman 00:22:37), who does not know where he is from nor where he is headed. Later in the film, Karuppu Durai tells Kutti his stomach and tongue do not allow him to go on without food, although he no longer feels the need to have any since he is going to die any day now (Sundararaman 00:34:25). When he finds out about the detective who is searching for him, Karuppu Durai feels that he is under surveillance. Out of fear, he refuses to return to the place where he was staying and spends the night on the street. Thus, Karuppu Durai is forced to endure the triple loss of home, the right over one's body and political status or identity, turning into a 'living dead' after running away to avoid Thalaikoothal.

Even the places he goes transform into a 'death world,' which reminds him of his forthcoming death. For instance, at Courtallam;[6] Karuppu Durai refuses to take an oil bath under the waterfalls, which is customary for the visitors to do, because it reminds him of Thalaikoothal. He tells Kutti, "When I saw those people getting oiled up, it reminded me of what I was running from. I just had to get out of there" (Sundararaman 01:07:44). Karuppu Durai, along with Kutti, moves from one place to another in fear of death.

In TK, Muthu was leading a very normal life until he fell from the roof of an under-construction building, after which he becomes senile. Muthu remains in a coma for six months. He cannot feel any pain, touch, or taste. His son hopes for his recovery but struggles with a serious dilemma, deciding whether to end his father's life by performing Thalaikoothal or not. Apart from Pazhani, no one believes that his father would come back to life. In one of the scenes, Pazhani's wife complains to him that while he is away at work, she feels as if she is "living with a dead body" (Radhakrishnan 00:35:04), which reiterates Muthu's identity as a 'living dead.' The village demigod confronts Pazhani and advises him to perform Thalaikoothal on his father since his father was meant to die in the accident. Defying the law of natural death, the villagers, Pazhani's wife, and the demigod become exponents of necropower as they await Muthu's death enforced through Thalaikoothal. Muthu is reduced to 'bare life' – nothing more than mere flesh and bone, devoid of identity and is perceived as someone who is meant to die. Moreover, Muthu's home is his 'death world.' His aged neighbor killed by Thalaikoothal, tender coconut vendor, and the chameleon which keeps entering Muthu's room as a harbinger of death, add to his 'death world.'

In addition to this, the intermitted flashback scenes of Muthu's subconscious in the film make the real world a death world, and his subconscious world – the real one. Subsequently, the plot thickens when Muthu slips into a coma again after waking up for a few days. As a result, the people around him feel a sense of relief, thinking that he will die soon and thus stop leeching his son's time and money, which he is meant to be spending on his daughter rather than on his dying father. This is illustrative of the fate of the aged people like Muthu, who have no life for themselves and only have something to give others. In short, both films present the effects of Thalaikoothal and thereby 'necropower' on individuals, particularly on the aging bodies, which transforms them

as ‘the living dead’ in the ‘death world’ to the extent that the audience feels the death of the characters becomes their liberation.

5. Exploring the Reasons for Thalaikoothal in K.D. and TK

Mala Kapur Shankardass and S. Irudaya Rajan, two prominent academicians doing research on the population aging in India, in their book Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly in India (2018), highlight various reasons behind the increased violence against the aging population in India. It includes factors like the changing socio-demographic conditions, increased migration of younger family members to cities and towns for jobs, lack of social security for the elderly, nuclear family system, modernization, and the rising aging population (15). Along with these reasons mentioned above, elderly abuse in a country like India can be attributed to distinct regional and personal matters that serve the interest of the younger generations. This is why a seemingly extreme act of violence, like Thalaikoothal, is carried out even today, justified as mercy killing. The films K.D. and TK help identify some of these underlying reasons.

In K.D. and TK, one of the reasons that prompts the children to perform Thalaikoothal on their aged fathers is wealth or money. In India, it is common for parents to hand down the wealth, in the form of money, land, or other riches, to their children. Therefore, to inherit these assets, the children have to wait until the death of their parent (usually the father’s). In K.D., we find all four of Karuppu Durai’s children and his in-laws, except his youngest daughter (Selvi), complaining about their financial troubles. One pawns his wife’s gold to cover Karuppu Durai’s medical expenses; the other mortgages her house to start a business; the eldest son is getting his daughter married, and the youngest son just wants his father’s house. All of them are waiting for the aged man’s immediate death so that they can take over his wealth and utilize it for their personal needs. In one particular scene from the film, thinking Karuppu Durai is dead, his youngest son Raja rushes to find his father’s Will to obtain the fingerprint instead of tending to his father’s body. This reveals how greedy and selfish Karuppu Durai’s children are and sheds light on the motivation behind their decision to harm their father. They did not abandon the plan to carry out Thalaikoothal, even after forcing Karuppu Durai to return home. They also made sure he signed the documents the night

before the ritual was scheduled to be performed for the second time. This makes Karuppu Durai flee the house once again at the end of the film.

Similarly, Pazhani's poor financial situation and his inability to afford Muthu's medical expenses jeopardized his father's life. Having pledged his only home to a local moneylender, Pazhani is left with no other option but to let his father die and move to a different place. Neglecting the needs of his other family members and spending all his money on his father's elderly care arouses a kind of sorrow and regret in Pazhani, which is why he agrees to the Thalaikoothal of Muthu, though heartbroken. Pyali Chatterjee, in her article "Thalaikoothal: the Practice of Euthanasia in the Name of Custom," also identifies poverty as a reason behind Thalaikoothal, confirming Muthu's fate in the film.

Other than money, objection to elderly care is what makes the lives of Karuppu Durai and Muthu difficult. No one except Selvi, Karuppu Durai's youngest daughter, is willing to take care of him. One of the daughters-in-law, Chitra, complains that she cannot take good care of her children because of her father-in-law's poor health. Another one, Mangamma, whines about the hardships she had to undergo while caring for the aged man. Pazhani's wife, too, laments about not having enough time to care for her father-in-law after coming home from work. Not even once did Pazhani's wife feed his father or change his wet clothes in the film. In both families, the daughters-in-law are supposed to care for their sick father-in-law. Renu Varughese and D. Jamuna, in their work "Anatomy of Elder Abuse in the Indian Context," observed that the "[i]ncreased demands of caregiving and stress often push the caregiver to a state of physical and mental exhaustion that cannot be admitted in societies like India's due to certain cultural barriers" (66). Therefore, it might be the frustration of these women in managing the household work along with their daily jobs, which makes elderly care a difficult task for them. There also exists a kind of moral and cultural conflict of a young lady taking care of an old man, which makes these aged men "abject" for the women. This shows how serious of an issue elderly care is in lower-class Indian households.

Along with these issues, such as money and objection to elderly care, what motivated Karuppu Durai and Muthu's children to perform Thalaikoothal is the social approval of the practice offered by culture and community. It is identified that the village population, where the practice is prevalent, considers it their duty to help the elderly die once they are very weak (Joseph). Saurabh Singh's

report on Thalaikoothal for Tehelka Magazine supports this explanation. It is noted that the community members and the relatives are accomplices in the act as they express their support and visit the aged one or two days before the oil bath one last time (Singh). More importantly, the children are of the view that they do not want their aged parents to suffer in their last days and are convinced to perform Thalaikoothal as a form of mercy killing (Shetty et al.; Saggu). This is something that happens in the films as well. Persuaded by the fact that such an act is not morally wrong, the children are convinced to do Thalaikoothal on their aged fathers. In K.D., there is a scene where the villagers talk about this practice, and one of them says:

"It is a celebration of sorts. We're not celebrating their death; we celebrate the life they lived till then. What is wrong in that? … You know what's worse than death? Fighting for your life. Let's say you fall sick, and get bed ridden, you become a burden for yourself and your family. Is that life worth living? (Sundararaman 00:10:26-00:11:03)

This dialogue reveals the rural community's popular perception of death. They consider life in a comatose state equal to death, and death to be a better option as it takes the aged and the sick to the next stage of their life. A denial of the vegetative state of life as something worth living has promoted Thalaikoothal over the years. It remains a factor that encourages the children in the films to perform the ritual on their parents, which, as their caretakers, they find morally justifiable.

In short, elderly care in India is an act of reciprocation of the benefits that children receive from their parents, which makes it a moral obligation (Lamb 46). However, in modern times, with the changing socio-economic conditions, elderly care is no longer a compulsion but rather a choice. In the case of Karuppu Durai, the children wanted to benefit from their aged father but were not ready to take care of him. So, they chose the socially acceptable practice like Thalaikoothal as the perfect strategy to fulfill both requirements. On the other hand, in TK, Pazhani was willing to take care of his father. In fact, most of the time in the film, we see Pazhani feeding, bathing, and talking to his father. However, his strained financial situation and domestic disputes, coupled with the social pressure, restrained him from continuing to do so, and he let his father become a victim of Thalaikoothal. This is how an act of senicide like Thalaikoothal becomes a guilt-free practice for the adults in these films set in contemporary times.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, an analysis of the movies K.D. and TK in the context of Thalaikoothal through a necropolitical lens offers quite a deep understanding of the ritual and the fate of the people who fall victim to it. The lives of elderly Karuppu Durai and Muthu reveal how Thalaikoothal is not just a tradition but rather a powerful means by which elderly bodies are subjected to 'necropower' by their younger counterparts. Aged, ill, and unproductive, Karuppu Durai and Muthu are far away from the axis of privilege in the necropolitical logic and are under the constant threat of death. Their bodies become sites of 'necropower,' and they are chosen to die for the benefit of the younger people around them. As Mbembe observes, the possible effect of 'necropower' induced through Thalaikoothal on these elderly men is their transformation into 'the living dead,' having no purpose or identity, surrounded by the 'death world,' which offers no liberation until death. It is the perception of people around Karuppu Durai and Muthu that aged bodies are meant to die anyway, along with certain factors like money, objection to elderly care, and selfishness, which prompt them to determine their parent's death. Thalaikoothal, in the disguise of a ritual, thereby becomes the best possible method for their elimination and can, therefore, be seen as a form of senicide or geronticide.

Karuppu Durai and Muthu, though fictional characters, were inspired by real-life people. Therefore, from a broader perspective, the continued presence of a practice like Thalaikoothal reveals the ageist prejudices prevalent in a country like India, which stereotypes the elderly who do not fit the ideals of successful aging as someone who has to prepare for death. What has to be changed is this attitude of the people. Also, in India, the responsibility for taking care of aged people is always thrust upon themselves or their younger family members. This, too, has to be changed. Government-funded social security systems for the aging population, care homes or palliative care facilities moderated by state support, and an inclusive social environment that promotes active elderly participation are some of the ways to support the geriatric population. Successfully implemented, these methods could eradicate practices like Thalaikoothal, or the threat of 'necropower,' from the lives of the elderly population in India.

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[1] Involuntary euthanasia is when a patient is killed against his or her will or without their consent. It is a form of murder (Holm 986). Involuntary euthanasia is regarded as a crime today in all legal jurisdictions.

[2] Jauhar was a collective self-immolation practiced by Rajput women in India in order to escape capture, slavery, or rape by the invaders in the face of the imminent defeat of the men. It is believed that Jauhar existed even before Sati (Palat).

[3] Sati was the mandatory custom followed by Hindu widows in India. They were forced to commit suicide by sitting on their husband's funeral pyre, as people believed that by doing so, they could be with their husbands in the afterlife.

[4] Santhara is a three-hundred-year-old practice of ending one's life by gradually decreasing the intake of food and water to attain 'moksha' in Jainism.

[5] Prayopavesa is the Hindu way of ending life by fasting to death.

[6] Courtallam is a village in Tenkasi district of Tamil Nadu. It is a famous tourist destination of the State.

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