

Speaking Scripts, Resisting Censorship

~the journey from disavowal to care~

{untouched by AI}

In this essay...

Censorship directly attacks authorship that attempts puncturing systemic violences. Questioning and critiquing the oppressive use of power has encountered multiple forms of author- versus- authority collisions throughout history and everywhere in the world. In India, the present coalition government formed with a 'winning majority' has laid blatant censors on voices in film storytelling and live- performance storytelling. Film schools, performance schools, film festivals, theatre festivals, music concerts, book launches & literature festivals, and all such public gatherings have been directed to fall in line or risk losing their 'autonomy' through government- appointed stooges. What does this mean for an authorship of care~ care for the voices that are suppressed, care for pushback and resistance against easily formed majoritarian, nationalist, casteist, religious narratives?

Through the lens of the Lacanian reference to disavowal as a characteristic mannerism of power, this paper/ paper- performance/ paper- performance- script cites Judith Butler, Jean- Paul Sartre, Alenka Zupančič and Joan Tronto to theorize on what it means to counter power's disavowal of the reasons for status quo, with an ethics of 'repairing the world' through care.

Embedded in the paper is a performance script of 'Nice Person Manifesto'~ a scripted poem- workpiece in which multiple voices speak at the same time~ the first voice of the nice person speaking acceptable truths of the world, the second voice of the ironical body performing cynicism, sarcasm and irony, the third voice of the performer indicating that the nicenesses of the world are indeed cruel, a fourth questioning voice, a fifth artistic voice and so on.



Realism falls short of reality. It shrinks it, attenuates it, falsifies it; it does not take into account our basic truths and our fundamental obsessions: love, death, astonishment. It presents man in a reduced and estranged perspective. Truth is in our dreams, in the imagination.

~ Eugène Ionesco, in the essay "Discovering the Theatre"¹

The Nice Care Problem

While we are seeing, what to my pessimist- anarchist- rationalist eyes is an almost- meteoric rise of self- claimed right- wing governments/ parties across the world {AfD in Germany, National Rally in France, Reform UK in England, Brothers of Italy, Bharatiya Janta Party... and the list goes on}, different versions of one rhetoric about liberal democracy are propounded on right- wing internet content and legacy- media conglomerates: that the "right" thinking citizens around the world were never heard, heeded, appeased by the liberal {some left liberal even} democracies and the political parties that made up parliamentary dispensations which stood for immigration, for free health care for all, for cheap public housing... you know the works! Their claim of being suppressed as mere hogwash by the ruling left- liberal parties is termed as undemocratic, oppressive, authoritarianism- "authoritarianism dressed up as 'protecting democracy'"², they say.

What really is the contestation in that claim? Like in every conflict, when we let all the fuzz wither away here, the core of the blame that is being cast by both parties in fact against each other, is over protection and lack of protection. This isn't really about the Left or the Right, it isn't just about Capitalisms vs. Communisms, it is not about the particular tricksteries of political parties employed by them to stay in power. If protection is the contentious issue~~ who is more protective than the other, whose methods to protect are more effective than the other, who protects whom, why protect at all, who is the seeker of protection, in whose eyes are the protected in need of protection~~ then we are speaking of the personhood that lends its framework to the idea of protection, the idea that there is a section of Society that must be protected and that certain personas' protection is more important than others.

In their 2004 book 'Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence'³, Judith Butler lays out our hierarchies of grief as humans~ we choose when, for whom, how long and with what degree of intensity we grieve for our fellow human beings. They further speak about the grievability of a human {I would add more- than- human too} life based on the "frames". Ideologies we subscribe to.

To grieve itself, to attempt to protect, to wish for the safety of one section of the fellow populace implies the ability for care. To contend with protection, to discover and battle for rights for oneself and others, to verbally and viscerally wrestle for socio- political satisfaction at the end of our daily democratic tunnels is a function of this thing we call care.



Around the days of the APARN {Asia Pacific Artistic Research Network} meet during which I was presenting these thoughts to the gathering of artists, researchers and pedagogues in July 2026 at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts {NAFA}, Singapore, India was witness to large scale public protests against a series of examination paper leaks and an allied array of problem- scenarios in the Indian education system. In the media discourse surrounding the protests, hunger strikes and fast- unto- death campaigns happening then, the almost continuous refrain one could hear from the far- right 'Hindutva' ideologues freely offering their distant- from- ground- reality interpretations was one familiar strand of blame: that the 'real', 'genuine' protestors must be separated and sifted from the 'mischief mongerers', that the 'realness' of protestors could be identified by the appropriate language they use, by the degree of their focus on 'actual' demands from the state, by their willingness to adhere, in other words, to the norms of care standardized, proselytized by state powers. In keeping with these parameters of judgement, young protestors who were the face of that spate of almost anarchist- single- leader- less resistances were judged according to the respectability of their slogans, protest songs and behaviour.

Those whose resilient plaques mentioned names of people aligned with the crony capitalist land sharks that aided educational institutions backed by wealth, were discarded as sideliners. Those whose songs mentioned names of ministers seen as practitioners of centuries- old, oppressive caste ideologies were downriden as youth brainwashed by pedestrian Marxism. Those whose anger and frustration were evident in their passionate, quick- paced humour and post- ironic performativity were termed as ingenuine vigilantes. Aspersions were cast on some of them as merely the mouthpieces of political parties in opposition to Hindutva. Some were called the George Soros gang, in honour oof the wild conjecture that all progressive and liberal voices in the world are essentially funded by George Soros' philanthropic activities. Some others were of course sidelined as Muslim participants of an Indian citizenry who were playing 'victim' at the hands of the Indian government. The short and the long of this filtration process to discern who really, truly cared for Indian education is that mainstream, mainlander, state- supporting intellectuals and the conforming middle class found their contorted ways to decide who has the right to care, and therefore whose demands must be carefully met, whose lives must be cared for and which sections of Society fall into or beyond the margins of care.

Jean- Paul Sartre, particularly in the context of racism, anti- Semitism and social politics, in his 1944 collection of essays 'Reflexions sur la question juive'⁴ expresses the idea that none of us, no one, can be truly free until all of us are free. In the multi- pronged fights that place protection, care, genuineness, grief, anger~ all human capabilities~ as their standpoints, the question that arises inevitably as to their definition, as to the responsiveness to the authenticity of these values, as to the moral currency ascribed to them, as to the scope and extent to which they must be judged as cognizable, lies finally in the realm of interpretation- in the hermeneutic approach that either/ any stakeholder takes in accordance with the particular line of thinking, socialization, class- caste- economic- religious consciousness they ascribe to. While the Hindutva ideologue in India is willing to care only for those 'genuine' protestors who are respectful, polite and humble in their asks of the educational superstructure, masses of non- Hindu underprivileged citizens have their makeshift homes unsubstituted-ly bulldozed



for lack of care, in one part of the country. The care that the state embodies in one scene somehow escapes its grasp in another. Isn't, however, all care, care? Borrowing from Sartre's claim, can dictats that presuppose care be called caring at all when they fail to address every stakeholder within the ambit of the conflict, that needs to be cared for? When the general direction of care-flow is toward the historically advantaged, the presently powerful, is it really care we are witnessing?

The 'July Revolution' pioneered by the students of India is just one, recent example among umpteen at the environmental front, many at the intersection of urbanscapes, some more at the economic- wage fore, many silent more at the interlocation of culture, history and caste. The lines always hermeneutically, interpretatively, opportunistically blur in the vicinity of concerns over identity, personhood, protection, victimhood, inclusion, ability, and... care.

There are avowedly two parts to this puzzling disavowal of care by power- a wanton display of lack- of- care for one portion of the populace alongside a simultaneous supportive love and care for sections of people that toe its line, those whom it willingly takes in its tow.

In his 1995 essay 'Care as a Basis for Radical Political Judgements'⁵, Joan C. Tronto quite rightly points out that care, caring acts and interdependency precluding care might be "ubiquitous" in human {and more- than-human} life, but that it has remained fairly hidden from the conceptual lenses of social and political thought. In the process of conducting social life, daily governance and without doubt in the execution of state power, we have either refrained from facing head- on the complicated manners in which care surfaces, in which we build responsiveness arising from care, or, we have succeeded in over- simplisticising the precarity that care- giving, responsibility and institutionalized care entails. Simply put, for millions of participants in protests across the world, often the resistance against state- power they display at a protest site is contested by the views back in their homes held amongst their family members. In the face of reciprocal care shared with the members of their family, complicated spaces are navigated by protestors demanding care from the state outside of their homes. Are not the state, the country, the land, its people, parts of their larger home? Which home does one care for more~ the larger one outside or the relatively smaller unit called home in which they live, stay, survive?

The mandate to resolve this puzzle seems almost impossible at the systemic level. Each individual is left to find for themselves their balancing act or perish in the process, sandwiched between social pressure and political oppression.

Alenka Zupančič in 'Ethics of the Real'⁶ points to Lacan's interpretation and admiration in fact, of Kant's breakaway from 'traditional' ethics. Lacan suggests that Kant makes this break at two specific points. The first break according to Lacan is from the "morality that spells out obligations in terms of the possibility of fulfilling them". Kant knew, he says, that morality itself a demand for the impossible. Considering that an all-encompassing care is in the realm of the impossible, it is well therefore, to feel that in the face of the individual's desire to live comfortably, the umbrella of state power and the state's blessings disguised as governmental



appreciation for a populace's niceness are sufficient display of political care. The trouble in this framework arises however, when the limits of morality become fluid and leak through the interstices of individual desire. This is the second break, Lacan suggests Kant is making, in rejecting the moral- ethical view that "I shall want good for others as long as it also reflects my own good." In other words, in her reading of what Lacan sees of Kant's standpoint, Alenka Zupančič's suggestion is that the journey from disavowal to care entails on the one hand an examination of one's own desire, and on the other, the moral- ethical- political effort to expand the extent to which one can care. For political thought, this journey has great implications as it attempts to achieve the impossible in terms of questioning the desire for power, control and the reflection of "one's own good", while also moving further away from the disavowal of the need for care that constitutional citizenry seeks when disenfranchised, marginalized and suppressed by the state, or history, or culture, or the economy.

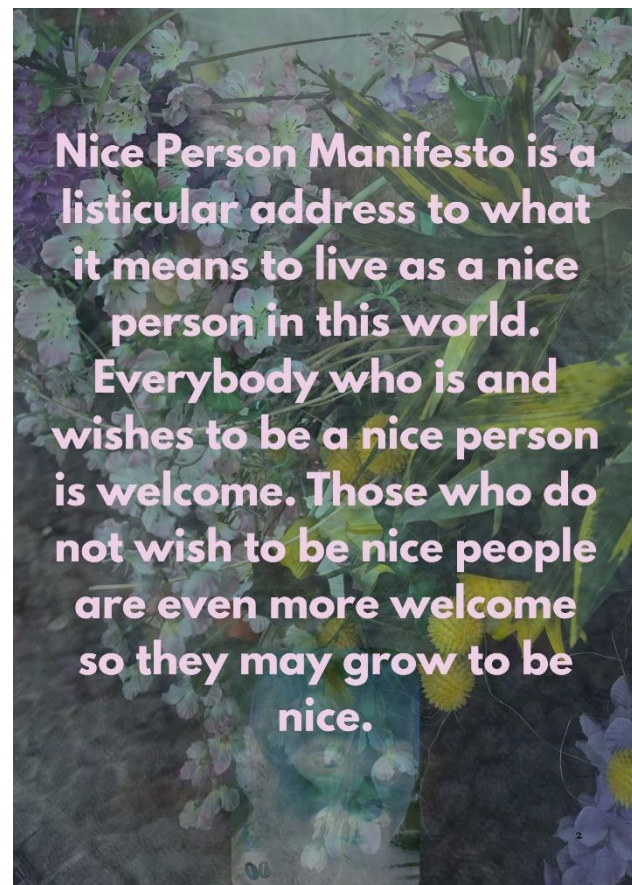
At the threshold of this moral- ethical quandary is the examination of the boundaries prejudicially imbibed over contested values of humanhood, only complicated multifacetedly by individual lived realities vis- à- vis systems of power.

Nice Person Manifesto

The magical beauty of the performative offers forms of questioning, subversion and satire that place before its audience the lines of thinking we subscribe to unquestioningly. Designed as a revelation of a manifesto~ a manifesto of nicenesses propagated, defined, supported and sponsored by state powers that censor resistance, this performance script makes the attempt to trace the moral- philosophical journey from disavowal of care, to the questioning of one's desires, to the acknowledgement of the complexity of the politics of care itself. The performance begins with a musical invitation to the audience to participate in the celebration of being nice- we sing together the song of a desire for niceness. All those present in the moment heed the invitation and participate endearingly. As time passes, as words of the poem 'Nice Person Manifesto' are spoken, the plot that characterizes a nice person becomes

acceptable for some and disdainful for others. Towards the end, when a call is made for all those who wish to continue to be nice by the tenets of the

A Poster for a Performance of Nice Person Manifesto at Brut Studio, Vienna; Designed by Varun | Varun's Worklab



manifesto, for all those who wish to propagate this niceness within society, to come forward and participate in a mass movement to proselytize this niceness, people refuse. Eventually, everybody present refuses to participate in this niceness. The nice person who has laid out the manifesto is alone in their endeavour to be nice.

In an increasingly censored political and cultural environment in India, live- performance artists have had their performance scripts rejected while applying for auditorium spaces. Films that speak specifically to the hegemonic dynamics of religious identity, caste location or environmental destruction have been banned from film festivals and public screenings. Social media posts questioning government decisions have been trolled, cancelled and shut down. Stand- up comedians have been attacked in mob violences that precede the state's oppressive measures in the face of comic interventions. While such tragic stories abound, I also claim that this is a historical moment of learning for artists, comedians, film- makers, storytellers, all who comment artistically on the various forms of censorship exerted by the state: this is because it instigates in art newer movements that attempt to circumvent and resist state censorship. These movements gives birth to refreshingly new languages of art.

In 'Nice Person Manifesto', if the government and those on its side admit that the manifesto is indeed true, there is no censorship needed. If they admit that the manifesto is false, they don't remain nice by their own standards anymore!

Speaking the Script

You are a nice person if you are humble.

You are a nice person if you walk around the city sidewalk with a smile, a gentle nod at every eye that meets your eye.

You are a nice person if you have a family, meaning a husband or a wife and your kids with them.

You are a nice person if you drink about two centilitres of alcohol just about everyday but certainly on important family occasions.

You are a nice person if you spout a trimmed beard that is shaped, oiled and combed well.

You are a nice person if you have trained your dog, have a sweet name for them, and have an adorable hoodie made for them for the winter.

You are a nice person if you can sit at a café and stare into empty space, the café floor, or at your toast and wine, whilst thinking important thoughts.

You are a nice person if you follow religion, some religion, any religion but not the bad ones, if you celebrate the religious festivals that nurture love within your fraternity.

You are a nice person if you laugh freely, laugh well and just enough to not be too loud or too soft, too rough or too timid.



You are a nice person if you own some land~ big, small; or atleast an apartment, if you have saved and invested enough for a secure future, a home you can call your own, a 'little piece of earth' you can leave behind for your children.

You are a nice person if you are interesting, fun, entertaining, conversational and social enough for dinner philosophy but not too queer for table comfort.

You are a nice person if you are progressive but not too accepting of the eccentricities of strange aesthetes and divergent sociologies.

You are a nice person if you wish to always have a nice relationship with the nice, familial, positive people around you.

You are a nice person if you love your country, if you accept and quietly brush aside its dark histories, macabre presents.

You are a nice person if you are openly positive, if you recognise distinctly, fundamentalism and terrorism from purification for cleansing and occupation for reclaiming.

You are a nice person if you speak the truth but not to power, if you wish for equality but not in social hierarchies.

You are a nice person if you propagate the preservation of ancestral professions, if you believe in bloodlines, lineages and unconditional respect for all elders who are all, without question, nice people.

You are a nice person if you engage in artistic practice, in the making of really true, great and higher Art that elevates your audience to a state of greater ideal, reality, states of higher consciousnesses than the daily.

You are a nice person if you are intellectual but not complex, because as all nice people know and believe, life is simple, facts are simple, histories are simple, people are simple.

You are a nice person if you live in a 'developing' country, wish to decolonize yourself but feel cutting edge technology and holidays in Switzerland are important for a true modernization of your 'home- land'.

You are a nice person if you are well- educated, attended college even until Master's level and yet kept- in- touch with your native tongue, your mother tongue, with the popular literature of Your soil.

You are a nice person if you are polite to nice people and understandably harsh to those who are not nice.

You are a nice person if you are nice to your friends and unfriendly with your enemies.

You are a nice person if you are not divorced but can be nice despite having divorced for the right reasons and unforeseen circumstances.

You are a nice person if you dress well.

You are a nice person if you speak good English.

You are a nice person if you are fit physically and if you do not fall ill often and if your disabilities are not bothersome for others who are not nice.



You are a nice person when you don't rant about politics or religion or economy or caste.

You are a nice person if you engage in sexual intercourse primarily for procreation and for a sweet, genuine and understandable satisfaction that is important and unavoidable for men, and a blessing for women. Trans people are anyway just prostitutes.

You are a nice person if you are open to and enjoy hugs, but not with anybody~ and~ everybody, only with those other nice people worth trusting.

You are a nice person if you tip the *garçon* generously, say "...oui monsieur...", "...pardon monsieur...", "...service monsieur..." amply.

You are a nice person if you come from a back- of- beyond village into the new city and want to take back only fruits from the new city as souvenirs for your family. A standing example of village-like-innocence, acceptable naïveté and simplicity.

You are a nice person if you live abroad, work in a company night and day, or own a business, miss your home, call every night and cry to your old parents about how much you miss your Culture.

You are a nice person if you support the military establishment, if you consciously thank the army, navy and air forces personnel with a broad smile that means, "Thank you for killing our enemies", "Thank you for keeping us safe from immigrants who take away our jobs and corrupt our language, culture", "Thank you for protecting our women, our mothers, sisters and wives, from being raped by our enemies, invaders, aliens, strange looking people, dirty people, people who are butchers, and tailors, and cobblers, and cooks, and vendors, and restauranteurs, and janitors, and people with small homes, and crazy habits, and...", "Thank you..., thank you..., thank you..."

You are a nice person if you do not speak about politics all the time, if you are just apolitical enough to have fun, and polite and light conversations about the little joys of life: like good vegetarian food, a comfortable home, the Sun, the Moon, dry fruits, the garden, the pollution in cities, the paintings of great Masters, the great and popular writers, poets and musicians of yester years... and other such important and not- so political subjects.

You are a nice person if you have your own children~ biologically Yours. Not adopted. Bloodlines are important. Blood is in fact, thicker than water.

You are a nice person if you discipline your children well, if you are a good parent.

You are a nice person if motherhood is a great ideal to you. If you believe that, after all, a mother is the greatest well- spring of love, courage, righteousness, virtue, protection, but also of fashion, cuisine, philosophical outlook, social politics and economic policy.

You are a nice person if you educate your Own children well, if you keep them at a safe distance from bad company, from the illiterate; if you send them to a good college, with nice staff and nice faculty, and nice classmates and nice friends who have a nice influence on your nice children.



You are a nice person if you know the need for reparative justice and support it~ but know where to draw the line~ which is right at the time when Your young children cannot exercise their human and inherently inborn privileges in colleges, hospitals, with salaries, taxes, on the roads, with the police, with CEOs of the corporate companies and trustees of cultural organisations. Because when your child is TARGETED by the historically marginalized people getting jobs or getting educated it is simply plain injustice.

You are a nice person if you truly know, within your heart, that the government~ any government~ is made of nice, good and respectable people, and that they will always do the right thing.

You are a nice person if you talk about the right things~ correct subjects~ about gender identity, sexual identity, educational level, about the number of cars you own, about climate change, about feminism, about misogyny and patriarchy, about how men are the oppressed group in Society now, about having a small farm and about growing your own food there and being self- sufficient, about saving the world from the big, bad, ugly, corrupt, wrong, cruel people out there who are not at all nice and who do not understand nice people like you.

You are a nice person if you believe and abide by these and more such salient features of the Nice Person Manifesto.



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