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Between Care and Control: Biopolitical Practice in Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am*

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Abstract: This paper maps and analyses Sunitha Krishna's memoir *I am What I am* as a vantage point to critique the nexus of care control as a biopolitical practice. Drawing on Foucauldian theories of biopower, and governmentality as biopolitical practices NGO centred anti-trafficking activism operates within, rather than outside, broader regimes of biopolitical governance. A close textual analysis reveals the paradoxical role of activist interventions, simultaneously critique state neglect and extends forms of ethical, institutional, and regulatory control over vulnerable populations. NGO activism extolled in the memoir, participates in governing vulnerable lives through identifying, managing and regulating marginalised bodies. Because the system works in subtle ways to regulate every disruption to its sustenance. These are techniques of governance that reorganise power rather than redistributing it. Care and control are entangled in endless process of rescue, legal intervention, rehabilitation, discipline, surveillance and correction. The paper argues that NGO led structural change is limited albeit there are moments of disruptions.

Keywords: *Sunitha Krishna, I Am What I Am, biopolitics, NGO activism, care and control, governmentality.*

Introduction

Sunitha Krishnan's memoir, *I am What I am* has two narrative arcs that converge in the activist image. On the one side, a snapshot of the activist as an individual navigating personal challenges are traced. The majority of the book is on the activist as a rescuer and rehabilitator of victims of tracking and sexual violence. They converge at several points and these are moments when the hierarchies of power become more evident.

Given that, life writings are political acts, the question of power is invariably connected with them. Foucault's notion of power as diffuse, relational and productive force is manifest in activist discourses. Power operates through discourses of victim/rescuer, morality and identity. Power, in this sense, does not merely repress but produces subjects, norms, and fields of intelligibility. Activism, care, rescue, and rehabilitation may therefore function simultaneously as practices of resistance and as techniques of governance. Apart from, this manifest forms of power, operating through institutions and everyday practices a symbolic form of power is evident in the memoir.

The paper studies these operations of power in the memoir through three core analytical sessions titled, biopolitical calibration of rescue, the production of the survivor subject and Nexus of care and governmentality in NGO centered rehabilitation. These sections are preceded by an introduction and analysis of theoretical anchors of the study. In the conclusion a synthesis of argument is presented.

Biopower, governance and symbolic authority

In his post 1970 writings and lecture series Michel Foucault traces transformation of power from ancient to the modern times. While mapping these transformations, Foucault identifies a historical shift from sovereign power, to disciplinary and biopolitical models of power. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 136). These transformations are not mutually exclusive. Earlier models are integrated into new models with subtle nuances.

Sovereign powers, as seen in monarchy system, privilege was 'the right to decide life and death' (135). This 'power over life and death' was exercised as a means of deduction. It operates through spectacle of violence and morbid punishments. He argued that the concept of power changes along with the modes of governance. Thus, by contrast, disciplinary power, elaborated in *Discipline and Punish*, targets individual bodies. With modern democratic societies new form of power emerged. People required systems to govern themselves which gave rise to disciplinary forms of power. It produces docile, useful subjects through surveillance, normalization, and correction (*Discipline and Punish* 135–69). With modern democratic societies new form of power emerged. The focus here is on optimizing human body's capacity to sustain life.

However, Foucault argues that modern societies move beyond discipline alone. Beginning in the eighteenth century, power increasingly focuses not merely on individual bodies but on populations —their health, reproduction, longevity, and productivity. Thus, in part five of the *History of sexuality: the Will to Knowledge*, he shifts from repressive models to relational models of power. The aim of new forms of power is to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize forces under it. (136). The power of new era is "bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them" (136). Termed as biopower, it operates through subtle processes that organize, regulate and optimize life itself. This shift is crucial for understanding institutions that operate in the name of protection, welfare, and care.

Biopower operates at the level of two axes. The first, an anatomo-politics of the *human body* that treated body as a machine. Its aim was integration of docile bodies into systems of efficient and economic controls.

The second pole effected supervision through intervention practices and regulatory controls. It is termed as a biopolitics of the population. It concerns with propagation, births and mortality, public health, life expectancy and longevity. (139). Rather than repressing life, it invested in life entirely. The emphasis is not on spectacular punishment but on regulation, intervention, and management. Institutions such as secondary schools, universities, hospitals, welfare agencies, reform homes, and rehabilitative spaces become central mechanisms of this new configuration of power. They do not simply punish; they classify, monitor, reform, and normalize. Biopower expanded hands of law into regulatory apparatuses such as medical and administrative institutions.

Biopolitics is a management of life driven by political rationality. There are techniques that render population legible and governable such as statistical knowledge, therapeutic interventions, medical discourses and streamlined social work practices. They exist for the circulation of power eventually classifying healthy, normal and life that can be optimized through rehabilitation. This is where activist interventions find space.

In 1978 lecture, Foucault resituates biopower and biopolitics within the context-of the broader notion of "governmentality." (Biopower: Foucault and Beyond). Governmentality is "the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical investment." Governmentality thus, extends beyond the state. Governmentality sets the field of possible action for subjects. Subjects are encouraged to regulate themselves in accordance with norms presented as reasonable, beneficial, or morally necessary. This sets desire in population to integrate into the dominant ideologies of dignified life.

Thus, people volunteer to rescue, rehabilitate, or initiate social reform and care becomes a key instrument of governmentality. Care in this sense, appears as benevolent intervention, but it also entails assessment, categorization, and correction. People who are rendered in need of care by the system are required to narrate their experiences in legible language, to accept therapeutic interventions, and to comply with normative trajectories of recovery. This situates care within the circulations of power and act as one of its mechanisms. However, even as Foucault's formulations illuminate grey areas of care, how it legitimises itself require more unpacking. Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic power becomes relevant in this regard. For Bourdieu, symbolic power is the power to impose meanings and have them recognized as legitimate (Bourdieu,170). The ability to name, classify, and speak on behalf of others constitutes a form of epistemic power that is often invisible to those who wield it. Symbolic power exists in relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it' (Bourdieu170). It commands arbitrary submission, 'capable of producing real effects without any apparent expenditure of energy' (170).

Institutions produce authoritative vocabularies—such as "victim," "survivor," "rehabilitated," or "at risk"—that shape how individuals interpret themselves and others. These categories carry moral weight. They define what counts as suffering, recovery, success, or failure. Because these classifications are embedded in professional expertise and humanitarian discourse, they are rarely experienced as coercive. Instead, they are internalized as common sense. It is not experienced as violence because it aligns with prevailing moral and social expectations (Bourdieu 164–205). In institutional settings organized around care, symbolic power ensures that regulatory practices appear compassionate rather than disciplinary.

Drawing on both Foucault and Bourdieu help a deeper understanding of political dimension of care as protection and regulation. Biopolitics explains the broader narratives behind rehabilitative contexts. They foreground, empathy, moral urgency, ethical commitment albeit reproducing governable categories. Governmentality shows how individuals are guided to govern themselves in accordance with institutional norms. Symbolic power accounts for the processes through which these norms are perceived as legitimate and benevolent.

This theoretical approach therefore makes it possible to examine how care functions as a central technology of contemporary governance. At the same time, it leaves room to consider moments of ethical discomfort, hesitation, or contradiction within such narratives—moments that may reveal awareness of the constraints within which they are produced.

Biopolitical calibration of rescue

In the prologue, author gives a peek into the life of an activist. A call from the police at 5 a.m. in the morning sets things in motion. The victim was a four years old girl gang raped in a drunken rage by father and friends. She was taken to hospital immediately. The girl survived with thirty-two stitches and countless hours of rehabilitation process. (Krishnan 2-3). In the memoir there are several such moments when rescue transforms to regulation under administrative care. On the face of it rescue is an ethical act par excellence. However, in the moment rescue operations commence, a series of administrative apparatuses are set in motion toward the goal of reintegrating the rescued body into the system. This requires a detailed unpacking through a close textual analysis. The driving questions of analysis are, who names it as a rescue worthy situation? How institutions responded and activated? What procedures follow? In what language does the system legitimize itself?

This event outlines how biopolitical institutions operate. The rescue operation is set in motion with a phone call, from the state. The police and the NGO apparatuses cooperate in institutional mobilization. This has been done several times in the past and they had 'streamlined' (1) this process. The judicial system with Juvenile Justice Act and the state-run Child Welfare Committee hand over such children to NGO care. Care and protection operate within judicial system with clear guidelines on how these non-state actors should function.

The narrative describes the violence underwent by the child in detail. "There was blood all over… her insides were trailing out of her vagina…She needed the hospital right away." (2). The narrative swiftly moves from description of bodily horror to institutional language. The hospital and the police work in line with the rescuer. From this moment onwards the body becomes countable in biopolitical language.

The author praises timely intervention of the police, who are often stuck in 'duty and protocol.' (3). Because when the system follows its route, "whereby the lower-rung police men inform their senior officers and only then raise the alarm and alert agency like ours" (3). This criticism signals how modern rescue is inseparable from juridical apparatuses. They must exist in a co-operative eco system often transgressing the official routes for efficient execution of rescue operations. In this instance, the policeman circumvents protocol. It is in such little acts such as this disruption of the system occurs. However, this humane act does not thwart the system.

Instead, this act of policeman legitimizes the NGO efficacy. They function on moral urgency, a force capable of evading procedural delay. This is how NGO optimise its skill through trust building. NGO does not merely become a solution to state failure, rather a trusted extension of state apparatus.

Does this intervention interrupt violence or does it but it inaugurates a new regime of management? The cause of violence lies in the structural marginalisation of migrant workers. However, this cause is not the concern of the system or the NGO. Those who commit violence are eradicated or removed from the society. The child is reconfigured to a governable body. Rescue in this context extends beyond a single child. The aim is sustenance of the entire system. The body is no longer threatened by death, but it becomes inserted into a regime that seeks to optimize, reform, and normalize life.

The medicalised body, that survived 'thirty-two stitches, several hours of surgery and many, many more in rehabilitation (3) translated into a case within the framework of protection. She is a symbol of efficiency and necessity of the intervention, care and protection programme. The case becomes a success story when the child is rehabilitated, and 'moved on and studied law at a reputed institution'. (4). She represents productive citizen churned out of intervention programmes. In its subtle form biopolitical organization optimized a body, otherwise left to deduction, capable of returning value to the social machine.

In this cycle of rescue, reform, rehabilitation, and production of valuable subjects, the structure becomes morally unassailable. In the terrain of biopolitical calibration administrative and therapeutic care is paramount. The 'immense potential of human beings to tide over adverse situation' emerge as 'loving and sharing' people require therapeutic management. Files, medical evaluation, psychological assessment and legal categorization are perfectly in sync here. The memoir thus oscillates between necessary rescue and the normalization of life through institutional frameworks.

The Production of the 'Survivor' Subject

The biopolitical apparatus is not limited to this survival arc- victim, trauma, healing and survivor with dignity. Its most important function is in the production of governable subjects. This subjectification is exercised by the state through judiciary and police system. The society also participate in subjectification of the marginalised through coercion. Underlying discourses are that of purity, stigma and shame. In the memoir, activism pivots in such Juncture of an eradication.

As per Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1956, running brothel was illegal. But in Hyderabad, ironically, a red-light area located opposite the high court and policemen roamed about the streets regularly. This created/constituted a demography of perpetually surveilled, vulnerable, stigmatized subjects. They are administratively manageable population category. This meant, they have to negotiate with a system that could exercise power at will.

However, in the modern state mechanism subject position is always in a flux. With a sudden crack down on brothels, their subject position shifts. They are reconstituted in the language of rescue and rehabilitation. Under earlier frame they were governed through surveillance where as in the new frame they are governed through care.

This shift is marked in language surrounding the eviction. 'They burnt all the clothes' and celebrated their victory against the 'bad women' and to 'cleanse' the area"(75). The vocabulary, carefully marked off in single quotes by the author, codes the perception of women as contamination within gentrified space. Their eviction is legitimized through this moral positioning and acts of purification. This recodifies the sex workers from rights bearing subjects to a collective threat to the society. In police custody and judicial surveillance these women are reconstituted and classified again through medical examinations. This epidemiological classification aids governance. From condemned bodies to reconstituted subjects the women travel through legal, moral, and medical codes.

However, this circulation of power is not smooth. Because, the government had no concrete plans for rehabilitation. Thus, an administrative impasse occurred, leaving the women on their own. This biopolitical paradox is mitigated by NGO interventions. The state was not prepared for eradication of prostitution rather a control of its visibility and eventual displacement of vulnerability. The HIV positive women were put in shelter homes 'in the outskirts of Hyderabad' (77) and other women without any plans for future, 'ended up back on the street'. They reorganised and resumed in a more 'decentralised fashion'. In failing to address the economic and social conditions that sustain sex work, the intervention reproduces the very phenomenon it seeks to eliminate**.**

This institutional inadequacy pivots the author to establish an independent NGO, Prajwala. The dilemma of the activist formulated a new apparatus that identifies vulnerable bodies, extracts them, classifies them, rehabilitates them, and circulates them back into normative society. So, what are disciplinary and regulatory practices deployed by the NGOs and activists?

Nexus of care and governmentality in NGO centered rehabilitation.

The activist intervention, born out of desperation at state failure to account for the structural inequalities pertaining to sex workers, is morally unassailable. Yet, a closer look at the procedures of intervention programmes reveals a new pattern. The reflective calculations and the tactics to execute them form a complex nexus of power dynamics. These work at two levels. The adult women displaced by the system require a new employment opportunity. The rescued children, and the children born into brothels require new environment to survive.

This rehabilitation model constituted through grassroot activist experience unravels intersection of care and governance. On the face of it, these interventions are humanitarian. However, these actions are deeply intertwined in institutional structures, juridical system, and administrative discipline. The NGO becomes a mediating apparatus that produces rehabilitated subjects through administrative rationality, therapeutic discourse, and procedural care. Rehabilitation is not merely a moral project; it is a technology of governance that organizes life, regulates conduct, and generates legible, productive citizens.

This is a dispersed form of power operating through its apparatuses, rather than through overt coercion. The NGO in the memoir is integrated by the system to function as its extended hands. This requires the NGO to work within legal and bureaucratic frameworks to reshape life trajectories. Its success depends on convincing subjects of their precarity and of the necessity of reform. Only when a desire for rehabilitation is internalized can governance operate smoothly.

Before the intervention, Mehendi functioned through an internal, self-sustaining economy. Former madams such as Khatoon Bi and Masoon Bi had ruled the area for decades. The brothel system ensured older women were housed and sustained. This older system became unviable in the fast developing urban milieu. Thus, a sudden crack down on the older system occurred.

The closure of brothels, ostensibly a legal correction under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, produces systemic exclusion: livelihoods vanish, dignity erodes, and survival becomes unstable. For men like Akbar and Jaffer transition into other livelihoods after closure was possible. But, for women this meant reconstituting entire livelihood against all odds. Although the memoir acknowledges this internal organization of older system, it is presented as morally inferior.

Here, biopolitics operates through deprivation as well as rescue. By dismantling the old structure without providing viable alternatives, the state renders them discursively reproduceable subjects. Their precarity becomes the entry point for intervention for humanitarian bodies. They are put in a position where they plead, “Do something for our children,”. This enunciates a chain of new technologies of governance. Here the activist function not as sovereign authority, but as organizer and mediator between outcast community and civil society.

The author confess that the meeting was a “hellishly uncomfortable experience” because the women vent grievances against the system and frustration with the new challenges. Her position as an individual, without anyone backing her, builds trust in the women. How they respond to the opportunity reveals that they are capable of mobilizing for collective goal. This ability however, require moral and ethical reconfiguration to be accepted as right bearing subjects. With displacement from centres of the society to the outskirts of the city, these women require a new link with the system. When the activist urges them to contribute to their children’s education and not “dump their

responsibility," the women respond sharply: "Who told you we're slinking away our responsibility?!" Their rebuttal reveals a tension central to governmentality: subjects must be constructed as both responsible and deficient—capable of reform yet in need of guidance. Most importantly, with a desire to be a 'normal' subject.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, governmentality has two axis points in this scenario. The first being the children of the evicted women. The school becomes the primary site of biopolitical intervention. A six-hour timetable is instituted, covering numeracy, alphabets, music, dance, and knots. Uniforms for students, sarees for teachers, assembly routines, and march past are introduced. These are not neutral pedagogical choices; they are disciplinary mechanisms in Foucault's sense, reminiscent of his analysis in *Discipline and Punish*. Bodies are arranged in space, time is segmented, behaviour is observed, and norms are imposed.

Children's attention spans and preferences, common to all children, are interpreted as behavioural issues specific to "these" children. Their proximity to brothel life, their language, and their premature sexual knowledge are pathologized. The activist deploys her degree in psychiatric social work to address scholastic and psychological needs. Therapeutic vocabulary becomes a mode of classification. Deviations from an "ideal childhood" are corrected through structured routine and psychological monitoring.

This is biopolitics in action: the optimization of life. The goal is to produce children fit for "regular schools," that is, legible within state systems. Care becomes routinized, procedural, measurable. Lesson plans, weekly reviews, and professional monitoring render development quantifiable. Medical examinations, hospital visits, and psychological evaluations fold bodily existence into an administrative task. The introduction of uniforms and protocols create docile bodies ready to enter into normative citizenship. The children are no longer merely rescued, but disciplined and normalized.

The second point of intervention, the lives of adult women prove more complex. Skill training programs, toy-making units, and collaborations with institutions like The Boys Town aim at livelihood generation. Productivity becomes the metric of redemption. "Becoming productive" emerges as the ultimate narrative arc: the reformed subject optimized to contribute to the economic future of a nation.

Akbar's transformation illustrates this recoding. Formerly a pimp and electrician, earning little after brothel closure, he is presented as now leading a "dignified life." His pride within bureaucratic halls signals elevation from "scoundrel" to respectable citizen through association with the NGO. Yet this dignity is contingent on institutional recognition. Past identity is implicitly rendered undignified. Rehabilitation thus entails symbolic purification.

However, the memoir also contains ruptures. Mehendi is described ironically as a place where "women could walk around unmolested." Within a stigmatized space, women experienced forms of autonomy and security absent in mainstream society. The narrative, takes a small pause at this paradox. But soon, reverts to abolitionist discourse. It favours the grand narrative of victimhood, where some women who escaped shelter homes are portrayed as conditioned or trapped, despite repeated demonstrations of agency.

As the NGO operations expand, documentation becomes central. Legal setbacks and threats from powerful men necessitate meticulous record-keeping. Admission to shelters requires official documentation; judiciary handles entry and exit, while the NGO provides "holistic care." A clearly demarcated duty structure emerges. This bureaucratic clarity reflects Foucault's insight that modern power operates through knowledge production. Files, case histories, and medical reports create a governable subject. This objectification is central for the survival of the NGO itself. Thereby the system carefully embeds the NGOs within its machinery.

These non-governmental organizations are neatly engrossed within state initiative such as housing schemes for weaker sections, Juvenile Justice Acts and reformed judicial mechanism, However, these policies are initiated through surveys and studies conducted by grass root organisations. The activists' advocacy for such measures blurs the boundary between civil society and state. The NGO occupies an in-between biopolitical order: not sovereign, yet integral to governance. Financial management reinforces this nexus. Salaries for teachers, rent, materials, and travel require economic metrics to shape intervention strategies. Managerial rationality is inseparable from humanitarian ethos.

Conclusion

The memoir acknowledges criticism from sex workers' unions, framing the debate as an ideological war. As a staunch abolitionist supportive of the Nordic model, the author defines prostitution as slavery produced by patriarchal precarity. Yet even within abolitionism, biopolitical tensions persist. The NGO system remains bounded by legal codifications and policy frameworks. It supports victims while recodifying them as docile, governable bodies. Autonomy is recognized only insofar as it aligns with rehabilitative norms. Thus, care and control are not opposites but co-constitutive. The NGO's interventions undeniably provide shelter, education, medical care, and psychological support. At the same time, they normalize, discipline, and regulate. Governmentality does not negate compassion; it organizes it.

In this nexus, subjects are transformed—not merely rescued but rendered administratively visible, economically productive, and therapeutically articulate. The rehabilitated citizen is the endpoint of a process that begins with convincing individuals of their vulnerability and culminates in their integration into normative structures. The memoir, perhaps unintentionally, reveals how humanitarian activism can function as a subtle yet powerful extension of biopolitical governance.

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