
Dystopian Realities: Interrogating the Relationship between Technology and Human Rights in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Abstract

Manjula Padmanabhan is a “playwright, novelist, short story writer and illustrator” (Ramchandani). Representing the science-fiction theatre, her iconic play *Harvest* describes a soul-crushing dystopia that is ruthlessly ruled by biotechnological advancements.

Keywords- Dystopian Realities, Interrogating the Relationship, Technology, Human Rights

Introduction

Dealing with the Faustian state of affairs, this allegory narrates the commoditization of living human bodies sold and exploited by the wealthy people of the Western world.

The three-act play is set, like a few of Padmanabhan's earlier stories, in some grey, almost anaesthetised near-future. And the future is used as a magnifying lens to look at a greedy and dead-end present - a soulless world without exits. Ostensibly, *Harvest* is about the sale of human organs: poor Indians selling various parts of their anatomy to rich Americans shopping for spare parts to replace theirs in a cannibalistic quest to hang on to youth. But Padmanabhan has taken it much further to look at our derailed society. The story revolves round a family of four: Om Prakash, who has made the Faustian deal, his mother (Mrs Praycash as the Americans call her), his wife and brother (Jain).

It exhibits a neocolonial techno-space where Third World countries serve as the crop fields for cultivating human bodies meant to be harvested for the use of the rich Western world. It presents a bleak future where technology and human rights collide. Here, the adverse effect of global capitalism comes to the fore through dehumanization.

Harvest brings forth the ethical dilemmas of the people who are blinded by the spirit of greed, and profit in a morally corrupt social setup. It describes the phenomenon where poverty-stricken third-world people become mere playthings in the hands of the rich. They are subjected to 24x7 surveillance, control, and exploitation. They are devoid of any agency, dignity, and personal autonomy. The unchecked technological power snatches their human rights in a deeply unequal world. The play is a dystopian story of a family in the city of Bombay (Mumbai). It depicts the horrors of the organ market where multinational companies target the poor inhabitants of Third World countries for their business.

They serve to procure the organs of these poor but young and healthy people for transplantation in the future. Commoditized bodies as readymade products assure better well-being and extend lives to the wealthy but ailing Westerns. One such rapacious multinational corporation is Inter Planta Organ Transplant Services, which “is recruiting healthy Third World humans to become, essentially, health

repositories for wealthy Westerners” (Denton). This paper explores how Western techno-science, advances in transplant medicine, and cyber-culture become the tools in the capitalist trade of cannibalization of bodies of the Third World’s disenfranchised beings, as depicted in the play.

The plot focuses on Om Prakash, the male protagonist, who lives in a cramped space of a one-room apartment in a Mumbai chawl with his family. His existence is marked with stark economic deprivation. His poor family consists of four members –Om, his insecure wife Jaya, his haggard-looking frustrated Mother, and his easy-going younger brother Jeetu, who secretly works as a gigolo. Om and Jaya are caught in a hollow and loveless marital relationship that is going nowhere. Jaya satisfies her physical needs by having a covert sexual relationship with Jeetu. With a reversal of fortune, one day, Om loses his job as a clerk. So, in the wake of this economic disarray, he subjects himself to becoming a body parts donor. He makes a Faustian bargain with Mephistophelian InterPlanta Services (a transnational company). “InterPlanta Services will maintain Om and his immediate family in a consumerist lifestyle in exchange for Om living as a spare-parts inventory for a recipient half a world away”(Halpin). Om makes a transaction out of his greed and need, but it means surrendering his autonomy, human rights, and dignity. Thus, the play delineates a society where capitalist forces undermine human rights and render underprivileged beings as mere commodities.

The dystopia of *Harvest* shows the advancement of technology to such a degree that human bodies can be transacted and harvested like commercial products. Here, technology does not serve the purpose of improving human lives but rather exacerbates inequalities. Capitalism and technology force poor and vulnerable beings to sell their bodies for survival. The technology becomes a tool of control and oppression in the hands of the powerful. Since Inter Planta requires only the services of healthy and unmarried donors, Om is forced to conceal his marital status, and hence, Jaya pretends to be his sister. He tells his mother, "We'll have more money than you and I have names for!" he says to Ma, proudly. "Who'd believe there's so much money in the world" (Padmanabhan 11). The social and economic factors responsible for Om's decision cannot remain concealed under the garb of the liberal discourse of "contract" and "free will" because these two factors have a vital role in influencing his "freedom of choice". Although the signing of this ethically- challenged contract was an act of "individual choice" on the part of Om, he still has a perplexed sentiment about it later when his mother and wife Jaya question his error of judgment. Here, his behavior reflects a strange mix of hope, despair, anxiety, dilemma, and illusion. His wife, sensitive about the gravity of the decision and its consequences, tries to make him realize, "You're wrong, there are choices- there must be choices" (23). But, he tries his best to justify and defend this choice with the paradoxical mix of optimism and pessimism,

Om: I went because I lost my job at the company. And why did I lose it? Because I am a clerk and nobody needs clerks anymore! There are no new jobs now- there's nothing left for people like us! Don't you know that? You think I did it lightly. But...we'll be rich! Very rich! Insanely rich! But you'd rather live in this one small room, I suppose! Think it's such a fine thing-living day in, day out, like monkeys in a hot-case..." (23).

Economic deprivation coerced Om to sacrifice his body and fundamental rights. His decision is influenced by necessity, not by free will. This commodification is not limited to the human body only,

the human soul is also commodified by the capitalist forces. Strangely, the mother also has a myopic vision of reality, only worried about the Western luxuries and technological comforts that are to come in the bargain. She does not care about the loss of human dignity. When Jaya fails to convince both her husband and mother-in-law about the loss and complications of the decision, she expresses her fears and anguish,

I'll tell you! he's sold the rights to his organs! His skin! His eyes! His arse (sobs again) sold them! (holds her head). Oh god, oh god! What's the meaning of this nightmare! (sobs, to Om). How can I hold your hand, touch your face, knowing that any moment it might be snatched away from me and flung across the globe (sobs)...(23)

In *Harvest* Manjula Padmanabhan explores the adverse impact of commodification on family ties. Om's Faustian transaction takes the whole family into its grip. Subsequently, all four members of the family are caught in the vicious web of exploitation by getting into the contract. They are under surveillance and 24x7 control of the corporation. Om and his family suffer alienation and deprivation of privacy which further leads to disintegration. Later, Om feels frightened when the transient bubble of glittering illusion bursts and he realizes that running behind affluence was just a hollow quest, "How could I have done this to myself? What sort of fool am I?"(Padmanabhan 234).

The multinational corporation InterPlanta, simultaneously as serving guards and agents, puts the family on inflexible surveillance – completely hijacking their human dignity and autonomy. They establish a one-way communication with the family. They try to make sure that the house remains germ-free so Om's unspecified organs remain healthy and intact for the wealthy client Virgil. It invasively controls Om's life and monitors his daily routine with a constant gaze. Like Big Brother, Vergil also does the periodic supervising by hiding behind a digitally projected superimposed female self-named Ginni. Ginni, "a computer-animated wet dream" (Padmanabhan 95), treats them with a condescending and superior attitude and turns their household into a sort of prison – suffocating their identities in a sinister way. Their dignity, pride, and identity are breached through this act of surveillance and supremacy. They become "if they were fish in an aquarium, well fed and ready to be consumed" (Banerjee. 60). Professor Praggnaparamita Biswas of Banaras Hindu University aptly analyses Ginni's presence in the play:

Due to its futuristic setting, the playwright designs the character of Ginni as an electronic simulacrum through the onscreen contact module. She is recast as a decoy by Virgil to entice the male donors of the third world. Padmanabhan's presentation of Ginni as a blonde and white-skinned woman and her sudden flickering from the polygonal contact module for continuing the panoptic vigilance upon its sellers proves the fact that the feminine presence has vital importance for consumeristic pleasure.

This play puts the exploited Third World bodies at the center of discourse and simultaneously exposes variegated dichotomies and post-colonial binaries at the heart of the matter– male body/female body, impoverished/healthy, old/young, virtual/real, self/technology receiver/giver, etc. Modern apparatus, better lifestyle, and technology play vital roles in luring the First World donors to make morally questionable bargains with their First World counterparts. In this standardized global market, First World receivers hold a hegemonic position with weapons of capital and new technology.

These

receivers wish to "live forever" via gadgets or agencies that will procure "fresh bodies". At the same time, the donors escape their corporeality by means of technology-induced simulations of dream-like states of fantasy that seduce them to willingly sell their physical bodies and their identities to be housed in by "enhanced" First World capitalist buyers in an unequal trade (Chanda 113).

The corporation modern gadgets and luxury for the donors' entrainment and pampering, enslaving Om's family. The ravenous force of technology colonizes their bodies instead of empowering or liberating them. The swift intrusion of Western technology has a dehumanizing effect on Om's aged mother as she becomes compulsively addicted to watching Television on the video set meant for interaction with Ginni. Later in the play, "Super Deluxe Video Couch" (a capsule-like cabin) seduces the mother to escape into the world of technologically-induced delight. As a perfect recipient of Western machinery, she completely surrenders herself to virtual/artificial contentment and forgets her reality.

The Super Deluxe Video Couch she orders for herself is representative of her self-imposed withdrawal. Om's mother's renunciation of the world is complete, unhesitating and unquestioning. She chooses for herself electronic annihilation (Prabhakaran 2).

She is so lost that when guards and agents take her second son Jitu away to extract his body organs, she doesn't react or pay attention as she is too busy enjoying the TV. She "finally merges her body with a mechanized coffin-TV module that gives her a nonstop visual experience—a kind of cyborg existence" (Banerjee 60).

Ginnie, never physically present, connects with the family through video conferencing at regular intervals via a screen suspended from the ceiling of the room called Contact Module (an apparatus of surveillance), installed by Interplanta Services, which looks like a "white faceted globe" (Padmanabhan 221). She says to Jaya, "Always I listened in to you, Zhaya. I heard every word in the room- even when the Module was off, it recorded." (Padmanabhan 94). With this demigod-like contact module, Ginni monitors donors and tries to inculcate the habit of self-discipline. She encourages them to amend their behavioral patterns to ensure their well-being. Intervening and controlling the donors' lives, she disapproves of their insanitary dwellings and instructs Interplanta Services to install a modern toilet in the home so the Om family doesn't have to use the same toilet that all the other families have also been using. She orders them to do no extra labor, eat just the prescribed food cooked within the "gleaming fully equipped-kitchen" (227) or consume the multicolor nutritional food pallets, and use mini-gym to stay healthy so any infection and deterioration of health can be kept at bay. She does habit-policing as she can't take any risk to the health of her purchased organs. She pronounces Om's name with an American accent as Auwm while stressing the value of keeping the organs healthy,

The Most Important Thing is to keep Auwm smiling. Coz if Auwm's smiling, it means his body is smiling and if his body is smiling it means his organs are smiling. And that's the kind of organs that'll survive a transplant best, smiling organs... (229)

The entire family, except Jaya, surrenders to the technology-equipped Americans without fighting for the dignity of life. Om and his TV-addicted mother take the route of escapism, leaving poor Jaya to face the horrific consequences. Jaya is the only character that demonstrates virulent resistance to claim her dignity as a human being from the mechanized rapacious powers:

...while all the donors fall prey to Ginny's tactics, Padmanabhan uses Jaya, the only character in the play who is virulently opposed to Om's decision, to reclaim a human dignity of sorts, a dignity that allows Jaya to resist the lure of money and the seductive escapism of technology. It is a dignity that is predicated, I contend, on the very limitations of the physical body that the receivers are so desperate to overcome. (Pravinchandra 14)

In the play, her lone confrontation with the predatory forces is a flicker of hope in this bleak and depressing vision of humanity. She can dupe "the imperialistic order and pervasive reach of technoglobal gadgetry" (Chanda 118) with her intelligent move by replacing her husband Om with his brother Jitu, who bears a resemblance to Om. On her insistence, the easy-going Jitu also registers himself with InterPlanta, but he shows some ambivalent resistance to its hidden motives. He says, "I don't mind being bought – but I won't be owned" (Padmanabhan 227). Ginni, as the maximized persuasive power of technology, lures Jeetu with the promise of a virtual reality future and seductively persuades him to go with InterPlanta guards when they come to take Om to extract his organs. The guards mistakenly take him, extract the necessary organs from his body, and return him as a disembodied entity - fully wrapped in bandages like an "apparition". The technology-infused abyss of Neo-imperialism snatched away his identity and left him as a dehumanized white bundle devoid of body and soul. :

He has been transformed into an individual cyborg with implants in place of eyes and a visor across them, a posthuman body that is first disembodied and then re-embodied enabling his transition into another consumer body. Ginni's images are transmitted directly into Jeetu's brain and he is completely entranced by her. (Chanda 121)

The aged, diseased, and capitalist buyer Virgil, in the garb of Ginnie, seduces Jaya and seeks self-transformation by exploiting Jaya's body to fulfill his wish to live forever by eradicating the boundaries of human existence. Being hungry for youth, he is not satisfied with just claiming Jeetu's body organs. So, he craves her youthful body for using it as an outsourcing Machine. Without any physical contact, his hidden motive is to impregnate her by injecting his seed into her body via some technological devices and prolonging himself through his perfect progeny. Jaya is petrified when he comes open and reveals that Ginni is nothing but a virtual projection of his machinations. Virgil, the racist capitalist, sees Jaya as the commoditized "Other" who lives in very unsanitary conditions. So, any direct physical connection between them is unimaginable. "Zhaya, I'd love to travel to be with you, but I can't...The environment you live in is too polluted for me, Zhaya" (Padmanabha 247). So, scared of being contaminated, he invasively exploits the technology in the form of Ginni to ensure a healthy "harvest" of body parts. But, "the insistence of Jaya...on physical touch and contact with the First World receiver upsets this hegemonic construct. She prefers to die with dignity than to live ignobly by sacrificing her identity, rooted in her Third World body" (Chanda 114).

When she refuses to succumb to Virgil's demands, he commissions the InterPlanta guards to

break the door and forcibly drag Jaya out for insemination. Having no exits for escaping now, she chooses the disturbing option of "winning by loosing" (Padmanabhan 248). This is a new definition of victory for her as she decides to thwart Virgil's Mephistophelean plan by committing suicide with a "piece of glass". Padmanabhan says, "only thing she has which is still her own: her death" (248). She can beat the First World hegemonic structure only via her death. There is even a victory for her in this death as it would help her reclaim dignity and self-pride, and she will be free from the vicious clutches of Virgil.

Thus, the overriding presence of the "panoptic surveillance technique" (Prabhakaran 2), computerization, and the advancement in medical transplant medicine intrude into the human world and become a potent tool in the hands of the illegitimate global economy of the First World for governing and exercising power over the Third World bodies. The incidents in the play symbolize the conflict between humans and machines. Electronic technical devices and modern gadgets help a rapacious monster like Virgil connect with the organ donors in the garb of Ginni without entering the geographical and physical spaces of the Third World. This technology, blended with millennial capitalism, also facilitates the cannibalization and destruction of human bodies by making organ trade possible in a standardized way. In that case, third-world bodies are meant to be mined and harvested for the use of wealthy Westerners via the automatic application of technological powers.

This all becomes possible with the weapon of technology, which also threatens the existence of individual dignity and selfhood. The installed contact module (a panoptic mechanism) does the job of a demigod as it catches "every sneeze, every belch" (Padmanabhan 94), even the slightest mistake and dishonesty on the part of the donors. This is just like the constant hegemonic gaze of the colonizer inducing a sentiment of vulnerability in the colonized.

Padmanabhan's *Harvest* not only illuminates the tribulations of the marginalized people in the Third World but also delineates how the much-celebrated progress in science and technology turns antagonistic to the underprivileged. The inescapable grip of capitalism and its close kin neo-imperialism, as portrayed in the play, has never been a mere dystopian nightmare. The increasing presence of organ-donation mafias and fertility tourist packages in our contemporary society testify to Padmanabhan's apprehensions (Sojan).

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