

MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *HARVEST*:

An exploitative dystopia



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Abstract

Manjula Padmanabhan presents a dystopic vision of the future of imperialism in her 1997 play Harvest. It is an imaginative examination of the possible future evolution of the relationship between the developed and developing world. The play shows how the "first" world cannibalises the "third" world to fulfil its own desires and needs.

Key words: Manjula Padmanabhan, exploitative dystopia, 'Harvest'

Manjula Padmanabhan sets the play in the city of Bombay in 2010, where all legal, moral and bio-ethical debates about organ sale and transplant are no longer. It is a world where organ trade is fully institutionalised and smoothly operated by the structures and representatives of global capitalism. The story centres on a young man Om, who signs up to be an organ donor for an American named Ginni because there are no other jobs available for him in Mumbai. The characters in the play are divided in to two. They are third world donors such as Om, his wife Jaya, his mother Ma and his brother Jeetu and first world receivers such as Ginni and Virgil.

The voluntary decision of Om to sell his organs is brought on by contradictory emotions such as hope and despair. Om become an image of the poor third world individual who is seduced by the myth of prosperity promoted by capitalism but for which he has to pay with his organs. On the one hand, it is the poverty and economic



crisis that leads Om to sell his organs and, on the other, Om is attracted to the global prosperity promised by capitalism, which presents organ donation as a new means of making money to overcome poverty. We have Om saying that “we will be rich! Very rich! Insanely rich” (23) to Jaya when she disagrees with his decision. In the economic structure of millennial capitalism, the selling of organs becomes an ‘option’ for the third world individual. The helplessness of Om is very clear in his dialogue with Jaya as follows:

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 is nothing left for people like us! Don't you know that?

JAYA. You are wrong, there are choices, there must be choices.(68)

The exploitation of third world countries have evolved over the centuries. They have been exploited in every conceivable way, politically, economically, socially, culturally, materially etc. Earlier wide range of commodities like tea, cocoa, sugar, timber and lands were taken from them and in this dystopic world their organs become commodities to be sold. The organ is indeed a material good but not the product of labour. Each part of the body is assigned a market value and they can be harvested at any time the receiver needs. In the play, Om faces an interview to be selected for the organ trade. The description that Om gives shows how the process of their selection is very similar to the selection of crops for agriculture. There was medicine dripping on the people in the queue. Om says: “I wonder if I am not dreaming! The water is hot, scented. Then cold. Then hot air. Then again the water. It stings a little, this second water. Smells like some medicine” (12).

He compares himself and others in the queue to ‘goats at the slaughterhouse’, an innocent remark that acquires great significance as the events unfold in the play. Third world individuals like Jaya, Om and Jeetu are devalued as mere resources from which parts of the human body could be drawn at cheap rates. By signing the pact with the



receivers, Om becomes a mere property at their disposal. His body is no longer his own, as Jaya asks: “How can I hold your hand, touch your face, knowing that at any moment it might be snatched away from me and flung across the world” (23). Ginni thus becomes the owner of Om’s body and she sucks his life, as Jaya states, “like a vampire” (29). Ginni sees him just as a commodity at the market to be consumed, and only his health is of vital importance to her because it will directly affect her plans for survival. Ginni stresses.

“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”. (41)

Om is totally dehumanised and deprived of his own individuality. All the comforts that Ginni offers are just to make Om’s body healthy. She frequently reminds him that “I get to give you things you’d never get in your lifetime and you get to give me all...may be my life” (43). Only when the Guards come to take him, does Om realises his true predicament: “Oh how could have I done this to myself? What sort of fool am I?” (53). Along with the loss of the body, the power to articulate their own desires also has been lost. Ginni does not care about the life of Om as one human being would with another, but “she cares”, as Jaya says, “just as much as she cares about the chicken she eats for dinner-that’s all you are for her, another kind of dinner”. Thus the third world citizens become mere puppets in the hands of the first world receivers.

In colonisation the first world has been considering that it is their duty to civilise the third world individuals whom they consider as ‘uncivilised’. Interplanta services send two Guards to ‘civilise’ Om’s family. The Guards and Agents are robot-like commandos of the receivers. Their mechanical existence is clear in the ruthless precision in whatever they do and say. They are mere puppets working for the first world individuals and thus they are dehumanised. It is to be noted that Guard 3 is a male clone of Guard 2. It is described that “whatever is visible of their faces is



completely blank” (18). They are turned into machines without feelings and emotions. Om and his family lives in a single-room building which the first world changes utterly. The Guards replace their old kitchen with a cooking device and they have to take multi-coloured capsules instead of food which Ma calls “goat shit” (22). Their most important installation is that of Contact Module. They destroy not only their kitchen but their way of life itself. They are not allowed to respond but it is only Jaya who responds that “I have question”. They are colonised without any voice.

The first world people see themselves as perfect and try to recreate the people of the third world in their own image by imposing their ways of life on them. Ginni reacts with horror, when she comes to know that Om’s family shares a toilet with forty other families: “No! It’s wrong. It’s disgusting! And I---well, I’m going to change that. I can’t accept that. I mean, it’s unsanitary!” (28). The first world makes the third world people feel that they are unclean and uncivilised, and there by arouse in them a feeling of inferiority and the need to be ‘civilised’. Ginni and her Guards are successful in inflicting their ways of life on Om’s family. The result is that the one room apartment of Om is completely changed. They are provided with TV sets, computer terminal, an air-conditioner, bathroom and toilet. Their food is also turned into capsules which are to be taken at particular times. Thus they are re-produced in the form that the first world wants them to be in every aspect.

The Interplanta intervene in the donor world without having to set foot in the geographical location that the donors inhabit. It is through the Contact Module that the first world controls every aspect of Om’s life from when and what he eats, to whom he sees and how he uses the bathroom. The Contact Module is installed at the centre of the room to facilitate communication between the receiver and the donor. They are watched over by an American named Ginni. She speaks with Om, Jaya and Ma. Ginni, through Contact module encroaches upon each and every minute aspect of their lives. It records every sneeze and every speech inside the home. They are no longer free to speak and do what they like and thus they are conditioned by the



Contact Module. Ginni herself likens Om's flat to a "human goldfish bowl...Better than TV. Better than cyber net. Coz this is real life" (43). It is just like a play to her which she can amuse herself with. The surveillance of the Om Prakash family by Interplanta proves not to be confined to the physical plane alone. Virgil, another American receiver, later informs Jaya that the Contact Module had spied in on their words and every thought: "Always I listened to you, Zhaya. I heard every word said in the room-even when the Module was off, it recorded" (94). Om and his family are completely deprived of their privacy and freedom. Towards the end of the play, Virgil reveals that the food that they have been taking contains anti-suicide drugs. They are physically incapable of taking their own life. More than the cannibalistic sale of organs, it is this constant surveillance that threatens Om and his family. The third world donors are thus trapped under the unrelenting gaze of the first world receivers. Om and his family members appear to be unable to question the complete hijacking of their personal lives by Interplanta. Neither can they object to the humiliation of their complete transparency before their new masters.

Jeetu, Om's brother, is the only one who refuses to be 'owned' (34) or to "get used to the money that can make stud bulls into milk cows" (34). For Ma, he is a "jackal in my belly by mistake" (8). Jeetu is a male prostitute who says that "I'm not fussy—cows, pigs, horses. I'll service to all—for a price" (32). Unlike Om, Jeetu knows which part of him goes into where and to whom. For him "life is one long joke. The only trick is in learning when to laugh" (32). The inversion of ethical values is evident after the return of Jeetu as a human wreck. Om refuses to allow him to stay in the house as his permit to live in the house has been cancelled by Interplanta. Even his mother is averse to taking him in, worrying that the food allotted to them would not suffice to feed Jeetu also. Jaya's decision to nurse Jeetu back to health is seen by Om as a display of sentimentality, a weakness which he knows Ginni will disapprove of. It is apparent that Om is ready to renounce familial ties even without Ginni asking him to do so. This can be seen as a victory of the first world and its values of dehumanization. Human



feelings such as love, care, and affection are no longer valued in this world of contracts and terminal deeds. Om and his family themselves conforms to the patterns of the first world. They leave behind what they have been holding as their own, feelings and attitudes. Humanity is thus smothered under the weight of material considerations.

Om's mother Ma is totally absorbed in the fantasy world of television. Ma has become completely addicted to their new life of luxury. She spends most of her time watching television on the interactive set that Ginni has sent them. She becomes the perfect recipient of Ginny's gifts as she dismisses Om's compunction and increasingly seeks to escape the reality of her life in Bombay through technological devices. She is unmoved even as she sees her son Jeetu being taken away, apparently by mistake, by the Guards for an organ transplant. Jaya, who is shattered by the incident, tries to shake her out of the trance by physically intervening between her and the television set. Mother explodes:

"I am your mother-in-law, that's your brother-in-law on the floor there, your husband's gone to work at the spare parts factory. And you? You are just a slut who happens to be standing between me and my T.V". (65)

All the donors fall prey to Ginny's tactics and it is only Jaya who opposes the exploitation. From the very beginning of the play, Jaya opposes Om's decision to sell his body. She is the person who understands the full implication of this organ trade which threatens Om as an individual and to her as his wife, and also the social and political ramification. She presents this through the metaphor of widowhood, where the loss of each organs in his body, makes her widow gradually. She tells him: "If you were dead I could shave my head and break my bangles...but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece by piece? (sobs) Should I shave half my head? Break bangles one at a time?(23).



When the Guards encroach into their life, Jaya is the only one who responds “I have a question” (16). She is untouched by the temptations of Ginni who promised to give her whatever she likes. She keeps an affair with her brother-in-law Jeetu and she tells him that ‘A woman wants more than just...(breaks off) satisfaction’(32). Jaya is a woman whose desires are never satisfied by her marital life. Her husband hurts her by saying that:

“On paper, you are my sister. In reality, you are nothing to me. If not for Ginni I’d throw you out like a shot. On to the streets. To be hunted. What do I care? You betrayed me. Seduced my brother. I feel nothing but contempt”.(68).

Jaya’s relation with Jeetu is not for just satisfaction but above all, it is her basic urge for human warmth that leads her to Jeetu. She finds herself living with Jeetu rather than merely existing as Om’s wife.

In the final part of the play, Jaya is alone on the stage. Om has abandoned her, having wilfully chosen to seek out Ginny and give up his body to her, Jeetu is taken away by the Guards and Ma is plugged into her video couch, oblivious to her surroundings. To Jaya, an unfamiliar, disembodied voice comes from the contact module. It is Virgil, another American receiver with designs to prey upon Jaya’s body. Virgil has the image of Jeetu which shows that Jeetu is consumed completely. It is through Virgil, that Jaya comes to know that Ginni was nobody but “a computer-animated wet dream” (95), which the first world used to ‘bait the hook” (95). Virgil reveals their real tactic that they are really in need of childbearing women. Om was a just a means to reach Jaya. Virgil tells that “we look for young men’s bodies to live in and young women’s bodies in which to sow their children” (98). Virgil needs a child without his direct involvement because he tells Jaya that “the world you live in is too dangerous for me, Zhaya” (99). This is a fear of being polluted by Jaya, a third world other. Virgil’s desire to impregnate Jaya and his simultaneous fear that she would pollute him could be read as a modern instance of ambivalence. Jaya challenges Virgil: “I am not stupid you



know? I know you are stronger than me, you are richer than me. You'll get me in the end, I know you will. But I want you to risk your skin for me" (100).

Jaya finally discovers a new definition to winning "winning by losing". She is left with nothing as her own but only her death and pride which she decides to keep her own. She decides to defeat helpless woman"(102). She dares to make him pronounce her Virgil by keeping herself out of his reach. She tells him, "I will die by that you, who live only to win, will lost to a poor, weak and name correct. She decides to resist: "for the first time in my life, may be for the last time of my life, I am going to enjoy myself, all by myself" (102). Thus she resists the glittering illusions of western style capitalism.

Manjula Padmanabhan presents the themes of economic exploitation, commoditisation and acculturation through the metaphor of organ trade. The selection of the global organ trade as a compelling metaphor through which to dramatise the west's exploitation of its cultural others suits the futuristic bent of the play because it draws on the familiar science fiction motif of body snatching. The organ trade in the play reminds us of slavery in the past, which saw millions of bodies being bought, sold and exchanged. It also shows the present condition where Indian cities like Bombay and Calcutta are major locations for trade in human organs, especially kidneys and corneas. There is an assumption that the bodies of the poor are worth more as spare parts than as living persons. Describing this phenomenon as a case of 'neo-cannibalism', anthropologist Nancy Scheper Hughes notes that wealthy but ailing patients in the first world are increasingly turning to healthy and poverty-stricken populations of the third world in order to procure 'spare' body parts. This illicit global economy of organs is yet another example of the exploitation of third world bodies that global capitalism has given rise to. Scheper Hughes points out that the global circuit of organs mirrors the circuit of capital flows in the era of globalisation "from south to north world, from poor to rich, from black and brown to white.(qtd in Pravinchandra 89). Thus, the human organ is equated with other objects in the third world for first world consumption.



Due to the constant surveillance of the first world, a dehumanised Indian society is created. Om and his family are destined to live mechanically without any feelings and emotions like Guards and Agents. By signing the pact of organ sale, Om is expected to be submissive to the exploitation of first world people. They are no longer human beings but only commodities to be purchased. As in any other dystopia, dehumanisation is highlighted in *Harvest*.

The story is reminiscent of how colonialism is established on a distant territory. The first step of colonialism is the seduction and temptation by giving many promises. The Guards and Agents are sent as intermediates between the coloniser and the colonised. The next step is complete control, which is attained through the constant surveillance of the contact module. Finally, the donors are sapped off their vitality and the resistance comes only from the part of the woman character who achieves freedom. In fact, *Harvest* presents a picture of the hazardous patterns of neo-colonialism whereby the first world indirectly controls and determines the so called liberated third world. This dystopic world of *Harvest* presents a prison like society where human feelings and emotions are chained along with their bodies.

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