



Cadavers, Transactions and Birth of Knowledge: Scanning Disposable Bodies in Padmanabhan's *Harvest* and the Visible Human Project

Dr Asijit Datta

Assistant Professor of English at The Heritage College, Calcutta University

Dr Asijit Datta is currently working as Assistant Professor of English at The Heritage College, Calcutta University. He has taught at Presidency University, Vidyasagar University, Ramakrishna Mission, Narendrapur, and Bethune College. He completed his Masters in English from Presidency College in 2009. He received his PhD from the Dept. of Film Studies, Jadavpur University in 2017. His thesis attempted to locate the vanishing subjects in Ingmar Bergman and Samuel Beckett. His academic interests pertain to Posthumanism, Beckett Studies, Modern European Theatre, World Cinema, and Psychoanalysis. He has several academic papers published on Beckett, Disability studies and Film criticism in reputed books, and national and international journals.

Abstract

This paper attempts to read Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* under the humanist scanner of the Visible Human Project (VHP). The VHP not only dilutes the distinction between living and non-living bodies, the project in turn metamorphoses human substance into bio-graphics. Appropriating the bodies of the not-fully-humans and converting them into medical offerings and sacrificial objects are aspects visible both in the field of VHP and the ever-expanding arena of organ 'donation'. However, Padmanabhan's text destroys the myth of the renouncing, surrendering woman submitting her (dead) body for the greater good of society through the libidinal, uncontrollable, interrogating body of Jaya.

Keywords

VHP, death, images, body, animal

“Organisms belong to the public power: the body is nationalized.”
(Agamben 65)

Joseph Jernigan, a 38 year old Texan murderer, became the first official cadaver to be sliced open and photographed under the Visible Human Project (VHP) in 1994. VHP focuses on efforts to digitally create an expansive data of cross-sectional images of the human body to enable advanced anatomical visualization. Jernigan, the subject, “had been on death row in a Texas prison for twelve years, convicted in 1981 for burglary and murder. In August 1993 Jernigan was executed by injection with a lethal dose of potassium chloride. The choice of Jernigan’s body produced headlines like ‘Executed man helps science as internet cadaver’, ‘Executed killer reborn as visible man on internet’ and ‘A convict’s contribution’” (Waldby 1). Death and dismemberment are thus a precondition to this anatomical image-writing. The body was first frozen and smeared with polyvinyl alcohol and then converted into blocks of no more than 20 inches. On the ‘meat table’, the cubes were sliced into 1 millimetre pieces and reproduced on a 3D platform. The flesh is layered, segmented, and grinded by a mechanical razor and multiple shots are taken of the minute alterations that are submerged in these traces. Jernigan’s body was divided/ photographed into 1878 pieces/ images, and transmuted into 15 gigabytes of storable data (Waldby 15). The VHP not only dilutes the distinction between living and non-living bodies but the project in turn metamorphoses human substance into bio-graphics. Under the humanist schema, Cathy Waldby argues, the criminal’s body must be transformed into a raw material to generate use-value and bio-value for society. This sacrifice of the ‘lesser’ human in biomedicine is linked with ‘redemption’ and a spectacle of punishment. The debt of the insane, prostitutes, suicide victims, lawbreaker and orphans must “be posthumously redeemed through the transformation of their flesh into knowledge” (Waldby 54). However, the woman’s bodily contribution is seen either as self-sacrifice (as in the case of Susan Potter) or as reproductive beings serving the community (the unnamed woman’s corpse donated to the VHP allegedly by her husband) (Waldby 1).

Padmanabhan’s play *Harvest* (1996) imagines the imaged body of the dead subaltern and its value-generating potential for the privileged other. The play uses the term “harvest” both as an agricultural expression and an early medical one related to the process of surgical removal of organs for replanting. In the play, a colonial capitalist company, InterPlanta Services, organizes bio-transactions between first world recipients and third world donors. The beneficiary operates and commands only in the form of a virtual voice supplying surplus technological tranquillity and comfort to the one-room tenement inside Bombay slums. Under the blanket of maintaining the appropriate medical condition of the donor, bodies of Om, Jeetu and Maa are perpetrated and penetrated by pills, drones and guards of the organization. Here the victims of this necrocapitalism are the excess bodies of the ghetto which require no investment and perpetually wait to be harvested/ exchanged by the techno owners. This necocannibalism or bio-piracy operates on the deprived beings that are desperate to eradicate hunger. Therefore, the voice suspends Maa and attaches her to a self-complete VideoCouch which changes channels according to viewer’s desires. Finally, when the voice transforms into the complete image

of Virgil on screen after the successful donation, it is Jaya who still holds on to her corporeal self. There is no predilection for immortality in Jaya; rather she embraces the contingency of death against the technomania of eternal life. Virgil will live forever by switching from one body to the other, by preying on the ‘disposable’ body of the other. Jaya, on the other hand, reinstates the body by demanding Virgil’s somatic presence for her sexual desires.

We can comprehend the predicament of the slum-dwelling protagonists of the play through Giorgio Agamben’s exposition of bare life (the condition of *homo sacer*) which is banished by the state, and on the ground of this exclusion is encompassed by the law. Bare life remains suspended in a “zone of indistinction” between *zoē* (natural reproductive life) and *bios* (political life) (Agamben 109). According to Agamben, the violent biopoliticization of life without rights and full sanction of the law was nakedly visible in the Jewish figures in Nazi camps. The spectatorial configuration of these spectral figures is a reminder of the abjected, abandoned life existing between home and margin, future and timelessness, visibility and invisibility. Agamben writes that the *homo sacer* (sacred man) is

excluded from the religious community and from all political life... his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat of death” (184).

Therefore, the being is turned sacred by the sovereign not under any religious codifications of sacrifice (which must have approval from the state), but by accursing or interdicting the physiological self. By extending Agamben’s application of bare life to refugees and stateless migrants, we can also read the slum dwellers, the prisoners, the victims of torture, the disappeared, the exiled as bare lives living beneath state’s exclusionary politics. Life of the ostracized people must be periodically quarantined to protect the life of the privileged living. Political reduction of both selves and bodies in the extensive ever-expanding political camp is directed at securing and fortifying the fortress of the potentates. These lives are surplus or excreta of the sovereign power and could be killed with impunity. Thus, bare life is a vulgar site of “constitution and installation” (Agamben 188) where the state builds its hygienic empire. In *Harvest*, the family itself is a bearer of the naked properties of bare life. The inhabitants with a one-room tenement with complete lack of privacy and space (both sexual and psychological), a community bathroom two floors down, unsanitary clothes and bodies are prototypical victims vulnerable to the hypnotizing illusion of the first world. Their bodies are therefore useful only if they can be circulated within the production process, or their flesh corrodes under manual labour, or if they are ritually sacrificed in the service of the nation. Om’s description of the InterPlanta Services, a big machine with iron bars, and six thousand from the poverty-stricken ghetto queuing up to be the chosen one for an unknown offering, is an inhuman reminder of the concentration camps. A horde of naked bodies slam against one another, stamp the fainted and the fallen, get injected, and stand under a

rain burst of medicine akin to the Nazi gas chamber. Zyklon B of the camp guards has been converted into a white screen and an irresistible image which infects the mind and supplants violence with hallucinatory images. Biopolitical violence is performed inside a psychosomatic theatre; the actors follow a non-violent, pre-scripted path leading to self-sacrifice. Om voluntarily sells the rights to his organs to a foreign organization. The slow scission of body parts is sanctioned based on a return of a technologically upgraded lifestyle. Bodies of the inmates are infiltrated not only by the flashing image of Ginni, but by the prescribed dosage of pills for consumptions, powders for application and obscure small gadgets for inspection. The polygonal Contact Module which illuminates the figure and voice of Virginia Ginni functions both as an establishing link between the two worlds and a vantage point for the privileged recipient. Ginni's impression on the screen is not only a false simulation but it is also a conscious misrepresentation of the actual decaying body of Virgil; the counterfeit image embodies the surplus of the first world and foregrounds the lack of the Indian slum life. Padmanabhan explains in an interview that Ginni "...is not real, but she represents the powerful influence of market forces on the shaping of public tastes and desire. She is a plastic doll (i.e., the IMAGE of a doll), used by Virgil, to tempt the family to destroy itself" (Biswas 627). Moreover, the entire situation is bizarre and borders on tragicomedy; Ma is dumbfounded against the picture of the white American woman, and the family relations are altered for maintaining the a-sexual body of Om—Jaya readjusts as wife and sister, Om becomes husband and brother, and Jeetu, brother-in-law/lover and husband. The messianic image is a precondition to a blissful future (which is accessible only through limited membership) – a politics of nostalgia which invokes the limitlessness of immortality. Virgil's appearance, in the end, is a product of an inexhaustible, ageless body in process. A white, healthy American having his "fourth body in fifty years" (Padmanabhan 116) is not only an aberration in the form of excess life, it is also an imagistic token of the shining predators who "support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves" (Padmanabhan 116). While highlighting the operations of the biopolitical state, Agamben shifts our attention to the medicolegal amendments surrounding brain death and rights of personhood. Agamben observes that brain death which is the "only rigorous criterion of death and is, accordingly, substituted for systematic or somatic death, which is now considered to be insufficient" (162) gives rise to the contradictory affirmation of physical death which follows brain death. These "overcomatose" living dead bodies belong to a nebulous and obscured space where life and death are suspended (164). Brain death, Agamben asserts, is the sole criterion for mortality for "brain is the one organ that can't be transplanted... brain death would... cease to be death on the day on which the first brain transplant were performed" (163). W. Gaylin calls these spectral bodies "neomorts" which carry "the legal status of corpses" but retain few attributes of life waiting for future organ transplants (Agamben 164). Following the confounding notions of death in recent medicine, in Padmanabhan, Virgil's reply to Jaya's inquiry about Jeetu's death is equally mystifying.

Jaya: But *you're* not here! And he's dead...isn't he? The one to whom this...*body* belonged?

Virgil: Depends. On how you define death.

Jaya: There's only one way to define death!

Virgil: Not where I live. The body you knew is still alive. He was willing to sell and I was willing to buy. (Padmanabhan 113)

Thus, Agamben rightly contends, "Death, in this way, becomes an epiphenomenon of transplant technology" (163).

In the posthumanist vein Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism* discusses the idea of ethics in bioethics and the "medico-administrative" knowledge which tends to supervise, regulate and prescribe ways of living (53). A dangerous example of such a curative, restorative guideline occurs in the form of self-contained SuperDeluxe VideoCouch in *Harvest*. Once the viewer, the character of Ma, enters the cube the device overtakes the responsibility of feeding (through its nourishment panel and hydration filter), of entertaining with seven hundred and fifty channels which keep changing by reading the desires of the mind. It has "ten modes, seventeen frequencies, three sub-strate couplers, extra-sensory feedback" and access to "satellites, bio-tenna, visitelly and radiogonad" (Padmanabhan 105). By exposing bare life to the extremes of technology, life itself is both given and taken away; hunger, search, bodily pains are eradicated, but emotion, essence and individuality are dissolved. Wolfe argues that bioethics is intricately fused with the laws of the state and their objective is to define the personhood of beings based on their productivity, ableism, economic status. Therefore, treatment, nursing and care will be modified "if we decide that this marginal being is a person— a fetus, an anencephalic or a neurologically damaged adult", "or, say, a primate used in biomedical research" (Wolfe 55). The primary function of bioethics must be to maintain social welfare (of all forms) of life, and not imagine persons and non-human animals as means within a (medical) process. A case in point would be the use of pigs and baboons for xenotransplantation experimentations (all of which have failed due to immunological threats). Wolfe underscores that human as an ethnocentric moral agent would rather transfer organs from a full-bodied, healthy animal, and keep even a comatose individual untouched (59). In the space where non-human animals are demarcated and deposed on grounds of language and rationality, humans justify their anthropocentrism with their capabilities and faculties of reasoning. Rather what humans share with their non-human counterparts are the elements of suffering and vulnerability; we perceive a profound relation between tortured animals and prisoners of war. Wolfe quotes Cora Diamond here and writes "that "the animal's body, which is all it has, as a poor man's body may be all he has...lacks the power to get away, or to resist," and what is morally repugnant is to make this disempowerment, this absolute subjection, the occasion for jokes" (74). In the eyes of the American, the hovel of the Indian family in Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, mirrors a jungle and the noise emanating from the slum a discordant echo of first world harmony. Ginni astounded and agape is a stereotypical display of the westerner's fascination with and romanticization of poverty. Ginni says, "...it's magical, it's wonderful! I'm really talking to India..." (Padmanabhan 30), "...It's a wonder you're all not dead of the plague years ago!" (Padmanabhan 35), "You- you do bathe, don't you? I mean, at least once a day?" (Padmanabhan 35). "I'd get the kick of my life from these conversations! ... Human goldfish bowls, you know? ... I just look in on you folks every now and then and it just like- blows my mind. Better than TV. Better than CyberNet Coz this is Real life"

(Padmanabhan 57-58). The idea of the jungle is extended when Jeetu informs his family about his wild and uninhibited freedom on the streets. Jeetu, the gigolo, a stray who is “not officially on their records” (Padmanabhan 84), exhibits an overdose of freedom by sleeping on the open roads and drinking from the gutters. It is another excess, diametrically opposite to the inaccessible freedom of the recipients. “Freedom to eat the choicest servings from the garbage dump- shared only with cows, flies and pigs” (Padmanabhan 62) ‘reduces’ Jeetu to the anonymity of animals. The same animalistic body of Jeetu is taken near the end of the play for transplantation; the successful transference procedure of Jeetu’s eyes into the making of Virgil echoes a dystopian future where xenotransplantation become rampant and triumphant. Jeetu’s eyes with scars and blackness, with “No stillness, no dimensions” (Padmanabhan 92) are parallelly bewitched by the fluorescent impression of Ginni that emerges through live beaming of video directly into his mind. Virgil’s reconstructed body appears also as a representation of the western understanding of hygiene; the white American body here is a sanitised image, and bearing absolute resemblance to Jeetu and carrying his organs inside Virgil is a metamorphosed animal.

Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* could be deciphered more appropriately under the humanist scanner of the Visible Human Project. Appropriating the bodies of the not-fully-humans and converting them into medical offerings and sacrificial objects are aspects visible both in the field of VHP and the ever-expanding arena of organ ‘donation’. The video streaming inside Jeetu’s head, the devices pervading the private space of the family, the medicines and couch are pertinent examples of technical penetration in the organism. Returning to Jernigan’s physical anatomization, Jeetu’s organ transplantation and eventual death unfold the opaque body as a readable/ visualizable surface, flesh as sight/site. There is then a brotherhood between Jernigan, the state convict, and Om’s family members who are non-citizens and akin to laboratory animals. These bodies are marketable cadavers, sacrificial and anonymous, and as volumetric three dimensional living figures are transmuted into media files. Death and material fragmentation are conditions for producing the whole body of the other– body as a body of knowledge and also another human body. Waldby establishes the connection between the dissection and reading of the body and the contemporary practices of cartography, between the law of colonialism and the language of science. Waldby notes,

If the interior of the body could be thought of and treated as *space*, rather than as a self-enclosed and continuous, solid volume, then it could be laid out in ways which are amenable to a form of mapping, just as the navigators of the time were mapping the new world. In this analogy the body’s interior was described as a material terrain to be surveyed, a new topography which demanded exploration and discovery. (63)

Therefore, the deprived bodies of the third world are landscapes to be claimed, conquered and possessed. Waldby mentions the bizarre method of binding books with human skin called “‘anthropo-dermic bibliopegy’” (67). The historical *Theatrum Anatomicum* where the body is cut open in full public display is remodelled into splintered images on a virtual platform where the photorealistic flesh and structure of Jernigan is uploaded for artificial dissection. Analogous to the computerized body of Jeetu’s in the form of Virgil,

anatomised replicas of Jernigan on web authorizes “the user at the workstation to sample images from the project, to play animation flythroughs, and with the right software, to interact with the data, performing limited kinds of virtual dissections” (Waldby 71). Body, after the mechanisms of tomography, photography, reformulation, survives as anatomical surrogates. Lastly, Waldby explores the “bioethically supervised...anonymous donations” in countries like USA, Australia, Britain, along with the expropriation of Jernigan’s corpse and exploitations of “third-world populations to test AIDS vaccines” (79). Similarly, Virgil informs Jaya that growth in ageless bodies resulted in a clash between the older generation and their progeny. The war resulted in a massacre and wiped out the children. Virgil refers to a system where they “support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves” (Padmanabhan 116). Only those lives which can afford advanced technological medicine will be preserved albeit through sacrificeable, reducible and morphable bodies. Although, the philosophical justification behind seizing these bodies is linked to ‘repairing’ these ‘disjointed’ somatic forms. Consequently, Virgil appeals to Jaya to forget the past body of Jeetu and embrace the new embodiment, this “red-blooded all-American man...hot with life and heavy with desire” (Padmanabhan 117).

““Man” in the Western philosophical tradition secures its transcendence through mastery of nature, repression of the body— everything that Derrida associates with the term “carnophallogocentrism”” (Wolfe 95). However, Padmanabhan’s text destroys the myth of the renouncing, surrendering woman submitting her (dead) body for the greater good of society, through the libidinal, uncontrollable, interrogating body of Jaya. Jodi Kim who reads the play as an “allegory of gendered racial debt...a metadrama of surrogacy” (217) claims that

Heterosexual desire is also harnessed as a site of interpellation with Virgil's instance of racial crossing. The desire for a transracial whole-body transplant is itself a case of racial crossing, a particularly disturbing and cannibalistic one given the asymmetries of power involved. Yet instead of choosing Om's body, as we are initially led to believe, Virgil has strategically chosen Jeetu's body because he, and not his brother, Om, is the object of Jaya's heterosexual desire. (228)

Jaya desires for the physical weight of Virgil on her body; her impregnation must be a fleshly, laborious act and not through device implantation. Virgil refuses to enter Jaya’s ‘inferior’ world of suffering and selfhood, whereas Jaya craves to merge with the surrounding, with all forms of life, with the realization of the pain of childbirth. She restores the body within the circuit of “electronic dreams...virtual touch...plastic shadows” (Padmanabhan 121) by balancing sexuality on one side and death on the other. Jaya’s act of a possible suicide by slitting her throat with glass is her sole rational response in the face of a shapeshifting, deathless enemy. She defeats deathlessness with death, incorporeality with carnal desires, and untouchability with the demand of touch. By removing her body from the equation she reinstates the centrality of body. Padmanabhan’s Jaya upholds an embodied, relational, inter-connected mode of living which embraces both the concrete individual with her physical clamours and the all-encompassing technological advances which attempt to systematically erase bodies.

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