



Padmanabhan's Harvest as a Dismodernist Narrative: A Critical Posthumanist Exploration

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Abstract:

Transplantation narratives have been instrumental in the understanding of biomedical technology and its role in disability studies in this globalized era of twenty-first century. Manjula Padmanabhan's 1997 play *Harvest* has hitherto been investigated as a futuristic dystopian narrative as well as a piece of science fiction from the perspectives of organ trafficking, postmodernism, 'technoscape', virtual reality, and globalization theories. However, it has rarely been studied as a posthumanist text that exposes the ubiquitous nature of disabilities. The present study substantially explores the aspects of, as Lennard J. Davis defines, 'dismodernism' and its three ethics, namely, 'care of the body', 'care for the body', and 'care about the body'. Having gone through the lens of disability rights movement and the pertinent theoretical framework, it is also discovered that Padmanabhan's surrealistic approach critiques the evolution of the mid-nineteenth century eugenics discourse to the present-day genetics technology, such as prenatal screening and genetic engineering. At length, the analysis concludes by addressing the problematic liaison between the globalizing forces on the one hand, and the prerogatives of the disabled on the other, especially in the context of the South Asian territories. It ventures too to define Padmanabhan's positionality in this matrix, as reflected in her text.

Keywords: Disabilities, globalization, organ transplantation, posthumanism, virtual reality, cyborg anthropology, simulation





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Postmodernism criticizes essentialism as the essentialists think that identity is rooted in body. But the postmodern thinkers of race, gender and ethnicity, focus on social constructionism and performativity as building blocks of identity. But this stance problematizes the politics of identity formation and poses the question if all identities are socially-constructed or just performance-based. Even, Ian Hacking in *The Social Construction of What?* criticises it as an underdeveloped theory (Davis 235). Postmodernism cannot negotiate with such identities as disability, which, apart from the approaches of social constructionism and medical model, has to be traced back to the bodily identity. This is why Lennard Davis coins the term 'dismodernism' to accommodate the nuanced identity groups like the disabled (233). Davis draws some common premises of dismodernism: first, technology is not separate, but part of the body; second, not individual independence, but mutual interdependence should be the norm; third, "form follows dysfunction", that is, every bodily organism is subject to disabilities (239); fourth, difference or alterity is the only commonality that we share amongst ourselves; and finally, disability is an unstable, ubiquitous identity.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* depicts an extremely bleak picture of a technologically mediated future where everybody is "probably suffering from some illness" in this world, irrespective of the orient or the occident (Padmanabhan 21). Dismodernist subject is 'wounded' or disabled, dependent, and follows three ethics: 'care of the body', 'care for the body', and 'care about the body' (Davis 239-40). However, in this play, disability is born not only out of age or poverty, but more due to the nefarious system of organ harvesting and transplantation.

Organ trafficking is a product of neo-liberal market economy that treats human body as commodity. In the Istanbul Summit in May 2008, professionals from the field of organ transplantation condemned organ trafficking. Traffic in humans and their disposable organs and tissues bears a criminal aspect and Scheper-Hughes calls it various names, like 'neo-cannibalism', 'bio-terrorism', 'bio-theft', and 'bio-lust'. She even calls the surgeons involved in it 'outlaws', 'vultures', and 'organ mafia', and their local recruiters as 'kidney-hunters'. Scheper-Hughes has drawn four C's to characterize this dilemma – (a) Consumption, (b) Consent, (c) Coercion, and (d) Commodification (Scheper-Hughes).

The Organs Watch Project began in 1997, directed by Scheper-Hughes. Under this project, she observes that 'transplant tourism' is nothing but a circumlocutory term for an unethical, cannibalistic consumption of organs in the body of a desperate have-not by an affluent sick trying to be immortal. She further reported, "The United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons recognizes human trafficking in kidneys as organized crime, a





human rights abuse, and a potential crime against humanity” (Scheper-Hughes). Turkey is an important hub of illicit organ trafficking between the East and the West.

Global capitalism and advanced biotechnology help in organ transplantation. These markets are creating ‘super-citizens’ and ‘sub-citizens’. Rented womb is another aspect of this market. Selling of organs from the dead bodies of prisoners, mentally incompetent, and children is considered as a heinous crime. During the times of war, as in the Dirty War in Argentina, body plunder occurs routinely. But when it becomes a normalized custom of the world, it is called by Franco Basaglia ‘peace-time crimes’ (Scheper-Hughes).

Body organs have become merchandise. Bodies are treated like commodities in a globalized, posthuman world. They are processed and checked and rechecked before marketing, that is, selling their organs. The grimy description by Om in *Harvest* evokes a sense of vulnerability and helplessness before a monolithic capitalist transnational leviathan: “Then ... a sort of ... rainburst.... 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. Then air again. Then we pass through another place.... I don’t know what’s happening. Ahead of me a man screams and cries, but we’re in separate little cages now, can’t move” (Padmanabhan 12). Ginni is literally harvesting the bodies for organ transplantation. Even she refers to the body parts as ‘smiling organs’ (38). The sole purpose of Om’s existence is to get his organs transplanted for Ginni: “I live only for your benefit” (40). The body of Jaya is reduced to a machine to bear child by Virgil: “We’re interested in women, where I live, Zhaya. Child-bearing women” (85). As shown in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, the third world people are treated as consumable products (Vallath).

The motif of ‘surveillance’ is intricately associated with the thematic framework of organ transplantation in the play. The registered persons for transplant have become reduced to embodied products monitored under the terms and conditions of the agency: “That we’d be monitored carefully. Not just *us* but our ... lives. To remain employed, we have to keep ourselves exactly as they tell us” (13). The contact module seems to be a demi-god, controlling their lives. The aspect of surveillance is reminiscent of Orwell’s *1984*. The identities are reduced to numbers. People are routinized, digitized identities, as shown in Auden’s “Unknown Citizen”. It is an instance of the deterritorialization of the body by the first world countries.

The agency of the InterPlanta Services not only monitors the body, but also meticulously takes care of their product, as the Guard I says, “All implements of personal fuel preparation will be supplied exclusively by InterPlanta Services. Henceforward, you and your domestic unit will consume only those fuels, which will be made available to you by InterPlanta.” (15). This follows one of the three ethics of the dismodernist politics as formulated by Lennard J. Davis, that is, ‘caring for the body’ (Davis 239). In this technologically dehumanizing era, even the natural terminology too changes, like ‘fuel’ in place of ‘food’, as if the bodies, having no subjectivities or identities, are machines or vehicles that must be kept running with ‘fuel’ for the proper service to the owner of those machines.





What prompts people to trade with their organs is utter penury. This is the kind of poverty that Om abhorrently refers to: “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 ... lulled to sleep by our neighbour’s rhythmic farting! Dancing to the tune of the melodious traffic! And starving” (Padmanabhan 20-21). It is a nightmarish trap for those poor Bombay city-dwellers who are forced to barter their body-parts one by one to some unfamiliar, rich, sick capitalist across the globe.

It is like a food-chain that the relationship between the donors and the receivers of organs is turning into: “Oh yes, she *cares* – just as much as she cares about the chicken she eats for dinner” (47). This is what Nancy Scheper-Hughes refers to as ‘neo-cannibalism’ (Scheper-Hughes). Time and again, Jaya refers to Om as Ginni’s food or dinner: “An angel who shares her bed with her dinner?” (48). Neo-cannibalistic imagery is used frequently – “All to ensure that their meat, when it finally gets to Ginni’s table, will be the freshest, purest, sanest, happiest ...” (48). Jaya also refers to Om as ‘fatted broiler’ (50).

From the spectrum of organ transplantation discourse, the play presents a neo-Faustian narrative. Faustus sells his soul; Om has sold his body. When the final moment arrives and the Devil (here the agents) appears to retrieve its purchase, a similar emotional response of pain and panic, reluctance and repentance looms gloomily over the dialogues, “My legs! My legs refuse to move!” (50). Both have done it for transient material gain, though, unlike Faustus, Om precipitates it to meet an ontological crisis. The InterPlanta Services, a multinational corporation is equated with a ‘bill collector’ by Jaya (51), as though Om is living his life on credit. Someone has just given him a lease to live. This Faustian bargain puts the global transnational corporations in satanic robe. The demonic nature of the whole system, especially of Ginni, is referred to by Jeetu: “That’s not a woman, it’s a demon!” (65).

But the most vicious consequence of organ transplantation is formation of man-made impairment. But this strategic creation of disability has its own usage as well. To cope his/her suddenly-earned disability, the subject becomes desperate and wants to reach the farthest extremity. The pain of blindness is mentioned by Jeetu – “A bleached and pitted place. Scars and slashes against infinite blackness” (66). To escape his blindness, Jeetu is even prepared to give away his organs: “You don’t understand! I was blind! And now I have the chance to see again” (71).

This aspect of man-made impairment and privatization of the subject’s body by the transnational corporations in *Harvest* indicates the passivity and nonchalance of the state towards the poor and the disabled. Such irresponsible approach of the state is the assumed consequence of the concept called ‘Big Society’. The idea of ‘Big Society’ is conceptualized by David Cameron and his Coalition Government in Britain in 2010 (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 881). It does not take into consideration the fundamental rights of the disabled; rather, it insists on compelling the citizens to become self-independent. Likewise, the call for ‘Big Society’ questions the ‘dismodernist’ ideas of dependency and interdependence. It suggests that poverty is the consequence of individual failing.





This narrative challenges the social oppression model of disability. Here disabled people are seen as subjects to charity and philanthropy. Their positions in this discourse are charity-based instead of rights-based. Charity-based approach has also been noticed in the Poor Laws of 1601 and 1834 where before giving charities, the worthiness of the poor was judged (884). It has a demoralizing as well as dehumanizing aspect. There is no bio-security for the 'homo sacer' (Scheper-Hughes). Om's words about Jeetu in *Harvest* indicate the dehumanized status imposed upon the homeless people: "There are no laws to protect strays like him. He's not officially on their records. They can do whatever they like" (Padmanabhan 62). They are both the consumer and the consumed. Within the third world, these poor people are creating a fourth world (Vallath).

Apart from cementing an ambience of interconnectivity, globalization has also strengthened the endeavour of cultural imperialism by the first world countries over the developing nations. Body trafficking and organ trade are analogous to slave trade of the early imperial period (Vallath). The poor, helpless victims of the developing, overpopulated third world countries are treated like animals' butchered meat; their body parts are packaged in ice-chests and shipped around the world. Ironically, the Western people are considered as resources: "They don't have people to spare" (Padmanabhan 22).

Essentially it evokes the 'Us' / 'They' binary which comprises the victimized donors on one side and the victorious receivers on the other. Under the rubric of posthumanism, post-dualism negates all types of hierarchies. The playwright's stance is posthumanist as she sardonically satirizes the dualism on various planes. Ginni tries to discipline the bodies through an authoritative agency: "You must eat at regular hours, okay? We've had this problem before!" (37). Her attitude also indicates the master-slave relationship and a hierarchy that points to a cultural binary. She means that the Westerners (Americans in this case) are superior to the third world people. She does not even flinch from expressly condemning the culture of the 'Other': "You can't help it, I know, it's a part of your culture – it's what your people do when they want to Avoid Conflict and it's even got a name ... it's called '*face saving*'" (37). The condescending attitude of Ginni is highlighted to critique the dualistic hierarchies. Such an approach, as already mentioned, is posthumanistic in general and post-dualistic in particular.

The kind of register used by the receiver's party confers a false sense of comfort and consolation upon the donors. When Virgil, under the mask of a charming, young American woman, Ginni, claims, "It's our pleasure! Our duty, I mean! Anything we can do to help", it is crystal clear that this capitalist monster does not mean what he utters (23). On the other hand, though, empathy is what makes one human, exactly this sensitivity is criticized by the economically affluent, scientifically developed, and technologically equipped West as 'sentimentality' – "the curse of the Donor World is sentimentality" (47).

The room of Om's family has become a colonized space by the globalizing forces. Jeetu could discern the hollowness of the system and therefore he calls it 'fancy prison' (56). The dualism of organ trade versus flesh trade is made conspicuous by the characterization of Jeetu. His search for freedom in the raw reality, in the polluted, unhygienic atmosphere





is an open revolt against the confined, claustrophobic space of Om's room, virtually colonized by the globalized capitalist technology – "Freedom to lie in the filth of the open road and to drink from the open sewer!" (44). However, in front of the mighty globalizing technologies, the individual ideals of 'freedom' or 'pride' get crushed. The global multinational corporations must entertain "this feeling" about which Ostrovsky and Hoy wrote, "you can do anything you want to whomever you want for as long as you want because you simply have the power" (335).

Globalization smooths out the avenue to technological advancement. But the extreme pervasiveness of technology blurs the edge between reality and representation, as Baudrillard has alluded to in his conceptualization of simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality. The postmodern simulation refers to the representation of another representation and in doing so the simulacrum, that is the represented piece, substitutes the reality which is also called hyperreality. The relationship between simulacrum and reality is ordered into three stages. From Renaissance to Industrial Revolution the simulacrum was not produced so much. So the relationship between the simulacrum and the original was intimate. During the industrial period mass production becomes feasible owing to the development of science and technology. So the simulacra are produced to a huge extent and as a result the distance between the simulacrum and the original grew. From industrial period to the present age technology has so advanced that innumerable counterfeits of the original are being produced. Therefore, the relationship between the original and the simulacrum has been totally severed. Hence, today's reality is not real at all. It is a 'perverted reality' and 'tactical hallucination' (Gómez 1).

According to Baudrillard, these simulacra cast three impacts: (a) it creates a consumer-based market economy, in contrast to the Marxist production-based economy, through a series of simulacra on TV screen, advertisements, and motion pictures and thus it provokes a narcissistic desire to be perfect by simulating the actor(s) who is, in turn, also another simulacrum; (b) simulation destroys the sanctity of divine faith by simulating seemingly holy objects and, thereby, it threatens to disintegrate the sacred dimension of the original; and (c) simulation, by forming a lot of simulacra, disconnects us from the reality and creates hyperreality, that looks more real than the reality itself (Gómez 2).

By simulating an idealized form of real by the means of images in mass media, the reality falls short in the viewer's mind. Sometimes the anthropologists and ethnologists try to define a tribe or race by the standard of related simulated images produced in films, magazines, or any other cultural product, keeping certain ideology in mind. Then the simulacrum is given more importance than the real despite its presence in front. This is why Baudrillard warns us about the terrible roles images play, "It is in its resemblance, not only analogical but technological, that the image is most immoral and most perverse" (Baudrillard 14).

If read from this theoretical framework, *Harvest* can be seen replete with simulacra and their vicious repercussions as they form a maze of virtual reality all around the plot. The aspect of virtual reality has not only illuded Ma and Om about the true identity of Ginni,





but also about the actual motive of her generosity: “You don’t see what a good, kind, generous, loving person she really is” (Padmanabhan 53). The difference between the virtual and the real has been obscured. Through the simulating technology of virtual reality, Ginni is hoodwinking Jeetu by letting him see whatever she prefers – “Those plants! That light! What are those things there? It’s ... beautiful. Beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like this. Never” (69). Simualtion and virtual reality can also manipulate one’s sexual desire and hijack the entire conscious self: “... it’s me you’re seeing ‘coz I’m beaming my video image straight into your mind! So you can see me right in front of you, all of me, for once, not just my face” (69). Virgil is using Jeetu’s heterosexual urge to win his ready consent to transplant the organs by simulating a hologram of a young, seductive American girl, Ginni. The simulacrum has converted Jeetu into an enchanted devotee of an imaginary, non-existent, simulated character, Ginni – “She’s a goddess and she exists. I’d do anything for her – anything!” (72). It is that stage of hyperreality which seems more real than the reality itself. It disconnects the subject or subjective consciousness from the external reality. It is also a means of escapism: “Your relative will have no further need of the outside world from now ‘till ... she chooses to de-link” (79). Hyperreality breeds indifference to the real crises. In this topsy-turved world-order, Ma is so overwhelmed by the developed technology that she has turned a deaf ear to the reality and engrossed herself in the virtual world: “I’ve stopped caring about anybody” (75). Again, the postbiological dimension of virtual reality is unsettling as it negates the corporeality. To counter this crisis, Padmanabhan lays bare the exigency of pain to reciprocate the subjectivity of the embodied identity. Having contravened Virgil’s allurements of painless motherhood, Jaya shrieks out: “The pain tells me that I’m alive. I want the pain!” (88).

The association between advanced technology and images related with death is predominant. The playwright compares the VideoCouch ordered by Ma from the VideoCouch Enterprises with ‘Tutankhamen’s sarcophagus’ (76). Their entire domestic space is colonized by technology. Ma chooses electronic annihilation for herself. She will die in the VideoCouch as Nell died in the trash can in Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (Vallath). It is intriguing to note that, this relationship between death and technology is much more nuanced than it appears on the surface. On one hand, from the perspective of Virgil, technology is presented as an efficient agency to bypass the inevitability of death. There is a gothic resistance to death in this play. It is an archetypal theme that is reflected also in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Bartering with bodies has even changed the definition of death and Virgil triumphantly declares, “The body you knew is still alive. He was willing to sell and I was willing to buy” (Padmanabhan 83). He wants to be immortal – “This is my fourth body in fifty years” (86). It touches a metaphysical realm where the soul / mind / intelligence changes body as body changes dresses: “... this body which once belonged to Jitoo now contains a red-blooded all-American man!” (87). The scientific engagement with conquering death and achieving immortality through technological means is one of the prominent tenets in transhumanism, another way of becoming the posthuman. Radical life extension, cryonics, regenerative medicine, mind uploading etc. are some of the examples of these experiments. The theme of mind uploading, as represented in the film *Get out* (2017) by Jordan Peele, is also dealt with in this play. But, on the other, from Jaya’s viewpoint, death is the only weapon to combat and conquer the diabolic arrogance of Virgil





backed by sophisticated technology. Death is the only strategy to win against the mighty global capitalistic agencies: “But I’ll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman. And I’ll get more pleasure out of that first moment of death than I’ve had in my entire life so far!” (91).

This holistic invasion of global technology has disrupted the world of familial relationship. A moral crisis is hinted at time and again in the play throughout, especially in scene iii. This crisis created by the incestuous relationship between Jaya and Jeetu and the latter’s status as a male prostitute is overwhelmed by an inevitable question to existence itself posed by Jeetu: “I don’t mind being bought. But I won’t be *owned!*” (31). The relationship between jaya and Jeetu is not of lust, as appears initially, but of mutual trust and care: “That’s when I thought of you. I knew you would revive me” (56). But the westerners do not have any idea about family and social life in the third world (Vallath)

About the expungement of boundaries between human and technology, the characters are confused “whether this was to be mourned or embraced” (Luckhurst 790). Machine is supplanting manual labour. This anxiety of unemployment and defeat in the hands of machine is voiced by Om: “Because I am a clerk and nobody needs clerks any more” (Padmanabhan 62). The dominance of machines within the domestic space and outside in the work-space is reminiscent of *The Modern Times*, the cult film by Charlie Chaplin.

This liaison between ‘anthropos’ and ‘machine’ cannot properly be addressed by the twentieth century humanistic epistemology and therefore posthumanistic streams of knowledge, like cyborg anthropology, are evolving to negotiate with this discourse. The present late capitalist world posits both academic as well as popular theorizations on the same echelons. The nascent epistemological drive towards cyborg anthropology studies the boundaries between human and machine. It interacts with culture studies and forms a resistance against the hegemonic grand-narratives and power-structures. It also explores the ‘powers of the imagination’ invested in science and technology (Downey et al. 265). This interdisciplinary branch of knowledge focuses to deal with three areas. Firstly, science and technology is a cultural activity. It “helps us to realize that we are all scientists” (266). It wants to obliterate the distinction between science and culture (humanities) held by earlier disciplines. Secondly, cyborg anthropology critiques the traditional human-centred approach in anthropological studies. The autonomy of human subjectivity is not only questioned, but also posed in relation to machines and information transfer. The contemporary anthropology cannot define ‘human’ by excluding technology. New strategies of discourses are being formed within anthropological epistemology to accommodate machines, such as, considering machines, along with humans, as ‘actants’ having a certain ‘agency’ (267). And finally, cyborg anthropology explores how technologies (machines) participate in human life and form active social relations.

The twenty-first century is post-anthropocentric not only because humans and machines are in mutual coexistence, but also the awareness of the interconnected, symbiotic rapport between humans and animals or other micro-organisms, is gradually





growing. G. N. Devy has rightly pointed out that the wars the present century is going to confront will be for or against the environmental forces, natural evolution, non-human intelligence, and micro-organisms. The invasion of the novel Corona virus is just an instance of this confrontation. Devy has also shown that much before the shortage of oxygen during the present pandemic scenario, the Delhi schools had to be locked down due to polluted air and dearth of oxygen. David Beasley has warned already that over 83 crore people, that is, one in every 10 humans in this world have lost their food security (Devy).

The constant parallelism drawn between human and animal bodies in *Harvest* leads the reader to the liminal space of post-anthropocentrism: “They bathe him in praise while gutting him like a chicken!” (Padmanabhan 22). Again, Advanced global technology can create an artificial heaven, but that will be totally anthropocentric and compromising with other life-forms. Virgil himself regrets, “We secured Paradise at the cost of birds and flowers, bees and snakes!” (86).

These aspects of post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism, discussed in the context of the play *Harvest*, comprise the basic principles of philosophical posthumanism (Ferrando 22). Regarding the relationship between literature and posthumanism, Bart Simon distinguishes it between ‘popular posthumanism’ and ‘critical posthumanism’ (Wallace 692). Popular posthumanism treats the advancement of new technologies that help us become the ‘posthuman’ from a reactionary perspective. It believes that technology threatens the integrity of human nature and culture. Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* is an instance that embodies this approach which draws a postlapsarian dystopia and refers to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* as a testimony (692). However, critical posthumanism decenters the ‘human’ and blurs its boundaries (692-3). It also challenges the human exceptionalism provoked by dualistic formulation of ‘cogito’ by Rene Descartes. Donna Haraway’s conception of the ‘cyborg’, one of the most significant doctrines of posthumanist philosophy, not only critiques this Cartesian dualism, but bridges the gap between human and machines as well as human and animals (693). N. Catherine Hayles defines ‘the human’ under the spectrum of Western humanism as “that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice” (Hayles 286). Critical posthumanism neither transcends ‘human’, nor rejects ‘human’, but critiques the notion of being human.

On a fundamental reading of the text, Padmanabhan seems more to be a Luddite than a technophile and *Harvest* appears to be more in alignment with the argument of popular posthumanism than the critical, as, not unlike Fukuyama’s hypothesis, the play has underlined the deleterious impacts of advanced technology. Yet, on a close reading and deeper understanding of the narrative, the reader can trace that the playwright has very consciously and deliberately drawn Virgil as a representative of the Western ‘human’ with ‘wealth, power, and leisure’, as pointed out by Hayles, only to critique the concept of humanism in a subtle way. She has retheorized the politics of identity formation, not based on sex, nationality or ethnicity, but on empathy, mutual interdependence, and resistance. Thus it crosses the boundary of the postmodern markers of fixed subjectivity and puts forth





a 'dismodern' identity grounded on disability which also subsumes the all-embracing inclusivity of critical posthumanism.

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