

Tracing Posthuman Concerns in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Abstract

Posthuman drama engages with the question as to what happens when humans negotiate the technological landscape. New media blur boundaries between animate and inanimate objects as it becomes difficult to distinguish both. Posthuman drama mirrors future and projects popular culture meeting technology as envisioned by the playwrights. As a contemporary subject, posthuman situates itself in digital and new media landscape where both human and non-human objects communicate. Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* portrays electronic characters alongside human ones. Through her dramatic representation, she critiques issues concerning deprivation of jobs, problems of machines replacing humans at workplace and the resultant alienation, and the ghastly reality of the organ trafficking. This paper attempts to highlight the horrendous impact of machine world, trepidation of surveillance technologies, and critiques institutionalisation and commercialisation of organ harvest.

Key words: Posthuman drama, technological landscapes, electronic characters, original prosthesis.

In posthuman discourse, human consciousness is regarded as seat of identity and body is taken as original prosthesis which can be further used for prosthetic extensions. It talks about blurred identity between humans and new media technologies. It also considers human consciousness as a separable part of the human body. Posthuman is labelled as human of extended capacities as N. Catherine Hayles writes:

The posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born...the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals. (3)

Hayles stresses the shifting information patterns from human body to other material objects. In posthuman subjectivity, human consciousness is considered as separable part of the body. A combination of material entity and collection of dissimilar components, posthuman subject undergoes reconstruction, as body is treated as a prosthetic entity, which can be further used for increasing the lifespan of economically well off people. The underprivileged people, however, helplessly choose organ selling for survival. Consequently, organ transplantation

gives rise to organ trafficking, kidnapping, and cloning. Posthumanism, in fact, is a counter-discourse which exposes anthropocentrism and questions unethical use of scientific advancement and technocolonisation. The Posthuman view presented above by Hayles illustrates the artificial extension of the human life through technological, medical, surgical and digital technologies. No doubt, advanced technologies offer luxury and comfort in human life but posthuman dystopian writings describe potential dangers and critiques of anthropocentrism to dismantle the notion of popular humanism. The idea of posthumanism is critical because it speaks devastatingly about the developments made by humans. The developments have been benefitting, or adversely affecting people, and turning them into techno-slaves.

Since literature is representation of issues related to human life, technological creations have gradually acquired significance in human life. There are writers who have started introducing electronic characters alongside human characters in literature. Representation of whole range of human life and technological gadgets occupy similar space in posthuman drama. Digital computers blur the boundaries between animate and inanimate images where devices talk to one another. Richard Jordan in his thesis titled *Posthuman Drama: Identity and Machine in Twenty-First-Century Playwriting* claims thus: "In a world where our devices 'talk' to one another, where our virtual personae outlive our bodies, and where our memories are outsourced to the cloud" (4). Jordan emphasises the shifting of information from human mind to material objects. He further claims, "A 'Posthuman play', then creates a digital diegesis when human and non-human agents are essentially similar to each other, and where intelligent machines are crucial to the unfolding narrative" (5).

Harvest (1997) by Manjula Padmanabhan portrays posthuman condition where Prakash family confronts digital technologies provided by first world nation. The playwright uses electronic characters and digital technologies in the play which acclaims her as an electronic literature writer. Padmanabhan creates dialogic interaction between electronic and human characters. Use of machines, electronic devices, and new media landscapes in the play reflect repercussions of posthuman in drama. Padmanabhan gave new direction to the 21st century playwriting by introducing electronic characters in the play like: VideoCouch, Virgil, and Ginni. Virgil does not appear physically on the stage but his view is projected through the electronic gadget ContactModule. She has also portrayed cloned characters who are employed by Virgil. Cloned characters work according to the directions given by their master. The posthuman situations of *Harvest* are critical of contemporary society where technological artefacts are employed and humans dismissed from the workplace. The play also interrogates superseding of technology and shrinking human space. Manjula Padmanabhan could have projected cloned bodies victim of organ trafficking; she instead employs them up to the status of humans. She could have introduced stem cell technology to grow required organs in labs as to challenge the human nature of mortality and extend the death. But prime thrust of the dramatist remains on speculating the potential dangers of shrinking job sector due to the intervention of advanced technology. We come across the reality of the world where machines and smart technological artefacts occupy human's work place and make them jobless. She also highlights the pertinent issues of technology literacy where one sect is powerful and other is underprivileged in terms of usage. The former takes necessary benefits and exploits the latter. It raises a bioethical question about the government's silence in matters concerning institutionalisation of organ trafficking. The playwright does not speak anything about the role of the state vis-a-vis interference in the matters related to exploitation of people. Padmanabhan's economically deprived third world

characters are represented as organ donors for wealthy and ailing first world persons like Virgil. In the posthuman world, the body becomes prosthesis for expanding the lifespan of affluent people.

Thus, jobless young man namely Om Prakash becomes victim of flesh market for fictional corporation InterPlanta. Cloned guards of the corporation come with starter kit and install it at home to keep the donor under surveillance. The conversation between InterPlanta Guards and Om makes it clear that he is not aware of the functioning of the devices they have installed. The guards are cloned bodies as Manjula Padmanabhan indicates in the introduction of the play: "Guard 3 is a male clone of Guard 2" (6). Virgil produces cloned bodies to serve him. Om does not know how the starter kit works. He seems totally unaware of the functioning of the devices installed at his home.

Technologically occupied stage directions of Prakash family apartment can be viewed as technocolonised condition of the family. Nobody from outside is allowed to enter the apartment. The stage directions of the play clearly point towards the presence of electronic devices as characters. The whole apartment is transformed into glossy residence occupied by electronic gadgets, as stage directions indicate in the play:

There are the gadgets- TV set, computer terminal, mini-gym, an air conditioner that works. To the rear and light, there are two cubicles containing the bathroom and toilet. The changes are functional rather than cosmetic. Jaya looks better dressed than before, but not significantly altered by the change in her circumstances. Ma is wearing a quilted dressing gown and is watching TV, upstage right. Om is wearing a fluorescent Harlequin tracksuit and sits at the computer terminal. (Padmanabhan34)

The facilities provided by InterPlanta can be viewed as supporting material for organ farming wherein the corporation attempts to tempt the other family members and alienate from the donor. The facilities provided to the family made their life style better but also contributed in creating emotional gulf among the members. The whole apartment reshaped with electronic devices to make "union of the family with the intelligent machine" (Hayles 2) which reflects posthuman setting of the play. The technological devices installed in the house shift attention of the family from the members to devices. The advanced machines installed in the apartment push Prakash family into a dangerous situation. Virgil, an electronic character, provides all facilities to the donor's family members. The reasons for the exploitation of the family may be lack of skilled education, unemployment, dominance of multinational corporations, and non-existent government bodies. The play, *Harvest* portrays Om as an organ donor for American man who provides him necessary amenities to keep organs healthy for transplantation. Conversation between Jaya and Om reveals reason of becoming an organ donor for the multinational corporation:

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're wrong, there are choices-- there must be choices. (Padmanabhan 62)

Here, multinational corporations are shown as offering jobs of organ donation, but the role of government bodies becomes insignificant. Manjula Padmanabhan eschews writing anything about state government whereas multinational corporations are doing business of organs across the national borders. The setting of the play is Bombay in the year 2010 and despite that the role of central government remains insignificant. This, in fact, seems to be a deliberate attempt to unmask the face of multinational corporations under the veil of

democracy. The playwright reflects posthuman situations where people are reduced to being property of capitalist establishments. As Jaya reveals when Om has sold organs of his body:

I'll tell you! He's sold the rights to his organs! His skin. His eyes. His arse. Sold them! Oh God, oh God! What's the meaning of this nightmare! (*To Om*) 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 globe! (21)

Om is not aware of the terms and conditions of the contract he has signed with InterPlanta. Om's organs and skin become prosthetic supplement for Virgil. Technology helps people overcome biological limits such as ageing or ailments. Posthumanists define the human body as "original prosthesis" (Hayles 2) which can be used for further prosthetic extensions. People like Virgil get prosthesis and try to live a longer life. Jaya hesitates to touch Om's body because he has sold the ownership of his body. Virgil keeps surveillance over the activities of the family that creates a gulf in the conjugal relationship between Om and Jaya. She hesitates to touch her husband in the panopticon prison. Ginni instructs the family regarding food and hygiene, and treats Om as an organ continuum:

GINNI: If I have said it once, I've said it a hundred times... The most important thing is to keep *Auwm* smiling. Because if *Auwm*'s smiling, it means his body's smiling, it means his organs are smiling. And that's the kind of organs that's survive a transplant best- smiling organs. (Padmanabhan 38)

Prakash family is kept under surveillance through electronic gadget ContactModule. Ginni keeps control over the family and guides them to keep Om's organs healthy. Ginni scolds them if they don't take food on time. Electronic surveillance creates fear among the family members as Ginni can appear at any time through the ContactModule. They find themselves imprisoned in the media landscape of technological surveillance. Prakash family takes Ginni for a real person but she is a virtual, animated character.

Manjula Padmanabhan's portrayal of electronic characters reflects posthuman condition where human and non-human characters seem essentially similar. Jeetu gets attracted towards Ginni as she shows him naked pictures projecting through contraption. Since he works as a gigolo, he mistakes Ginni for a real person who can employ him permanently. Technologically advanced, and the first world man, Virgil deceives Jeetu by showing digitally animated picture of virtual Ginni as a real woman. Consequently, the latter gets trapped into ethically questionable cruel intrigue of first world man whose organs are harvested for transplantation later. He cannot differentiate between virtual and real body. The posthuman embodiment of Ginni is designed to trap people for harvesting organs. Virgil looks into their lives through the ContactModule and strategically exploits their emotions. After knowing that he works as a gigolo, he tempts Jeetu by showing naked pictures of a virtual woman. In the first phase of transplantation, InterPlanta Guards take Jeetu instead of Om for harvesting organs. They replace his eyes with contraption. Now, Jeetu can see only projected images of Ginni directly into his mind. He becomes ready to do anything for her:

JEETU: I'd never seen her, till just now! I thought she was an old woman! You never told me she was so... so young! And beautiful. Why didn't you tell me, Jaya?

JAYA: You didn't seem interested... we hardly discussed Ginni at all.

JEETU: I saw all of her, you know! Standing there, wearing almost nothing! And she kept moving, like this, like that... wah! I could have her, right there and then!

JAYA: But she wasn't real! (72)

In fact, virtually real Ginni's body is a screen, a projected image only. She controls the activities of the family through the electronic gadget ContactModule. Virgil strategically

holds control over Jeetu by projecting alluring images of a white woman. The device that replaces his eyes, projects Ginni's view directly into his mind. *Harvest* highlights ethically questionable issues of deception and organ transplantation. Technology blurs boundary between animate and inanimate images. As Judith Halberstarn and Ira Livingston claim in their book *Introduction: Posthuman Bodies*: "Posthuman bodies came into existence" because of "postmodern relation of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences" (03). Technologically powerful section of the society exercises power over technologically deprived people. The plot of the play resolves after the question raised by Jaya is answered by Virgil. The play can be viewed as critique of commercialisation of surrogacy and organ transplantation:

VIRGIL: We look for young men's bodies to live in and young women's bodies in which to sow their children....We lost the art of having children.

JAYA: How can it be?

VIRGIL: We began to live longer and longer. And healthier each generation. And more demanding... soon there was competition between one generation and the next-old against young, parent against child. We older ones had the advantage of experience. We prevailed. But our victory was bitter... We support poorer section of the world while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves.

JAYA: And it works? You live forever?

VIRGIL: Not everyone can take it. We fixed the car, but not the driver! I'm one of the stubborn ones. This is my fourth body in fifty years. (Padmanabhan 86)

Virgil, an ailing American man has used four bodies as prosthesis to live in. He gets original prosthesis to live a longer life. He offers Jaya to have children for harvesting organs and to repopulate their uninhabited world. While going through such transformation, Virgil loses the capacity of having children. Virgil's body is a mixture of more than one body who is managing to survive for a longer time: "The posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image; it is a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body; it is, as we shall see, a queer body" (Halberstarn and Livingston 03). Virgil is a technologically advanced person who has employed cloned bodies and seeks to harvest organs for his own survival. The playwright can be viewed as interrogating the agencies of unethical organ transplantation and decreasing fertility rates.

Om's mother orders a 'SuperDeluxe VideoCoach model XL 5000' (a fictional self-sufficient electronic device) provides multi-facilities for the user as explained by the Agent 1 in the play. The Agents in the play are the same cloned bodies who appear as Guards. They change their appearance and come to deliver the device. As Padmanabhan writes in the characters' list: "The Agents are space-age delivery-persons and their uniforms are fantastical verging on ludicrous, like the customs of waiters in exotic restaurants. Their roles are interchangeable with the Guards, though it must be clear that they do not belong to the same agency" (6). The cloned bodies intermediate between the donor and the receiver. The first world receiver strategically offers electronic gadgets to divide the attention of the family members from the donor. Om's mother loses her emotional connection with the family. She loses interest in the world outside the VideoCoach. As an Agent explains, the capacities of the electronic gadget:

AGENT1: This is the organic-input interface, the hydration filter, the pangro-meter! Here you see the Lexus Phantasticon which is programmed to receive seven hundred and fifty video channels from all over the world! There are ten modes seventeen frequencies, three substrate couplers, extra sensory feedback impulses and cross-net

capturing facilities! All media access: satellite, bio-tenna, visitelly and radiogonad. (Padmanabhan 78)

Ma (Om's mother) overcomes physical limitations by using VideoCouch which makes her self-sufficient. The play proceeds by reflecting abrupt changes in Prakash family. Ma becomes hybrid of "cybernetic organism" as Donna Haraway defines cyborg in *Simians, cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction"(149). She stops worrying about her son and confines herself to the new life style of pleasure and comfort. Om's mother remains busy in her self-sufficient electronic gadget till the end of the play. She is present on the stage but her attention fixed on VideoCouch. Her love is no longer visible for Om. She totally confines herself to the machine landscape which isolates her from the real world.

In current times, there are numerous technological gadgets available to entertain people which surely has become a reason of their alienation. Posthumanism interrogates when people get addicted to devices like mobile phone, television, desktop, videogame, etc. Excessive indulgence of human with technological landscape turns them into techno-aliens. In the play, new media landscape makes prison like situation for the family. Virgil uses technology as a tool to hold control over people to harvest organs to live a longer life.

Manjula Padmanabhan criticises the commodification of economically deprived third world people. Through Jaya's portrayal, the playwright questions everything that helps to resolve the plot. She rebukes the Guards while installing electronic devices in their apartment and hates the food they are being given by InterPlanta. Jaya always protects herself from the trap of digital technologies. She stays away from TV throughout the play. She denies the use of VideoCouch for her mother-in-law. In the last Act, Virgil appears before Jaya through the ContactModule and totally resembles Jeetu. Virgil says thus: "I am old and I was sick, until I got into this young body"(86). The issues concerned with human body remain pertinent in dystopian drama. She realises the trap of the American organ receiver who uses some electronic gadgets to beguile Prakash family.

After wearing the successful transplantation from Jeetu's body, he wishes to have bodies for future. To get fresh bodies, he offers Jaya to have e-sex without touch of his body. Jaya rejects his proposal and firmly tells him to disappear. Virgil tempts her by saying that her desire to have children will be fulfilled. Thus, *Harvest* can be viewed as interrogating the unethical way of deriving private information. ContactModule is panoptic and voyeuristic as the former restricts the family and the latter collects information from private conversation. Virgil, the voyeur in the play, keeps eyes on the activities of the family through electronic surveillance. He knows even about the incestuous relationship between Jeetu and Jaya. She calls him phantom but he still tries to persuade her. Jaya does not accept the proposal of getting pregnant through artificial devices and thus says: "I want real hands touching me. I want to feel a real weight upon me" (89). Instead of accepting the dominance of virtual world, she threatens to end her life, and considers this a victory.

There are numerous versions of the posthuman such as prosthesis, technocolonization and neo-cannibalism. Digital technologies and machines have become the essential part of the human life as these have replaced the human at various stages in day-to-day life. Mark Poster delivered keynote address in a conference of the American Comparative Literature Association, and coined the neologism, "humachine" to define "intimate mixing of human and machine" (Hayles 312). Poster's neologism "humachine" perfectly becomes a synonym of the term 'cyborg'. Virgil, an indistinguishable character

from technology can be called posthuman/humachine because he challenges the integrated continuum of body and consciousness.

Manjula Padmanabhan's futuristic play surprises the readers with the dystopian nature of modern technologies. Francis Fukuyama in his book *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (2002) shows his concern thus: "We need to start thinking concretely now about how to build institutions that can discriminate between good and bad uses of biotechnology, and effectively enforce these rules both nationally and internationally" (10). In the play, *Harvest*, Virgil owned the skin and organs of Jeetu where one perpetuates at the cost of terminating the life of the other.

Matthew Causey in his book *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture from Simulations to Embeddedness* uses "postorganic model" as a synonym of "posthuman" to indicate "the extensions and challenges to our bodies and selves brought on by the advances of new technologies" (53). Virgil succeeds in delaying death and tries to challenge the mortal nature of human life. The play also reflects dangerous distortions in the genetic line. As, Virgil confesses, "we lost the art of having children" (Padmanabhan 86). *Harvest* reflects challenging situations for humans to survive as species. Posthuman landscapes of Padmanabhan reflect human situations where people are hunting for healthy bodies to live in and searching young women to sow children to repopulate the first world.

Padmanabhan's fantasy extrapolates a future society where human desire of immortality meets catastrophe. Every character in the play has been introduced with different mindset in the case of dealing with technology. Om accepts the proposal as an organ donor for survival of the family and his brother Jeetu's ignorance ends his life. Om's mother becomes self-sufficient and disappears from interaction. Her desire to live life full of pleasure and comfort leads her to a situation where she gets isolated from her family. She is totally unaware as to what happens with her children. Jaya is the only rational character in the play who questions everything and gives a message that one should learn to govern the technological world instead of being governed. *Harvest* thus highlights the evil of modern technologies which pushes Prakash family into a chaotic situation.

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