

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest: a Battle Between Machine and (wo)Man*

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Abstract: The play *Harvest*, with very apt title, describes how one such family fall victim to the flesh-market controlled by the Western world. An attempt made herein is to describe how the machine world governs the human world and how the playwright has cleverly used the electronic devices turning them into characters. There begins the play of machines and machine-like men (representatives of the machine world) instructing, commanding, interfering and grabbing the human lives. The entry of the Guards from the Interplaza services is the beginning of the machine era and end of the human era.

Manjula Padmanabhan in *Harvest* presents battle a war between machine and man for possession human beings have to wage in future if not learn to control machines. Where machine will succeed at the initial ground, but final victory will lie with a (wo) man. The play also shows the futuristic picture of the modern times where the machines will be replacing and distancing human beings gradually. The play warns through the character of Jaya how one has to govern the machines instead of being governed.

Key words: Harvest, third world, Interplaza services, contact module, videocoach, sarcophagus organic input interface, the hydration filter- the pangrometer, Lexus Phantasticon

Delhi born Manjula Padmanabhan could be taken as a suitable match to the 20th century Rabindranath Tagore. Like Tagore, Padmanabhan has successfully tried her hand at all types of literature. It includes plays, comic strips, travelogues, short stories, and children's book and additionally she is as an illustrator. Before entering in the area of literature, she joined the staff of

a small magazine called *Parsian* and earned name as a cartoonist. After discarding the thought of stepping into the shoes of her IFS father and trying a suicide at 30 which she had decided at 17, she started writing. "Today Manjula Padmanabhan has", as Nilanjan and Ray put on record, "one of the most interesting CVs in the world of Indian literature"(2). She has written plays like

Harvest (1997) *Lights Out* (1984) and *Hidden Fire* (1991), *the Artists' Model Sextet* and the Gujrathi Monologue, a collection of short stories (1996) *Suki*, a travel memoir like *Getting there*, a collection of short stories like *Death and Old Soup* and *Kleptomania*, *Escape* a book for children *Muse Attack* (2008). Even after writing plays, Padmanabhan continued to contribute as an illustrator both independently and in collaboration. Independently she produce '*I am different! Can you find me?*' (2011), *Unprincess* (2005), *A Visit to City Market* (1986) and with *Tara Ali Baij*, *Indrani and the Enchanted Jungle* (1979) and with Maithily Jagannath, *Dropsy Dragon* in 1984. She also penned a comic strip as '*Double Talk*' (2007). Her comic female character *Suki* was serialized in Sunday Observer. She also earned her name as a cartoonist and had a daily cartoon strip in The Pioneer.

This is an attempt to see how Manjula Padmanabhan makes a successful attempt at a science fiction on stage for the first time in India. Manjula Padmanabhan, a 21st century woman, being a technophile uses the techniques and tools of the modern world in her most celebrated play, *Harvest* (1996). Though *Harvest* is not, as obvious, the first play Padmanabhan wrote, her fame as a playwright rests on it. Padmanabhan drew the attention of the world when *Harvest* won the Onassis cash rich award

for the theatre at Athens (Greece) out of more than hundred entries.

The underlined statement, though, made a decade later, seems to be predicted in the play. The economics of life rules the life. The events that take places in the play are the results of the economics/financial pressure as the only bead where now unemployed Om. Though the play, *Harvest* as Shital Pravinchandra comes as a critique of the commoditization of the healthy third world body, much thanks to the significant adventures in transplant medicine, has now been a bank of spare parts for ailing bodies in the first world (1). Apart from its futuristic approach (as the play is set in 2010 Mumbai) the play also shows how the financially strong groups/agents use the modern electronic technology to control and govern the financially weak sections of society in the world at the risk of hell like life as is found in Padmanabhan's another play, *The Mating Game* (2003). Though the gist of the play, *Harvest* can be given in three lines, its presentation, characters, their behaviour, action and the space occupied the screen contact module speak of the value and possession electronic devices are going to have to the life.

The story of the play centers on Om, who signs up to be an organ donor for an American organ receiver named Ginny. Ginny provides all the facilities to make and keep Om's body parts hygienic. Gradually

the electronic contact module takes possession of all the characters in the play. Om, Ma and Jeetu except Jaya, Om's wife who, as Durgesh Ravande says, represent the conflict between technological adventures and human relationship in life. (163) Jaya appears as the last hope of emotional value in the fire when a legal moral and bio-ethical debates about organ sales and transplants have been overcome, when the trade in human organ is fully institutionalized and smoothly operated by the rapacious forces of global capitalism (Shital Pravinchakra, 8). Helen Gilbert in her introduction to the Anthology of the Post-colonial Plays rightly comments on the nature of the play. She observes:

Harvest can be read not only as a cautionary tale about the possible (mis) use of modern medical and reproductive science but also a reflection on economic and social legacies of Western imperialism, particularly as they coverage with new technologies (216)

The play is set in 2010 Mumbai. The financial crisis and computerization at the global level have turned the unskilled employees jobless. Ransacking job has become the routine of such middle-class and middle-aged people who can do nothing else. The play *Harvest*, with very apt title, describes how one such family fall victim to

the flesh-market controlled by the Western world. The action of the play moves around four full-fledged characters, Om the jobless husband, his 19 year old wife Jaya, his 17 year old brother Jeetu and his 60 year old widow mother, Indumati Prakash. There are four other minor nameless mechanical guards, two screen characters, Ginni and Virgil and a neighbor Vidyutbai. An attempt made herein is to describe how the machine world governs the human world and how the playwright has cleverly used the electronic devices turning them into characters.

When the play opens, Ma and Jaya are seen waiting for Om who is about to come after job-hunting. Apart from the usual retorting and differences between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, one notes their concern for Om's getting job. Though the ever-growing use of electronic devices like computer has turned Om jobless, his sixty-year-old mother seems to be addicted to another electronic domestic device-television. She appears to be less concerned about her son and daughter-in-law. One feels that she believes more in the celluloid world than the real world where one finds difficult to feed only four members in the family. Ma retorts her daughter-in-law Jaya when the latter asks to leave her alone.

MA. Alone, alone! Have you seen your neighbours? Ten in that room;

twenty in other! And harmonious as a TV show! But you? An empty room would be too crowded for you. (Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, 218)

One begins to feel influence of technology more when Om comes back and begins to describe how he has been selected for a different kind of job. He narrates the non-human instructions at the time of his selection procedure. There begins the commanding influence of the machines in human life. Om narrates:

OM. We were standing all together in that line. And the line went on and on -not just on one floor, but slanting up, forever. All in iron bars and grills. It was like being in a cage shaped like a tunnel. All around, up, turn, sideways, there were men slowly moving. All the time, I couldn't understand it. Somewhere there must be a place to stop, to write a form? Another questions? But no. Just forward, forward. One person fainted but the others pushed him along. And at the corners, a sort of pipe was kept.

You had to be quick. Other men would squeeze past behind. The fellow who was doing his business. Sometimes there was no place and he'd have to move

on before he finished still dripping-- (219).

Om's further narration makes clear that all these men in line were ordered and monitored by the instructions being given by faceless machines.

OM. I don't know for how long we moved. Then there was a door. Inside it was dark like being in heaven! So cool so fresh! I too fainted then with pleasure, I don't know. I wake up to find how the ground is moving under me. The floor is moving then there's a sign. REMOVE CLOTHING so we do that still moving. Then each man gets a bag. To put the clothes inside. (219)

Then a sort of rain burst. I wonder if I am 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. Then air again. Then we pass through another place.--- I don't know what is happening. Ahead of me a man screams and cries but we are in separate little cages now, can't move. At one place, something comes to cover the eyes. There's no time to think, just do. Put your arm here, get one prick, put your arm there, get another

prick-pissshhh! Pissshhh! Here, stand here, take your head this side, look at a light that side. On and on. Finally, at the end, there's another tunnel with pretty pictures and some music. And the sign comes, RESUME CLOTHING. I just do what I have to do. All the time, the ground keeps moving. Then at the end, the ground stops we are back on our feet, there are steps. It must be the other side of the building. And as we come down, guards are standing there, waiting for us. And to me they say you come and that was all.

Some other men were also with me, all looking like me, I suppose blank. They told us we had been selected. They wrote down our names, addresses and this-that. All details. Then they gave us these packets. Told us not to open them and we must go home, the guards would come with us for final instruction. (228)

Then there begins the play of machines and machine-like men (representatives of the machine world) instructing, commanding, interfering and grabbing the human lives. The entry of the Guards from the Interplaza services is the beginning of the machine era and end of the human era. The objects of use begin the using objects. The very language used by

the guards is exact, neutral, dry, and machine like devoid of human concerns.

GUARD 1. Interplaza services wishes to confirm that this is the residence of Om

Prakash? (Meanwhile the Guard of 2 and 3 carry equipments which they set down and immediately begins to ready for installation. Guard 3 produces collapsible cartoons that he begins to set up. Guard 2 starts to install a power-generating device after when she will set up the contact module.)

GUARD 1. Sir, you are directed to open the kit and make it operational just after our departure. Instructions are provided within. We will set up the contact module. It will start functioning in approximately two hours. About the contact module, all details will be found in the starter kit.

At the time of first contact, you and your receiver will exchange personal information. Your physical data has been sent for matching and we are confident that you will both be well satisfied. When we have confirmed that the contact module is functioning, you will not be responsible for anything but the

maintenance of your personal resources. (221-222)

In fact, by signing the contract with the Interplaza Services, Om, like that of Dr. Faustus, sells of his soul to his western buyers. The life of his family is completely being hijacked by the machines. The Guard 1 says:

GUARD 1. All implements of personal fuel preparation will be supplied exclusively by Interplaza service. Henceforward, you and your domestic unit will consume only those fuels which will be made available by Interplaza. We will provide you more than enough for the unit described in your data sheet. But will forbid you from sharing, selling or by any means whatsoever commercially exploiting the facility. (228)

When the contact module is installed, it begins to operate. The playwright describes the movements of the contact module. Guard 2 moves swiftly over to contact module and points a remote at it. There are musical notes and clicks. A screen saver pattern appears. The contact module moves, is raised and lowered a couple of times, then switched off again.

And there begins the governance of the contact module on the family of Om Prakash. The timings of food, bathing,

taking medicines, even going to toilet are monitored by the contact-module. After some time, a loud tone sounds. All three react, looking immediately at the globe. The contact module comes to life. It displays a young woman's face, beautiful in a youthful, glamour first world manner (224). The young woman's name is Virginia Ginni. She gives instructions to Om to be happy and healthy and other members of the family. Jaya his wife and Ma are ordered to keep him happy and healthy so that his organs remain healthy and fit to be transplanted. Om is given food as prescribed by the machine, the kitchen is modified; a toilet is installed in the same room. Ginni instructs in a commanding way because she has got the ownership on the body of Om.

GINNI. Zhaya. You see, it's important to smile all through the day. After all, if you are not smiling, it means you are not happy. And if you're not happy, you might affect your brother's (Om is presented as Jaya's brother) mind and then where would we be?

If I have said it once, I've said it a hundred times. The most important thing is to keep Auwm smiling or if Auwm's smiling. It means his body's smiling; it means his organs are smiling. And that's the kind of organs

that'll survive a transplant best, smiling organs. I mean, God forbid that it should ever come to that, right? But after all, we can't let ourselves forget what this program is about. I mean, if I'm going to need a transplant then by God, let's make it the best damn transplant that we can manage. I'm sorry Auwm but I insist you must eat at regular times. (229)

Ginni begins to control lives of the family members so much, so that she doesn't allow anyone of them to sneeze before Om because she wants Om to be healthy at any cost. The aptness of the title is proved here when she starts treating the body of Om and the family as the soil where she has sown the seeds, she feeds Om give. Other members in the family care of the plants of the crop as farmers take. Ginni takes every care in feeding and keeping them away from every disease as a farmer uses fertilizers and pesticides on plant for their well growth and protection from any insects. As a farmer sows, uses and applies pesticides for better growth of the crops so that he can ripe the fruits and can have the expected harvest. Similarly, for Ginni, Om's body is no more than the land where she wants to grow his body like the crops in

hygienic atmosphere and she could harvest them when she needs them.

The excessive care for protection of Om's body for all types of health hazards, other members are also well fed, taken care and governed as if they have no desires, no will and no existence for themselves at all. Their kitchen is changed, foods are prescribed. In order to avoid any problem, they are provided a toilet in the same one room house. No outside member is allowed to come in their contact to avoid any kind of infection. One can note the governing tone of Ginni when Jaya, Om's wife is one tries a fake sneeze, and her attempts to hide it.

JAYA. (Now faking a sneeze) choo!
Sorry Ginni. Sorry.

GINNI. That was a sneeze! Don't deny it. You have u cooled. Zhaya don't you?

Come on, Confuse!

JAYA. No, Ginni!

GINNI. Don't lie to me, Zhaya. I know a sneeze when I hear one.

JAYA. It was the –the peeper.

GINNI. I will have to ask Auwm. Tell me the truth, Auwm does your sister have a cold? Does she?

OM. Cold? Ch-no-now! No, cold, Ginni, it was only the.

JAYA. Pepper. It's this foreign pepper. I'm not really used to it.

GINNI. Then why haven't you reacted before this? Well, I don't know! What was all that about? Why did Zhaya sneeze? You know how terrified I am of colds. Auwm! Ever since we eradicated colds from here, where I live. It's like –like having the plague!

OM. Ginni. It's not. I promise you that.

GINNI. If you get cold, Auwm, I can't take your transplant! You will be quarantined.

This whole program will go to waste.

OM. Ginni believe me. I will never risk your health.

GINNI. Though- I guess- they screen everything that comes in. Even if you did have a cold, they'd never let your organs through.

OM. I live only for your benefit you know that.

GINNI. All right, I believe you. I'll make myself believe you. I mean it has been hard to read your faces, you know? You people don't use facial expressions not like us. (231-32)

Not only this, the contact signed by Om compels him to present Jaya, his wife as his sister and his brother Jeetu as his brother-in-law. But careless Jeetu fails to report himself as per the contract and he is derecognized by the contact module. He is not allowed to enter the house. When he appears after spending few days at the dirtiest gutter feeding on the left out shared with street dogs and pigs, his mother and Om don't want to take him in. The contract affects their relations also.

Jaya rightly reacts when Om suggests presenting Jeetu to the guards regarding his recognition and admission into their family, Jaya says, "What faith you have in them? They don't care about any of us not as people, not as human beings". (233). She tells him about Ginni.

JAYA. Oh. Yes she cares- that as meat as she cares about her chicken she eats for dinner. (231)

Never mind chickens! Have you seen how their beef cattle live? Air conditioned! Individual potties! Music from loudspeakers. Why they have even their psychiatrists! Only because that their meat, when it finally goes to Ginni's table, will be freshest purest sanest, happiest (284).

Finally when the moment of transplant occurs, the Interplaza services

guards appear and inform them in the strongest language. "Resistance is useless! We are authorized to break down this barrier if you do not completely without reflect is ten seconds exactly". (256) But accidentally they grab Jeetu as the donor instead of Om who has signed the contract. Out of fear, Om hides himself under the table. Jaya tries to tell them about their confusion but without success. Finally, they capture Jeetu and take him away. Before they depart, the Guards thank in quiet formal language.

GUARD1: Interplaza services thank you for your cooperation. Your family member are to fulfill the solemn and noble contract into which he entered. We on our part offer you as sincerest assurance that we will do everything on our part to ensure that he will come no avoidable harm and will suffer no discomforts other than what is deemed normal under the circumstances.(237).

The guards install the video image of Ginni in the mind of Jeetu. He is enamored and fully controlled. He is willing to die for Ginni now. It shows the western gimmick of addicting their culture in the minds of the third world and then monitoring them like druggists. One can note the piece of dialogue between Jeetu and Ginni to see

how Ginni has taken total possession of Jeetu's being with the technology.

GINNI. The next phase of the transplant you see, we have to progress rapidly now and I need all your support until we reached this platform of contract, we couldn't be sure. But now that we are sure. We've got to move more readily fast. Are you with us?

JEETU. Yes.

GINNI. Because you have to be willing, for what he wants to do now. You have to be really willing passion.

JEETU. Tell me, Ginni. Tell me what you want.

GINNI. Help, you'll have to go back to the clinic and they'll prepare you.

JEETU. You need some more parts of me?

GINNI. Well. Yes. I mean that's one way of looking at it but I -I think you should understand that this is kind of that sort, Awwm and we really have to get a move on.

JEETU. (He moves his body seductively). Just tell me what you want of me Ginni.

GINNI The guards will come for you and they'll require you to follow them away.

JEETU. Anything Ginni, anything.

GINNI. The sooner you go, the better it will be for you.

Jeetu. Whatever you say Ginni (241-42).

Ginni has got full control of Jeetu through the contact module. Because of her video image in his mind, he is able to see her directly what often cannot see. He sees her naked image and meeting her becomes his passion. His excitement shows both his passion and slavery to her. He tells Jaya when she says to him that Ginni doesn't exist. "She exists. That's enough for the she's a goddess and she exists. I would do anything for her anything.(241) Within some minutes, the guards come and take away Jeetu without explaining what they propose to do with him.

After some times, some agents appear with a videocoach which Ma has ordered online. The videocoach is a reminiscent of Tutan Khamen's sarcophagus, encrusted with electronic dials and circuitry in the place of jewels. The Agents maneuver it into the centre of the room, move the dining table aside and install the device in its place.

The other two agents open the case, revealing an equally ornate interior filled with tubes, switches, and circuitry. Inside are a number of containers. (244)

The agents explain how it functions:

AGENT. This is the Super Deluxe video coach model XL 5000! We are certain it will provide you our valued customer with every satisfaction. This is the nourishment panel- the hydration. This is the organic input interface the hydration filter- the pangrometer! 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 sub- strate couples, extra-sensory feedback impulses and cross net capturing facilities! All media access satellite bio-tenna I visi-telly and radio-gonad. Manual control panel neuro -stimulator and full body processing capacities- all other queries will be answered online from within the videocoach self training program.(242-43)

The moment other two agents attach a power line to the unit and at this moment activates the system. It twinkles with small LEDs. It looks like a tiny space-module.

Agent 2 delinks the power connection and the lights continue to twinkle. Ma detaches the cable from the coach, it begins to speak.

COACH. (A fruity voice issues from which the videocoach) Welcome to video paradiso!

You will not regret your choice! Please ask our authorized representative to settle the in your customized, contour gel, fully automated Video-chamber (243).

Then the two Agents help Ma to lie into the chamber. She lies down and the agents handle around her connecting her up to various particles and tubes. They do this very quickly and she gasps or grunts once or twice. There is a breathing mask on her face. Soon they are ready to close the lid. "Your fully automatic video paradise unit is now ready for operation! Just relax and let your guide. Show you the way to an experience of ultimate bliss. (247)

The agents shut the lid, seal the edges, and lock then. They work extremely fast. The muted sound of the Couch's voice continues but becomes a constant unintelligible background hum. When Jaya asks them how Ma will breathe, feed, relieve, and close functions, the agent replies:

AGENT: Mam- it's a total comfort unit. We have a full recycling and bio- feed- in-process. Your relative will have no further need of the outside world from now till she chooses to delink. Everything is now in the customer's operation. The unit is holy self-sufficient, total self sufficient. There is nothing to be done.(244)

It fact, Ma is packed in the video-couch and delinked/disconnected from the world. She is as if on some space tour, where everything is unearthly. It's a seclusion Ma selects an escape/exit for her self to be controlled by the machine. It's first Om, then Jeetu and now Ma are under full control and possession of machine bereft any human senses and emotions. Only Jaya realizes the seriousness of the situation when the real receiver of the body organs of Jeetu, Virgil appears before her. She comes to know that Virgil is the man who has bought the body of Jeetu and entered his body. When she realizes that, the person whom they were talking so long- Ginni was nothing but a computer-animated wet dream. She realizes that they have been cheated by the western buyers with the advanced technology. Virgil reveals objective of buying the body of Jeetu to retain youth forever. He also expresses his desire to fill womb of Jaya with child with technological sex- remote sex without

touching her body. She rejects his offer and invites him to have a real skin touch. When the guards threaten to force her to have e-sex, she threatens to end her life than to give in.

In this battle between the machine and men, it's Jaya who wins the battle and decides to live a relax life. In this way, Manjula Padmanabhan in *Harvest* presents a battle a war between machine and man for

possession human beings have to wage in future if not learn to control machines. Where machine will succeed at the initial ground, but final victory will lie with a (wo) man. The play also shows the futuristic picture of the modern times where the machines will be replacing and distancing human beings gradually. The play warns through the character of Jaya how one has to govern the machines instead of being governed.

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