

Neocolonialism and the Resistance of the Third World

Body in Manjula Padmanabhan's Play Harvest

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ABSTRACT

Manjula Padmanabhan is a renowned Indian playwright, cartoonist and journalist. Harvest is one of her most critically acclaimed plays for which she won 1997 Greek Onassis Award for the original theatre drama. In this dystopic play, written in 1997, set in Bombay Of 2010 against the backdrop of corporate globalization, economic inequality, digitalization and cyber culture, Padmanabhan highlights the question of identity, marginalization, and exploitation of the people belonging to the developing countries. The play exposes the calamitous influence of commoditization and global capitalism on lives of its characters, each of whom represent an underdeveloped section of the third world. The present paper will critically examine how Padmanabhan through the issue of organ sale and transplant explores neocolonialism, effective in the guise of capitalism, as a dominant threat, overpowering and exploiting the developing countries. The third world body in the play is the transplant donor and the first world body is the receiver. The play depicts the grim financial crisis of third world which forces its inhabitants to opt for organ trade. They sell parts of their body, which are their only piece of possession, to earn a living. The physical body of the third world inhabitants is a metaphor for their national identity which is caught in the maelstrom of neocolonial powers. The paper will also analyze how through Jaya rebellion against the first world receiver towards the end, the play highlights the resistance of the third world body against the first world dominance.

Keywords: *Capitalism, globalization, Neocolonialism, organ trade, Padmanabhan, resistance, Third world.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The play tells the gruesome tale of an impoverished Indian family's struggle whose eldest son Om takes the extreme step of selling his organs for a livelihood. After being fired from his job as a clerk he applies at Interplanta Services, a transnational Corporation dealing with organ trade. The play opens with Om's mother Indumati Prakash referred in the play simply as Ma and his wife Jaya waiting for him to return from his interview at Interplanta Services. Their bitter argument exposes their estranged relationship, their awful financial condition as well as shed lights on Jaya's incestuous relationship with her brother-in-law Jeetu. Jeeten Kumar or Jeetu is Om's youngest brother and works as a male prostitute. Om returns to announce that he has been selected for the job after he proved himself a healthy donor for an American receiver. Ma is fascinated by

the idea of a job which only requires her son to sit at home and stay healthy but Jaya is skeptic and disapproves of his decision to become an organ donor. However, soon after Om's selection the company's guards install a contact module in his small, rundown apartment through which the receiver talks to the family from time to time. The receiver is Virgil, an ailing aged American male who has used four donor bodies in the past fifty years, posing in front of the Prakash family as Ginni a young, beautiful blonde girl with seducing voice. Ginni interacts with each member of the Prakash family except Jeetu who refuses to be part of the contract signed by his brother. Om and Ma are happy with the comforts provided by the Ginni but Jaya and Jeetu are displeased and often mock Om for selling "His skin. His eyes. His arse" (Padmanabhan 28). While, signing the contact Om lies about his marital status and registers himself as "single" to fulfill the job criteria. He, therefore, introduces Jaya, his wife to Ginni as his sister and Jeetu, his brother as his brother-in-law. The whole family conceals the real identity and relationship of Jaya and Jeetu to avoid annulment of the contract. Even Jaya, fearing the revocation of the contract adeptly plays her newly assigned role and like the rest of the family unquestionably carries Ginni's every order.

Jeetu, after he refuses to register his name as a member of Prakash family with the guards, is denied access to the apartment. He continues to wander on streets, eat leftover food and work as a prostitute before returning to the family in rags; starved and diseased. Jaya and Om clean him up and try to hide him from Ginni and the guards. But in a tragic turn of events the guards mistake him for Om, take him away for organ extraction and later bring him back with his head covered in bandages. His suffering further infuriates Jaya. But soon it is revealed that the blind Jeetu can see Ginni and even more closely than others. She digitally appears half-naked in front of him and he is completely enthralled by her charms. Her beauty mesmerizes him so much that he is willing to even die for her. He tries to win her appreciation through complete surrender: "tell me Ginni, tell me what you want...you need some more parts of me...just tell me what you want of me Ginni...anything Ginni, anything" (Padmanabhan 96-97).

After the first transplant Jeetu (referred by Ginni as Om) becomes Ginni's centre of attention. This gives rise to sibling rivalry as Om is enraged to know that Jeetu can see Ginni more closely, a privilege over which, he believes, he had the real claim. After the guards take away Jeetu for the final step of organ removal, Om too leaves for Interplanta Service to reapply for the job of a donor. It is then that Virgil, the real receiver contacts Jaya through the module and reveals his true identity and intentions to her. He tells her that he monitored the family all the time and knew it was the diseased Jeetu and not Om whose organs were extracted for the transplant. He also tells her that he is actually interested in her and not in Om's body. "We lost the art of having children...so we designed this programme. We support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves", he tells her (Padmanabhan 116). He reveals his real plan; to inseminate her body with the help of a gadget. But Jaya, unlike other members of Prakash family refuses to become a donor.

II.NEOCOLONIALISM AND THE RESISTANCE OF THE THIRD WORLD BODY

The play is set in a neocolonial age and highlights the unequal power relation between the third world and the first world countries. The first world is represented as technologically advanced and financially potent as a result

of which it controls its underprivileged third world counterparts. Virgil in disguise of Ginni rules the third world Prakash family with the help of science-gadgets or technology. The third world is depicted as lacking in facilities, hygiene, education and human rights. The first world offers a hope of better standard of living and an opportunity of earning quick money, which eventually turn out to be a mere illusion used to force the third world into subservience and self-annihilation. The play explores the deep grip of colonial hegemony and how its era never really ended but left behind a much precarious legacy in form of neocolonialism which functions through capitalism. The play “poses a potent critique of the first-world’s exploitation of third-world bodies for the commodities of labour-power...” (Pravinchandra 15). The first world turns the third world in a workshop or manufacturing unit where it can produce spare human organs and babies for the westerners. The third world “people” are reduced to a mere “body” which is treated as a commodity in the global market. Padmanabhan exposes how “Capitalism...presents itself as a gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered” (Comaroff & Comaroff 292).

Virgil is a symbol of neocolonialism. Ginni, his digital female persona, represents the marketing or advertisement strategy used by corporate world to entrap and exploit people. Ginni is a beautiful manifestation of a hideous reality. The Prakash family is fascinated by this glamorous and sensuous “youth goddess”, whom they call an “angel”. Her beauty and charm gives rise to sibling rivalry as both Om and Jeetu try hard to sacrifice their bodies for her. In the end, she turns out to be “a computer animated wet-dream” (Padmanabhan 113) used by the Virgil to lure Om and Jeetu, both of whom walk straight into the trap, without any protest.

The play exposes various facets of neocolonialism by challenging the colonial stereotypes and myths. For example, soon after Om signs the deal with the company, he and his family are confined, at the behest of Ginni, to their small apartment room to avoid the infection and pollution of the third world environment. They are given a separate water supply and instead of their routine diet they are fed multicoloured food pellets. Ginni from the first instance shows outrage at the family’s unhygienic lifestyle. She embarrasses Jaya by asking her “you do bathe, don’t you? I mean, at least once a day?” (Padmanabhan 36). She is also shocked to know that the family has no personal toilet and are using a public toilet shared by forty other families of the same apartment block. “It’s wrong’, she exclaims. ‘It’s disgusting! And I – well, I’m going to change that. I can’t accept that. I mean, it’s unsanitary!’” (Padmanabhan 34). In spite, of the family’s disapproval a separate toilet is installed for them in their apartment. The family is prohibited from making any social or physical contact with the outside world. But, in the end it turns out that Virgil knew about everything going on in the Prakash household. The contact module, through which he in disguise of Ginni monitored the family, worked even when it was turned off. Therefore, it becomes clear that the sanitation rules and regulations were set only to put the Prakash family in a shamefully awkward situation.

The image of the first world is so alluring and its promises so seducing that the third world donors willing walk into the trap. Within few months, the Prakash family becomes addicted to the gadgets gifted by Ginni. Their small apartment is stuffed with luxurious appliances, an air conditioning unit, a gym, a television

by the Interplanta service guards. Ma spends most of her time watching television sent to her by Ginni. She is so engulfed by the comforts of technology that towards the end of the play she locks herself in a video couch, a capsule in which she can plug herself and watch hundreds of channels without having to worry about her diet or digestion because the capsule is completely self-sufficient. But these comforts are part of a contract which demands something more precious in return, as Ginni reminds them “I get to give you things you’d never get in your lifetime, and you get to give me, well... maybe my life” (Padmanabhan 58). It is actually Ginni successful investment in a deal which benefits her own cause, as she tells Om, “the most important thing is to keep Auwm smiling. Coz if Auwm’s smiling, it means his body is smiling and if his body is smiling it means his organs are smiling. And that’s the kind of organs that’ll survive a transplant best, smiling organs...” (Padmanabhan 54).

However, in this macabre of commoditization and exploitation Jaya is the only survivor who emerges as defiant, taking charge of her situation, and refuses to be victimized. Jaya from the beginning reproaches her husband for making the wrong choice and keeps on warning him about the harsh consequences of the contract; “this whole dream will come crashing down around us! The guards will come and take everything back” (Padmanabhan 74). She protests against the first world dominance by resisting the temptations Virgil tries to arouse in her. He tries to seduce her by visually appearing in front of her in Jeetu’s body, whom she secretly loved. But she refuses to be lured by mere illusions, “if you want me, you must risk your skin to get me...either that or...you won’t have me at all”, she valiantly sets her conditions before him (Padmanabhan 120-121).

By refusing to accept Virgil’s offer Jaya reclaims the ownership of her body and challenges his authority by threatening to die with dignity than to surrender her identity. Her encounter with Virgil is the only part in the play in which the third world body seem in control. Her suicide threat turns the tables as it puts Virgil in a vulnerable position because the death of the third world donor body would be the death of the first world receiver body as well. The play ends with a fearlessly, happy and relaxed Jaya watching television after having dictated her new set of rules to Virgil.

III.CONCLUSION

The play, through the woeful story of a poor Indian family, predicts a bleak future that awaits the human race if the neocolonial powers are left unrestrained. *Harvest*, although a dark satire, ends on a positive note: the decision still lies with the third world, to sell or not to sell its resources and to insist on a real relationship with the first world rather than a ‘digital’ deal. Jaya’s insistence that if Virgil wants a baby with her he must come to her as a real person and “risk his skin”, changes the whole discourse. The play, as a result of Jaya’s resistance ends on a note where the first world is more dependent on the third world than verse versa. In an interview with Sunita Paul, Padmanabhan talking about her play *Harvest* said, “As people living in the third world we are encouraged to think that we have nothing to give, but in fact... we are actually giving our minds, our body and our labour to the first world all the time” (retrieved). The play, through its critique of the exploitation of the potent, resourceful developing countries highlights the need to discover “a new definition of winning” (Padmanabhan 121), which in other words is the resistance of the third world body against neocolonialism.

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