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Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*: Confronting Neocolonial Heterotopia of Coercive Menace

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“Visibility is a trap”

Michel Foucault

Abstract:

This paper offers a reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's futuristic sci-fi drama *Harvest* (1997) in order to examine how a transnational flow of digital and biomedical and technology including virtual reality are deployed by the First World for commodization of the Third World body. The dual attributes of digital and telecommunication, namely, the intrusive gaze of the camera and the allure of the television /computer screen effectively channelize American bio-power to Indian homes. When visual culture becomes one's everyday life, and reality gets enmeshed with digital image; reaffirming the primacy of human experience over the virtual becomes imperative. The play also critiques the stereotypical notion of women as self-sacrificing mothers or faithful wives. Attempts to interrogate, negotiate or resist the biomedical and digital invasion are initiated only by women in the play.

Keywords: gaze, heterotopia, organ-harvest, panopticon, technoscape.

Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist opines that contemporary cultural globalisation is reflected in surrender to the values of commodification and consumerism sold by the purveyor of culture – the media, advertising, and communication industries. Also consumed are possible or imagined lives, as individuals are presented with a repertoire of images by the media, or according to Arjun Appadurai the 'global imagination industry.'

Visual culture depends on modern tendency to picture or visualize experience. Visual images are all pervasive and are not stable in their relation to external reality. The interstice between image and reality is the location of power, observing, manipulating and permeating the lives of screen-gazers.

Harvest is a dystopian play about international organ trade, set in a Bombay chawl in the year 2010. In a cramped one-room tenement the donor family lives: Om Prakash, his mother- Ma,

brother, Jeeten Kumar and Om's wife Jaya. Om is a desperate jobless former clerk, the sole bread-winner of the family and the favoured son of Ma. Jeeten is a good-looking gigolo, who is also the lover of Jaya. Ma is indifferent towards her irresponsible younger son; she is caustic and harsh to her daughter-in-law. The InterPlanta Services recruits only bachelors for organ donation program, Om registers himself as an unmarried male and Jaya as the wife of Jeeten. The North American receiver Ginni/Virgil appears on the stage only in the form of attractive images and voices on the screen at the donor's home. Padmanabhan uses futuristic situation and electronic gadgetry for the co-mingling of physical and virtual reality.

In "Of Other Spaces" Foucault examines the historical development of Western space perception, "Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relation among sites" (Foucault, 1998, 238). Foucault uses the term heterotopia to describe spaces that have more layers of meaning than is immediately discernible. A heterotopia is a representation or appropriation of a utopia, or a parallel space (such as a prison) that contains undesirable bodies to make to make a real utopian space possible. The well-monitored and regimented life of the Indian family vis- a- vis the beamed images of American(s) Ginni\Virgil is a heterotopia. The perpetual youthfulness and health of the West sustains itself by preying upon the hapless poor of the Third World.

"Om: They don't have people to spare.

Jaya: And we do, of course. Spare Lives! We grow on trees, in the bushes!"(Padmanabhan, 24)

Foucault uses the idea of a mirror as a metaphor for the duality and contradiction, the reality and unreality of utopian projects. The image of young blonde Ginni, represents the desirable affluent west for the awe-struck Indian donors. The contact module functions as a virtual mirror. The screen is self-reflexive, it mirrors the anxiety and rapacity of the ailing and ageing west, and the desires and privations of the colonized. The screen\mirror is the real object that shapes the way, both, the receivers and donors relate to their own image.

"The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." (Foucault 1998, 241) The contact module ushers into the donor's home the phantasmal visual representation of the west, at once tantalizing and threatening. The receivers perceive the one-room tenement as an exotic garden where spare organs for their bodies are grown under controlled circumstances. Symbolic and psychological controls are affected through rapid integration of technology. It emerges as a site for the interplay of absolute power versus guileful resistance. While technology engenders doom for the young in the household; the aged Ma masters it enough to couch herself in the blissful oblivion delivered by multitudes of TV channels.

“Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say they open onto what might be termed [...] heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.” (Foucault, 1998, 242) Foucault mentions libraries and museums as examples of such perpetual and indefinite accumulation. Virgil, the beneficiary of Jeetu’s organ harvest is a human heterochronie:

Jaya: There is only one way to define death!

Virgil: (softly) Not where I live. (pause) We have some new definitions. (pause) We speak of body- death and self- death. The body you knew is still alive (Padmanabhan, 93)

Virgil: This is my fourth body in fifty years. (96)

Virgil’s body is a sort of general archive enclosing organs from across nationality\ethnicity and time, erasing notions of geographical boundaries and conventional perception of time.

“Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general the heterotopia site is not freely accessible like a public place [...] or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications”(Foucault, 1998,243). Om was selected for the programme after rigorous scrutiny of bio-data and a battery of physical examinations. Their home is virtually sealed off with minimum interactions with the neighbours and the outside world. Though Jeetu is ‘allowed’ to sneak in, he pays for it with his body parts. Jeetu’s youthfulness, which Virgil terms as “the keenest scalpel” was the factor which guaranteed him space in the house. The American wanted him more than he wanted Om, owing to Jeetu’s youth and later to function as a bait to lure Jaya. Foregrounding the play in a consumerist culture, Padmanabhan creates myriad versions of heterotopia unfolding within the paradigm of globalisation\neo-colonization.

“The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models.” (Appadurai, 32) Appadurai developed a framework of landscape metaphors for exploring fundamental disjuncture between economy culture and politics. Scapes are associated with the rise of “transnational cultural flows”, a term coined by Appadurai. “By technoscape I mean the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanized and informational, now moves at high speed across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries.” (Appadurai, 34) Most important in the ‘landscape’ metaphor is the emphasis on the individual actor and how they move through the ‘space’ of the scape and hence its perspectival element.

The proliferation of technology into the donor’s home beginning with the installation of the contact module – a polygon with a screen, space-age food and other electronic gadgets which subsequently arrive transforms their lives and interpersonal relationships. Ma is an avid TV soap

addict who leads a vicarious life immersed in serials. In Act I Scene I, her rebuke directed at Jaya illustrates her worldview. “Ma: Have you seen your neighbours? Ten in that room, twenty in the other! And harmonious my dear! Harmonious as a TV show.”(Padmanabhan, 8)

She is thrilled by the recently acquired luxurious lifestyle. She prefers to overlook the fact that the source of affluence is consequent of Om pledging his body to Ginni, the American via the InterPlanta Services. Ginni declares to the donor family she surveys through the contact module, “Human goldfish bowls, you know? I mean, I just look in on you folks every now and then and it just like blows my mind. Better than TV. Better than cyber net. Coz this is Real Life.” (43)

Nicholas Mirzoeff had analyzed the phenomenon of postmodern destruction of reality accomplished in everyday life in the form of mass visual media “[...], some of the most avidly followed television series bear no resemblance to reality at all. Soap operas construct a parallel universe... soap is also perhaps the most international visual format, commanding national attention in countries as disparate as Russia, Mexico, Australia and Brazil. Reality is destroyed daily in hour-long slots across the globe.” (Mirzoeff, 9)

The contact module keeps track of all members of donor family: “Om: That we would be monitored carefully. Not just us but our... lives. To remain employed we have to keep ourselves exactly as they tell us.” (Padmanabhan, 13) The unrelenting gaze of the camera serves as a watchtower to streamline their lives, so as to ensure optimum benefit to the receiver of organs. “Ginni: If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a hundred times. The Most Important Thing is to keep Auwm smiling. Coz, if Auwm is smiling, it means his organs are smiling. And that’s the kind of organs that’ll survive a transplant best, smiling organs___ ...” (41)

The body is not simply there as a brute fact of nature, but is the site of meaning, incorporated into culture. Michel Foucault’s analysis of development of prison system and state punishment focuses on the body as the subject of discipline. Crucially body is shaped and disciplined through systems of surveillance, either actual or surveillance that is imagined to be occurring. To keep the donor transplant-ready, InterPlanta guards installs shiny new kitchen and provide the family with food pallets. They issue strict instructions. “Hence forward, you and your domestic unit will consume only those fuels which will be made available to you by InterPlanta [...], but will forbid you from sharing, selling [...].” (15)

For Foucault all modern mechanisms of control were contingent upon fear-induced compliance by the subject. He analyzed Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, a building with a tower at the centre from which it is possible to see every cell in which a prisoner is incarcerated. The Panopticon induces a sense of permanent visibility that ensures the functioning of power. Bentham decreed that power should be visible yet unverifiable. “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and knows it assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he

simultaneously plays both roles, he becomes the principle of his own subjugation.” (Foucault, 1975, 136) The one-way communication mechanism of the contact module insinuates itself into the donor family’s personal and social transactions. It inscribes Ginni’s invisible power into their consciousness, their interactions with neighbours and the outside world are curtailed. Every action, word and silence is subjected to suspicious scrutiny.

Ginni: You’re keeping something from me! I just know it ___ you’re all keeping something from me! ...Yes you are, Zhaya! I can see it in your lying scheming little face! You think you are such a cutie-pie, Zhaya – but you don’t fool me! Not for an instant! Now tell me ___ (Padmanabhan,42)

The panopticon gaze of close circuit camera invests the observer with the sense of omnipotent voyeurism and the observed with the sense of disciplined surveillance. Conditioned thus,they all hasten to assure and pacify the dictatorial voice. Ginni swiftly moves in to implant her agenda, extracts absolute pliancy; an enactment of obtaining power of mind over mind.

Ginni: If you get a cold Auwm, I can’t take your transplant! You’ll be quarantined! This whole program will go waste!

Om: Ginni – Ginni – believe me I will never risk your health. (emphasis added) (42)

Foucault argues that with the advent of bio-power, bodies themselves become proper targets of power. He argues in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* that disciplines surrounding the prisons, the military, and the school have had as one of their aims and effects the creation of docile bodies. “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.” (136) The Third World docile bodies fashioned out of the discourse of discipline is wrought by strict regimen of food, hygiene and mini gym and also through the persuasive power of luxurious jewelry and gadgets. That, such investments on part of the receiver is not misplaced becomes evident when the seriously ill Jeetu turns up, Ma and Om are dismayed and want to throw him out because Ginni won’t like it. Ma is worried about the lice and carpet. Jaya’s display of compassion elicits derision from both of them.

“Om: It’s like Ginni says – the curse of the Donor World is sentimentality. (Padmanabhan, 49)

Discipline as a tactic is inadequate to ensure absolute control over bodies. A network of discourses is set in motion simultaneously to enforce sustained docility and to create a suitable environment for receptivity. Padmanabhan deftly weaves in masculine discourse of objectification of female body and the male gaze. Subjugation of donor is achieved by deploying the subtle coercive strategy of visual seduction. The vision of Ginni, young, blonde, white-skinned, clear-eyed, exuding youthful innocence and radiant purity was calculated to captivate the Indian family. “Om: No, No, Madam! It’s our pleasure! Our duty, I mean! Anything we can do to help”. (25)

For Om parting with his organs is a pleasure and a duty not a Faustian deal he has entered into.

The visual offers a sensual immediacy that cannot be rivaled by any other media. It is that edge, that buzz that separates the remarkable from the humdrum. It is the surplus of experience that moves the different components of the visual sign or semiotic circuit into a relation with one another. Such moments of intense and surprising visual power evoke in David Freedberg's phrase, admiration, awe, terror and desire (Freedberg 1989:433) This dimension to visual culture is at the heart of all visual events. (Mirzoeff, 9)

Inter Planta guards take Jeetu away for transplant instead of Om. Jeetu returns with heavy bandages around his head, his eyes have been removed. He is extremely bitter as Om was the designated donor. "Jeetu: You show me a rich woman who plucks a poor man's eyes out of his body and I'll show you a she-demon". (Padmanabhan, 74)

His bitterness is transformed into ecstasy by Ginni, as she beams images directly into his head, exclusively for him. He is awed by the sight of her techno-eroticized body and the opulence of her surroundings. He forgets his misery and, of his own volition offers himself up for the next phase of transplant, "Tell me Ginni what you want (he moves towards the illusion he sees). "[...]. You need some more parts of me?" (79) White woman, the ultimate sexual fantasy of a native man proves a fatal trap for Jeetu. As Jeetu's male gaze devours the provocative image of Ginni's body, little does he realise that his own body that will soon be cannibalised. Padmanabhan illustrates through Jeetu the devastating occluding of the real by the virtual. "She exists. That's enough for me. She's a goddess and she exists. I would do anything for her – anything! (81) Finally his 'self' ends up in 'casing' as Jaya is informed by Virgil, the actual receiver of Jeetu's organs.

The undeniable impact of the visual renders the terrible, desirable. Mirzoeff names this feeling: Sublime. "The Sublime is the pleasurable experience in representation of that which would be painful or terrifying in reality leading to a realization of the limits of the human and of the powers of nature [...]. The task of the sublime is then to present the unrepresentable, an appropriate role for the relentless visualizing of the postmodern era." (Mirzoeff, 9) Ma chooses to ignore the implication of Om's 'employment' and completely immerses herself in the comforts it brings. She is busy watching her interactive T.V with her headphones on when Jeetu is taken away by the guards, "Tch! Let me be. Why should I care about what happens to Jeetu? I'm through caring about anybody - ." (83) She charts her own course of escapism by mail-ordering the Super Deluxe Video Coach equipped with seven hundred and fifty video channels from all over the world. She shuts herself up into the gleaming electronic self-sustainable, fully automated video chamber. She abdicates her harsh real world for a comfortable virtual one. For the first time in her life she takes a decision and executes it. Padmanabhan highlights the denial of deciding power to women within the domestic arena in a patriarchal system. Ma is disgusted

with the system deep-down in her heart and her detachment to the unsavory happenings in her household stems from it. Technology ironically engenders in this old, illiterate woman a confidence to recognize her desires and fulfill them without any assistance from her family. Emboldened and capable she extracts more from the bargain than Jeetu; now a cyborg “with his mind bandaged in dreams” (94) sustained only by false visions of Ginni; model of a real without origin or reality. Ma and Jeetu subsist on the hyperreal; Ma’s consciousness had ceded its ability to distinguish reality from simulation, to the T.V serials. Her interactions with Jaya are peppered with references to the saas-bahu soaps: “If you watched more T.V you wouldn’t dare talk to your mother-in-law that way - .” (65)

The coercive visual seduction proved fatal for Jeetu, his body was consumed by neocolonial-capitalistic power structure. “A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over other bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines.” (Foucault, 1975, 138) The image of Ginni in the contact module is replaced by Virgil, an old American who is the actual receiver of Jeetu’s organs. He informs the shocked Jaya that the module recorded even when it was off, he was aware of everything. Ginni was a ‘computer-animated wet dream’; “Ginni was something we need to bait the hook.” (Padmanabhan, 95)

Discipline operates by a calculated gaze not by force. The invisible power behind contact module inerrably interpreted their silences and dreams, enabling Ginni/Virgil to manipulate the bodies under her/his control. Virgil now looks like Jeetu, he now prepares to lure Jaya with Jeetu’s body. “He’s (Om) part of the job, but not the job itself! We are interested in women where I live Zhaya, childbearing women. (95) Computer-mediated communication facilitated not just instantaneous interaction but also to use the possibility of travelling through electronic space as someone other than the person he is. Gender-swapping becomes instrumental in maintaining and naturalizing the conditions of exploitation by the receiver. Jaya finds her voice and raises it decisively for the first time, after a life time of neglect and oppression.

Helene Cixous in “Laugh of the Medusa” urges women to reclaim their body as the locus of identity, to shed their silences and inhibitions and articulate their desires without fear or guilt. “Censure the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.”(Cixous, 880)

Jaya manages to overcome culturally imposed sexual inhibitions and voices her needs. “We’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we’ve been made victims of old fool’s game [...]. (885) Jaya acknowledges her physical desire for Jeetu and her wish to bear his child; She immediately realizes that her compliance was crucial for the success of Virgil’s scheme. She sets the precondition and insists on physical intimacy with Virgil rejecting his suggestions of clinical

intervention. She threatens to commit suicide if he doesn't oblige her. "I'm not willing to care take my body for your sake! The only thing I have left which is still mine is my death. My death and my pride." (Padmanabhan, 101). "If I lose my life, I win this game." (102). As an empowering act she asks Virgil to pronounce her name correctly. The American had so far distorted all their names – Auwm (Om), Praycash (Prakash), Jittoo (Jeetu) and Zhaya. He learns to say it right; she shatters the contact module and waits for him.)

Jaya refuses to be a prey to the paroles of colonial powers unlike others of her family who were ignorant of its langue. She realizes that she is the object of the transaction, control and intrusive gaze. She attempts to become her own subject by according centrality to her sexuality. Padmanabhan has expressed her discomfort about labeling her work as women's writing in an interview: "I don't call myself a feminist" (<http://www.livemint.com>). Harvest does encompass the politics of women's biology within its discursive ambit by dramatizing the grim realities in the third world, namely, illegal organ sale, surrogate motherhood and the hiring out of wombs especially, to foreigners.

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