

Marauding Capitalism and the Marginalized People: A Contemporary Reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Abstract : The paper explores the portrayal of capitalism, neo-imperialism, and the condition of the Third World in the play *Harvest* written by Manjula Padmanabhan. It also attempts to decipher the complex relations between the European Enlightenment, colonialism and the neo-imperialism which crippled the socio-economic and the political systems of the Third World. The paper further analyses, using the analytical grids of postcolonialism and the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, how the much celebrated technological explosion, which initiated in the last decades of the twentieth century, and its spin-offs turned detrimental to the Third World.

IndexTerms – Capitalism, Neo-imperialism, Biopolitics, Surveillance, Postcolonialism.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) is a complexly meditated play which attempts to address the problems and the worries of the Third World. This once colonized lands still remain politically, economically, and culturally baffled in the face of rapidly changing world. Most of the post-colonial countries, soon after their political independence, realized that their long cherished dream of a self-reliant, sovereign state will always remain a dream as they cannot easily shake off the exploitative system entrenched in their land. Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, set in a cramped single room tenement in futuristic Mumbai, delineates the predatory potential of the capitalist and the neo-imperialistic First World which will reach its apex in the immediate future. Writing the play in 1997 she imagined of a bleak Mumbai in the 2010 which is suffering in the hands of untraceable enemies. If one reads the present critically, s/he could take cognizance of Padmanabhan's imagined futures' harrowing similarity with the society in which we are living today.

Even after the political independence, multifarious forms of domination, control, and subjectivity prevailed in the former colonies and all these hugely contributed to the confused socio-political system of the newly independent land. *Harvest* portrays a dystopian India where unemployment and its all time companion poverty flourish. Bereft of the revolutionary spirit they had when agitating against the colonizers, the people in the newly 'independent' country are lethargic, escapist, and dejected.

As the play begins by dropping the audience into the midst of the problems and privations of Om Prakash's family, the dramatist effectively conveys the dire tone of the play in a concise fashion. The plot gets into gear by revealing Om's Faustian pact with the InterPlanta Services, which works as an agent for the European buyer Ginni, to trade unspecified parts of his body. InterPlanta Services' eventual 'elevation' of the living standards of Om's family resulted in the complete surrender of the family's privacy, integrity and whatever they held dear. Ginni, the buyer-cum-employer of Om, trespasses into his private life via technology and exercises her power over him in the forms discipline, care, control and so on. These techniques and modes of invasion invite a Foucauldian reading of the situation since Foucault has written so meditatively and scrupulously about the pervasive power relations that cover the modalities mentioned above. The way the Ginni trespasses into and 'takes care of' the family has close similitude with Foucauldian conception of the sovereign power which "was exercised over bodies through a system of surveillance and via a grid or network of material coercions which effected an efficient and controlled increase (minimum expenditure, maximum return) in the utility of the subjected body" (Smart 74).

Padmanabhan's characters are carefully constructed and they reflect altering approaches of the marginalized people to the 'brave new world' of advanced science and technology. Ma, being a simple and unwise old woman, is guided by her emotion rather than intellect. She is not prudent enough to see beyond the veneer of things and fails to notice the predatory and cannibalistic threat of the job to which Om enters. Ma is lured by the dream-like, technologically-induced bliss and she goes addicted to her new life of luxury. Jeetu, a gigolo and the secret lover of Jaya, is also unable to resist the phony allurements of Om's employer, the 'virtual Ginni', who is later revealed as nothing but a "computer animated dream" (95). When Jeetu is mistaken for Om and taken away by the guards Ma, unlike Jaya, shows no sign of pain;

JAYA. He's gone! They've taken him – and I could do nothing to prevent it!

MA. Can I switch on my TV?

JAYA. Your son goes off to the slaughterhouse and you're just worried about your TV!

MA. ... You are just a slut who happens to be standing between me and my TV! (65).

Ma's lack of emotion, love and concern shows technology's power to freeze or channelize human emotion and intellect. Her self-indulgence in television and Jeetu's self-submission to the 'virtual Ginni' are typical examples of escapism. As it says, when reality is hard to accept, fantasy is the better option.

While the character of Ma shows the ignorance and neo-slave status of the Third World woman, Jaya embodies the dare and spirit of the same class. Jaya is terribly frustrated by the ultra-hygienic set up and the technological intrusion into her domesticity. She is prudent and has a clear vision to see the potential danger of 'the affluent job' taken up by Om. While Ma is baffled about the new 'job' of Om, Jaya explains:

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! 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! If you were dead I could shave my head and break my bangles – but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece? Should I shave half my head? Break my bangles one at a time? (23).

Jaya's character displays the remaining traces of integrity in her bold act of defense and defiance. When she fervently expresses her dissatisfaction with Om's decision, it is obvious that she is unwilling to be lured by the luxurious life offered by the InterPlanta Services. More than any other characters in the play, Jaya has a clear sensibility about the need and wholeness of body and may be the absence of that sensibility in Om drives her to a clandestine affair with Jeetu. Throwing light into the other shades of Jaya, Padmanabhan denies her the halo of so-called purity, but at the same time delineates the emotional stress and loneliness of Jaya.

The play further problematizes the concept of free will and choice. Liberal democratic societies cherish themselves for being liberal and giving ample space to individual freedom. But what is the meaning of freedom without the basic needs of life in a Third World country like India?

JAYA. You never cared for me. You never wanted me OM. Wanting – not wanting – what meaning do these words have in our world? What choices do we have? Was it my choice that I signed up for this programme?

JAYA. Yes! You went off on your own accord!

OM. No. I went because there wasn't anything left to do. I went because I lost my job in the company. And why did I lose it? Because nobody needs clerks anymore! There are no new jobs now, from here till next week! It's all over! The factories are all closing! There was nothing *left* for people like us! Don't you know that? There's us – and there's the street gangs – and then the rich. (69)

The surveillance technology explosion that initiated in the later decades of the twentieth century has made a deep global impact. Padmanabhan places this double-edged sword in the post-colonial context and, with fascinating insight, throws light into its less impressive aspects. "Surveillance is a fundamental social and political activity. It involves control, influence and management through the medium of information, and as such is a combination of knowledge and intervention" (Barnard-Wills 2). The contact module installed in Om's house operates as both a means of communication between the donor and the receiver and a panoptic gadget through which Ginni keeps the family under constant surveillance. The contact module enables Ginni to intrude into the privacy of the family at any moment and the module detects any slightest trace of dishonesty in Om. Though one could find Padmanabhan's approach to surveillance a little naïve and predisposed, it is impossible to deny the prophetic quality of her vision of the malignant sides of the system, which time proved later.

The heated last scene of the play is a confrontation between Jaya and Virgil (the 'virtual Ginni' transformed as Virgil). Through the contact module Virgil, who looks like Jeetu, approaches Jaya for a new deal. He reveals that Ginni was nothing but a "computer animated dream" (95). Virgil claims himself to be true and original and he wants Jaya to be a carrier of his child without having any physical contact with her. With the strength born out of failure, Jaya audaciously bargains with Virgil, "Look: I'm not stupid, you know? I know you're stronger than me, you're richer than me. You'll get me in the end – I know you will. But I want you to risk your skin for me. Even though it's really Jeetu's skin – I want you to risk it. For me." (100). The play ends as Jaya threatens Virgil that she would take her own life, if there is any attempt from his part to dominate her.

In *Harvest* Padmanabhan places the tremendous advances in technology that resulted in global surveillance, radical progress in science, especially in medical science, and multiplication of transnational corporations in a Third World underdog's domesticity. The neo-imperialist social structures, as portrayed in the play, enhance and deepen and multiply the layers of exploitation initiated by the colonization. The term neo-imperialism, coined by the first president of independent Ghana Kwame Nkrumah, points that although newly independent countries like Ghana technically have political independence, the ex-colonial powers and newly emerged superpowers wield their power over the countries through international bodies like International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, multinational corporations and cartels and through a variety of educational and cultural institutions. In short the term neo-colonialism implies the inability of the third world countries to stand on their own in term of independent economic, political, and cultural identity under the pressures of globalization (Ashcroft et al.146).

The European colonization was not simply a political and geographical one but a cultural, economic, and intellectual one as well. These multiple-layered structure of colonization resulted in the disarray and dependency of post-colonial countries. The European Enlightenment which spread out most part of the world, accompanying colonization, played a vital role in the colonization of knowledge, culture, and rationality. Enlightenment, began in Europe and North America in the seventeenth and the eighteenth century as a "more or less self-conscious and unified movement... that rejected established authority as the basis for knowledge and insisted that only experience could provide us with reliable information about the world" (Hind 5), subsequently turned as the major tool for

the colonization of knowledge in its perpetual strives for closed and narrowly designed definitions and in their outright othering of the alternative modes of thinking. With this enlightenment framework the Europeans had endeavored to 'civilize' the rest of the world that left the colonized land crippled beyond repair and bereft of their possessions and singularities. The colonization, both geographical and epistemic, nullified the uniqueness and innovative spirit of the native knowledge and it resulted in the slow pace of progress in the post-colonies. The disturbing effects of the disproportionate distribution of resources and lopsided prosperity that Padmanabhan depicts in her play undoubtedly have its roots in the colonization and the European Enlightenment. It is this uneven development that creates the First World hunter and the Third World prey.

The Third World, which is lagging far behind the First World in terms of technology, education, healthcare etc., has to confront the neo-imperialistic powers' strategic moves to keep them under the stewardship of the First World. On confronting these strategic moves the Third World often fails to differentiate the friend from the foe and hence succumbs easily to most of these strategies even without a mild resistance. The various techniques and technologies employed by the NGOs, who encroach the cultural and the social spaces of the post-colonial countries and manipulate its internal affairs, have to be treated through the lens biopolitics. Reading them in this way, one has to look at the NGOs' forceful intervention into the field of healthcare, education, social welfare programmes etc. with suspicion. Biopolitics, for Foucault, is a new form of political rationality that concerns about populations and craves to know their biological secrets and personal activities and wants to discipline their bodies in order to keep them docile and productive. Concerned about every minute and abstract aspect of the population's lives, biopower is interested in the people only in statistical terms not in existential terms (Buchanan 59-60). This notion of biopower runs parallel to Ginni's treatment of Om's family. She has never been interested in the inner happiness and wellbeing of the family instead she is interested only in the physical fitness the donor in environmental and statistical terms. While depicting the cannibalistic neo-imperialism which has direct connection to the colonization and the European Enlightenment, the play lends itself a Foucauldian reading which helps the reader to understand the deeper insights of the play.

Padmanabhan's *Harvest* not only illuminates the tribulations of the marginalized people in the Third World but also delineates how the much celebrated progress in science and technology turns antagonistic to the underprivileged. The inescapable grip of capitalism and its close kin neo-imperialism, as portrayed in the play, has never been a mere dystopian nightmare. The increasing presence of organ-donation mafias and fertility tourist packages in our contemporary society testify to Padmanabhan's apprehensions. It is always disappointing to realize that these body mafias hardly ever make the headlines in the mainstream media. The nuances in the social media over the issue are, like the virtual Ginni, never turns 'real' and one cannot easily turn these virtual media nuances as foundation neither to make a decision or to conduct an action. *Harvest*, in this sense, is undoubtedly a wakeup call for the people across glob against the predatory appetite of the neo-capitalism.

Works Cited

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