

HARI KUNZRU'S *TRANSMISSION* AND THE GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract: The contemporary world has witnessed a strong economic, political and cultural connectivity which makes the current socio-economic borders irrelevant. Globalization is a social process that is capable of altering the current socio-economic condition based on global interdependencies and exchanges. Globalization and technological revolution have brought the world to an increasing interdependency. The novel *Transmission* (2004) by Hari Kunzru shows how a perfectly organized and patterned world of information technology could be easily disrupted by a wanton act of a troubled employee. *Transmission* discusses the extreme fear of the developed nations regarding illegal immigration and terrorism. The west attempts to reap in the gains of globalization without any moral scruples regarding its human cost. The rest of the world is at their disposal, to be employed as cheap laborers and contract workers. This paper seeks to understand how the ideology of globalization works in propelling the unsymmetrical power structures for the benefit of a section of society.

Index Terms – Globalization, migration, outsourcing, illegal immigration, terrorism.

The term “globalization” represents not just an ideological position but as Arjun Appadurai calls it reaches into “ethnoscapes”, “technoscapes”, “mediascapes”, “finanscapes”, and “ideoscapes” (Appadurai 22-47). This shows the all-pervading nature of the concept of globalization and the vast reach that it holds, penetrating into every aspect of life, affecting and transforming everything. According to Zygmunt Bauman: ‘Globalization’ is on everybody’s lips; a fad word fast turning, into a shibboleth, a magic incantation, a pass-key meant to unlock the gates to all present and future mysteries”. For some, ‘globalization’ is what we are bound to do if we wish to be happy: for others ‘globalization’ is the cause of our unhappiness. For everybody, though, ‘globalization’ is the inevitable fate of the world, a definite and irreversible process; it is also a process which affects us all in the same measure and in the same way. We are all being ‘globalised’- and being ‘globalised’ means much the same to all who ‘globalized’ are (1).

The contemporary world has witnessed a strong economic, political and cultural connectivity which makes the current socio-economic borders irrelevant. Globalization is a social process that is capable of altering the current socio-economic condition based on global interdependencies and exchanges. The process seeks to project the local into the global in such a manner that the distinction would disappear eventually. These all suggest a dynamics which might be gradual or sudden. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West made a persuasive case for a new world order based on the ideologies of consumerism and capitalism. *Transmission* by Hari Kunzru(2004) explores how individual identity has been mediated in the backdrop of globalization and consumerist practices.

As argued by Hardt and Negri in *Empire and Multitude*, the new world order has been constructed through a rapid exchange of information through the new media and the integration of territories into a single spatial totality which result in giving rise to an open borderless space. The new empire in part has been formed as a result of the declining sovereignty of the nation states. According to James Benedict Green “ In contrast to the regime of European colonialism, which managed economic expansion and cultural difference by setting up rigid, if always fragile, channels and barriers between centre and periphery, Empire is a smooth, fluid space of rhizomatic interconnection where there is neither an ontological ‘outside’ nor governing centre (152).

Hari Kunzru’s second novel, *Transmission* (2004), centers around the life of Arjun Mehta, a computer programmer, who lands a new job in America's Silicon Valley, only to find that things are not turning out as he imagined. This novel won Kunzru the inaugural 'Decibel' award at the British Book Awards and was named a New York Times notable book of the year. According to Green:

Transmission articulates contemporary concerns about what lies beneath the glossy surface of the information economy and the rhetoric of the borderless world. The dark underside to the awareness of globalization is the fear of contamination and corruption, for as the prophylactic borders of the nation- state become increasingly porous; our capacity to resist the rapid spread of undesirable or hazardous elements is proportionately diminished. Seen as an evolving bio-political body composed of both human and non-human systems, the globe at once appears more adaptable- since each part of the whole is connected to every other- and more vulnerable to sudden, catastrophic dysfunction (153).

The novel begins in “Noida”, “the new industrial fairy land of the nation” (Kunzru13). The author’s description of Noida underscores the construction boom India witnessed in the late 20th century around the Indian cities which prepare the ground works for India’s entry into the globalized order:

In the mid-seventies the Uttar Pradesh authorities had realized that the area on the east bank of the River Yamuna was rapidly becoming a de facto suburb of Delhi. Farmland was giving way to a chaotic sprawl of factories and shanties. The government stated a programme of compulsory land purchase, and, amid corruption and speculation, the displacement of many people and the enrichment of a few beyond their wildest dreams, they zoned a huge grid which promptly exploded with life, generating a city of half a million people in less than twenty years. Shopping malls, multiplexes, and temples and stadia jostled for position with hectre of new twenty storey blocks, built in every imaginable variant of discreet low-cost modernism (Kunzru14).

The family background of Arjun Mehta, the protagonist is one which is consistent with the changes that have been sweeping across India. The aspiration of middle class Indians for the low paying government jobs has declined, and the opportunities in the private sector have increased. The Mehtas “were no longer the family of a small-town administrator but modern people, participants in the great Indian boom”(Kunzru14).

Globalization opened up a world of opportunities and career options. The penetration of the global into the local necessitated a change in the mindset and value system. The adherence to the old way things began to be compromised and challenged. Being the citizen of the world necessitated one to be proficient in the socio-cultural practices of the west.

Women have witnessed better career opportunities in the service sector, especially in outsourcing firms. Apart from the good pay there, the social acceptability of the new India to such jobs attracts more women into such places and offers a way out from the stereotypical duties of women. Priti, Arjun’s sister works at a call centre, and she masters the Austalian culture and accents and serves the Australian customers from India through the phone. Priti, who is proud of her well paid job, receives the wrath of the mother who blames the MTV and the Fashion channels for her daughter’s new found assertive and rebellious nature, and muses on the good old times when one had only “Doordashan” to watch. Arjun who gets a job in the US proves to be a success for the rest of the family members. Arjun’s father now could save his face before his brother in law whose son Hitesh has for sometime been working for an artificial flavor company near Boston, US.

The Information technology boom in India in the 90’s drew a large number of youth to this sector. India became a hotspot for Information technology services and outsourcing and the new government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee proposed the development of Information Technology among its top five priorities. Young people believed that securing a B tech degree as the easiest way to land a job in the booming sector, which promised immediate prosperity and a prospect of going abroad.

Although Arjun doesn’t make it to IIT, the premier institute for engineering degree in India, he still manages to get an admission at a local engineering college: “...a middle- ranking school which had the compensatory advantage...”(Kunzru15).

The job offer from “Databodies” promises to send Arjun as a computer consultant to the US. The job is the ticket towards the fulfillment of the ultimate middle class dream of the youth in India: a job offer at the US. “The Americans have a skills shortage. They want as many programmers as they can get” (7), and Arjun is expected to fulfill this “demand” and is hoping to “raking in the dollars” (10) the moment he lands in the US.

The interviewer at “Databodies”- an apt neologism for the text’s interlacing of technology and human beings- is presented as “ a communications medium, a channel for the transmission of consumer lifestyle messages”(8). The novel hints from the beginning that the human mode of communication and relations are set to be replaced with disastrous consequences by a global network of capital and technology

where social interactions are increasingly reduced to sterile transmission of information and the cyber world is all set to replace physical reality.

Though Arjun makes it to the US, the job contract makes him a slave of “Databodies”, which subcontracts him to other companies. This is a new trend in the post globalized world where agencies offer companies who do not want to give job benefits, the service of temporary workers, allowing companies to focus their energy and resources on the business they are doing. It is a reality in the post globalized world that as the companies strive for profit, the wages of the employees remain low. The employees generate profit, which the company in turn uses for its expansion, and generating more profit. It is the profit generation which is given more priority than giving fair wages to the workers or addressing their grievances. The service sector industry views part time or contract work as a way to deprive the benefits of employees, and it is an option which is more profitable and keeps the wages low.

After many short stints at various companies, Arjun finally ends up in a computer security firm called “Virugenix.” The work environment at “Virugenix” for Arjun is challenging, as it lacks social interaction. Interactions are made through e-mail, even to the person sitting on the next cubicle. In the cafeteria he eats alone. The situation is so grim that at one point he even suspects himself of having Asperger’s Syndrome- “a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests or achievements with other people”(Kunzru 58).

“Virugenix” encounters loss and the company starts to lay off its employees. Arjun’s American dream starts to fall apart as he too falls prey to the company’s downsizing. In his desperation, he tries to prove his worth by unleashing a computer virus and suggesting a remedy to it. But his plan doesn’t come through. Darryl Grant, his boss takes the credit of countering the virus, and the virus named after a Bollywood film star, Leela Zahir, spreads across the world and causes considerable damage.

In a globally connected world no predicament remains local for long. This proves true with the “Leela Virus” as well. Virus becomes a threat which moves across borders and territories and becomes a “globalized” menace:

Hour by hour, the list of Leela –related disasters was growing longer. Clients from all over the world were contacting Virugenix, wanting to know how to remove her from their systems. The helpline staff posted updates to a page on the corporate intranet, and Arjun returned to it obsessively, to look at what he had done, the trouble he had caused for knitting-machine manufacturers and management consultants, adult magazines and university departments, for an auto-parts supplier in Austin which couldn’t track its inventory, a public-relations company in Sao-Paolo which had lost its contacts database (Kunzru136).

The subplot of Guy Swift takes the readers towards the world of corporate marketing and his failures as a marketing executive. He is a British entrepreneur hoping to gain on the benefits of the globalization. But the lack of revenues of his company “Tomorrow” leads him and his company to a crisis. He is a global businessman who deals with clientele from across the world. The three deals on which his future depends on are scattered across the world:

Tomorrow and everything associated with it now depended on three pitches. The one for the SSRI drug he had just made in New York, and two he had to make next week- to a leisure chain in the Gulf, and to PEBA, the new Pan European Border Authority, an artifact of EU integration intended to harmonize the immigration and customs regimes of all the member states (Kunzru 123).

But unfortunately for Guy Swift, his corporate talk fails to impress the client based in Dubai. It appears that the values represented by Guy Swift and his company suit the needs of a globally connected world. But he falls short on landing the Dubai deal as he is not apt in deliberating business in the real world rather than blabbering on statistics and graphs: “It is a question of respect, Mr Swift. I like to do business with people who respect the things I do. You, I suppose, respect other things, such as your circles and maps. So I say to you, go and do business with men who like circles and maps” (Kunzru173).

For Swift, the chances of landing a deal with The Pan European Border Authority or PEBA is the only chance of redeeming “Tomorrow”. PEBA is a jingoistic organization hoping to crack down upon asylum seekers and immigrants. It represents intolerance in the guise of security and border policing. PEBA hopes to achieve a quick solution to the problem of porous EU borders. Signor Bocca of PEBA proudly and animatedly communicates on a plan they hope to execute to round up illegal immigrants in Brussels:

A coordinated sweep, aimed at taking 5,000 *sans papiers* off the streets by tomorrow morning. Identify them, process them, and return as a high percentage as possible to their countries of origin within seventy-two hours. All based on common information handling, and taking place under the flag of PEBA (Kunzru 112).

Globalization promises on a borderless world. It is interesting to observe that, while the economic exchanges are entertained across borders, human movements are less encouraged. The west attempts to reap the gains of globalization without any moral scruples regarding the human cost. The rest of the world is at their disposal, to be employed as cheap laborers and contract workers, but they would have none of their presence in their land without the prior approval and documentation.

For Guy, he is better adapted than anyone else regarding global business practices and markets. According to him the belief that “[W]e don’t lose” is the first principle of survival. He believes that “[W]e were on top because we were better adapted to the environment of global city. We took chances and made opportunities for ourselves. We knew how to network, how to manipulate the flows of money and information to produce Results” (207). It is this knowledge of the systems around him that he hopes would make him a success.

Swift’s experiences in the corporate world suggest that it can be ruthless and unforgiving at times. Arjun too is a victim of such a system which lays off employees at whim. Arjun tries hard to retain his job and believes himself as a wrong candidate to get fired, owing to his productivity and loyalty. But when the company he works for resorts to cost cutting measures, his loyalty and effectiveness as a worker count little and profit becomes the only criteria the company strives for.

The life of Leela Zahir, the rising Bollywood actress after whom the Leela virus is named after is frustrated to the core by the infamy caused by the Leela virus and also by the torments of a controlling mother. Leela is a depressed and love starved girl who wants to escape from the fame and spotlight and finds herself pulled into the Leela Virus controversy.

In different ways the major characters of the novel are affected by the global catastrophe unleashed by the Leela Virus. According to Green “Though Guy traffics in the transient brand – images and sensations of consumer capitalism, Arjun immerses himself in the algebraic order of computer code, and Leela participates in the economy of fame and celebrity, it is not merely the case that these characters manipulate the various dimensions of the global mediascape; rather, they are simultaneously constituted by them” (158).

It is interesting to note that the perfectly organized and patterned world of information technology could be easily disrupted, and the resulting chaos would be paramount. The Leela Virus offers a challenge to network administrators and authorities seeking to perpetuate a system of control and order. The ensuing disaster, though playfully presented, offers a scenario where there is a sudden reversal of social hierarchies which create a temporary state of chaos and panic.

Hardt and Negri’s compare the age of globalization to the age of contagion (25). The transmission of ideas across the globe also proposes a chance of contagion or pandemic. This proves true with the spread of the Leela virus. According to Green “The dark underside to the awareness of globalization is the fear of contamination and corruption, for as the prophylactic borders of the nation-state become increasingly porous, our capacity to resist the rapid spread of undesirable or hazardous elements is proportionally diminished. Seen as an evolving biopolitical body composed of both human and non-human systems, the globe at once appears more adaptable- since each part of the whole is connected to every other- and more vulnerable to sudden, catastrophic dysfunction” (157).

The construction of identity in a global village happens through the outpouring of signs and symbols that crisscross across a globalized world. While Arjun proudly displays the image of geeky computer programmer, Guy surrounds himself in and lives out the consumerist and capitalist existence. Leela indulges herself in the fame and celebrity lifestyle that the global media endows her with.

Transmission portrays the threats faced by a globally interconnected world. Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens reason that growing interdependency and increasing global connectivity would result in a “risk society” that would bring along new dangers and insecurities (26). The dangers are numerous from biological pandemics to global terrorism. As the borderline between the local and the global thins down, any substantial threat would blow out of proportion, and affect countless people. *Transmission* represents a globally interconnected scenario where each person’s identity is established in terms of technology and global capitalist hierarchies. The images projected by the media cross over to the individual lives, and create “deterritorialization of social relations” (Green 158). Globalization necessitates an unfettered and unlimited exchange of information and cultural products across the borderless global space. While colonialism operated with well-defined borders, globalization works with the ideology of corporate capital, which surpasses fixed boundaries and works through fluid and mobile structures.

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