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Influence of Technology, Reconfiguring Identity and Power in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Abstract:

The world today is transforming at an unprecedented rate, with technology serving as the driving force of this rapid change. Catalysed by the global pandemic of 2020, the virtual space became the only space available for interaction to us, making it as tangible as the realm of the physical world and thereby erasing the once sharp distinction between the two. Deriving from Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and hyperreality and Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the noosphere, this paper demonstrates how the constant interaction between technology and humans redefines human identities and challenges the very fundamental natural process of evolution replacing it with an anthropocentric, hierarchically directed process. By closely reading Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest*, this study aims to discuss the social-ethical dimensions of technoscience and their influence on the human world.

Keywords: Technology, cyborg, noosphere, virtual reality, identity, hyperreality.

“Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway 11), says Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto*. This paradox captures the complex dynamics between

humans and machines, where technology increasingly influences individual identity in a world which lives in the virtual realm more than it does in the real one. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* published in 1977, eerily anticipates how technological advancements redefine the self and perception of one's identity by insinuating individuals within the larger matrix of technological advancements and interconnections. How social hierarchies and inequalities of the real world play a role within this matrix is an interesting question to engage with. This paper situates *Harvest* in the contemporary debates on the intersection of technology, identity and social hierarchies.

Harvest is a futuristic dystopian play set in a chawl in Mumbai in 2010. Om Prakash, a middle class Indian who has lost his job due to automation, agrees to sell his organs to a corporate association, Inter Planta Services, that facilitates organ trade from the first world to third world countries. Om and his family are closely monitored by Ginni through a "contact module." Ginni, who later revealed to be Virgil, a white American man, acquires Om's brother Jeetu's body. The play explores the issues of commodification of the body resulting from scientific progress in a world driven by capitalism. Existing scholarship has primarily looked at *Harvest* through the lens of bioethics, Marxism, neo-colonialism, the dynamics between the first world and the third world, disability studies and a gendered analysis of the dystopian world presented in the play.

Primarily, most of the analysis of the play centres around the issue of organ trafficking. Dipanjan Kundu in his essay *Padmanabhan's Harvest as a Dismordenist Narrative: A Critical Posthumanist Exploration*, references Schepher Hughes, who describes organ trafficking as "neo-cannibalism", "bioterrorism", "bio theft" and "bio lust". In a capitalistic framework, human organs become commodities, much like furnished industrial products thereby altering traditional notions of what it means to be a human. To be a human in possession of capital means that one can buy healthy organs and replace their dying ones in exchange for money. In other words, the haves can purchase

life and the have-nots can purchase luxury for whatever life they have left to live after trading their body parts. Dipanjan Kundu calls this narrative a “neo-Faustian narrative.” Om’s body is available for an exchange in a contract for the customer, Virgil. This indicates that the life of a human born in a first-world country is more valuable than the life of someone like Om inhabiting the developing world. This commodification of the human body is further viewed through the lens of Marxism by other critics.

Jodi Kim, in her essay *Debt, the Precarious Grammar of Life and Manjula Padmanbhan’s Harvest*, argues that the market functions on the principle of exchange. Capital is earned in exchange of labour. In this case, there is no labour. Land is a commodity that has intrinsic value, like the human body that needs to be nurtured to function properly. Therefore, the literal biological selves have become a commodity in itself, like land. A commodity in which the self has willingly surrendered its agency. Jaya’s (Om’s wife) attempt to reclaim her body in Act III, scene II by threatening to commit suicide has been interpreted as a way to challenge the status quo and to restore her control on her own body by embracing death—the only possible way of defiance to achieve liberation from the matrix of oppressive hierarchies. Jaya’s body is subjected to objectification by the male gaze along with the gaze of the coloniser.

Jodi Kim also talks about the idea of the “gendered racial debt.” It refers to the idea that certain groups of people by virtue of their gender or race are obliged to pay a “debt” for simply being who they are. They are unfairly burdened to pay this “debt” because of existing social inequalities and expectations. Om, as the patriarchal head of his household, is expected to be the breadwinner. To avoid the debt from unemployment, Om fulfils his gender role by entering into a new contractual debt with Inter Planta Services. In Kim’s words, he pays his gendered racial debt by “the commodification of his very material, organic life as it exists now” (Kim 220). In addition to this,

Harvest has also been read through the lens of disability—an acquired impairment which is contractual, granted with consent and the powerlessness of the state to regulate such exploitation. Roshni Prabhakaran uses the idea of the “panopticon” by Michel Foucault that renders invisible power at the centre—the panoptic which is established through the contact module—the ultimate surveillance system in the play, placed literally at the centre of Om’s house having absolute access to every movement and conversation that happens inside the house.

While the existing scholarship on the play *Harvest* extensively addresses significant ethical and philosophical questions, including organ trafficking, commodification of human bodies, the gaze of the panopticon and neo-colonialism however, there persists a gap in how the perception of the self, i.e. one's identity is reconstructed with the excessive interaction, interruption and integration of the self with technology in the everyday reality leading to a hybridisation of the very organic biological human entity, therefore, aligning with Donna Haraway’s idea of the cyborg. Furthermore, this hybridisation extends beyond the individual to disrupt even the processes that govern the logic of human evolution. By utilising Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of the “noosphere,” this paper proposes that not only are human identities redefined with technological progression, but the fundamental phenomenon of evolution is affected and perhaps becomes anthropocentrically directed by those possessing higher social and technological capital within the global social hierarchy.

In the contemporary context, as presented by Padmanabhan in *Harvest*, the concept of the “survival of the fittest,” which is central to the theory of evolution, has shifted from being determined by nature to being defined by social constructs of power and wealth, personified by the character of Virgil in the play. “This is my fourth body in fifty years” (Padmanabhan 96), informs Virgil to

Jaya in Act III Scene II. Virgil's act of acquiring Jeetu's body illustrates how technological progress enables those with greater access to technological capital to artificially manipulate DNA.

JAYA: There's only one way to define death!

VIRGIL: (softly) Not where I live. (pause) We have some new definitions. (pause) We speak of a body-death and a self-death. (pause) The body you knew is... still alive. Come! Doesn't that count for anything?

JAYA: (whispers) And the self?

VIRGIL: (briskly) The self you knew is also alive.

JAYA: Huh! Without his body?

VIRGIL: He was willing to sell, I was willing to buy - (Padmanabhan 93)

The fact that Virgil redefines death by actively selecting a body to continue living challenges the very concept of natural selection. Although this has not yet become an absolute reality in the contemporary world, the intersection of medicine and technology makes such ethical concerns highly relevant today, especially as technoscience has successfully cultured tissues in laboratories. As advancements in biotechnology and artificial intelligence accelerate, the natural phenomenon of evolution is replaced by a systematic, deliberate, structured process raising questions concerning power, equality and human identities.

Teilhard de Chardin, in his work *Phenomenology of the Noosphere*, introduces the concept of a new emerging layer— “a thinking layer.” Hub Zwart, in his analysis of this idea, explains-

Via global human activity, a new layer is added, over and above the abiotic, inorganic geosphere and the biotic, organic biosphere, namely the noosphere, the "thinking layer" which, besides noetic processes and activities (thinking, calculating, modelling, communicating, deliberating, etc.), also involves noetic

products (technologies, devices, infrastructures, computers, industrial plants, airplanes, and so on). (Zwart 219)

To simplify, concerning technology, particularly the internet, which operates through a network of “noetic products” (e.g. mobile phones, computers) constantly interconnected with invisible rays, through which various “noetic activities” are carried out, including transfer, exchange of data, communication etc., is in itself a “new sphere” beyond the tangible geosphere and biosphere. De Chardin talks about the evolution of this whole noosphere, where technology plays the fundamental role in determining the trajectory of evolution. At each point in these interconnections sits an individual consciousness that operates these noetic products. The distribution of individuals with the privilege of being one of the nodes of this vast network is not egalitarian. It is determined by their respective subjective positions in society. This is where social hierarchies and inequalities enter into the process of determining the direction of evolution.

The character of Virgil in the play occupies the privileged position of being one of the nodes in the matrix of the noosphere at the cost of Jeetu’s body. Ginni, the symbolic representation of Virgil’s consciousness, can be metaphorically interpreted as what we see as avatars in the contemporary world of social media. Ginni is not real but symbolic, in fact, as several critics have pointed out, we do not even know if the final appearance of Virgil in Jeetu’s body in the contact module is authentic or just another way of catering to the female desire of Jaya in order to convince her to offer her womb to carry Virgil’s child.

JAYA: And Ginni! Who is Ginni?

VIRGIL: Nothing. Nobody. A computer-animated wet dream. (Padmanabhan 95)

Ginni is nothing but a “computer-animated wet dream,” yet she was once a reality for Om, Jaya, Ma, and Jeetu, who lived their lives according to her directions. Metaphorically, Ginni represents

the version of us that we want the world to perceive—a constructed idea of ourselves which is sometimes more or less perfect than our everyday reality. Our sense of the self is reflected and influenced by this digitized version of ourselves, which becomes a part of the larger matrix of the noosphere.

Jean Baudrillard’s idea of hyperreality further explains how abstract symbols in the digital space replace the tangible leading to a constructed reality which is inherently paradoxical as real and virtual at the same time. Like Virgil’s Ginni, social media platforms provide a sense of control over what and how much of us should be in the frame available for the world to see. The constructed self on the internet is an extension of the tangible self, blurring the lines between the virtual and the real. Baudrillard explains that “to dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have” (Baudrillard 3). He gives the analogy of a sick person. When a person fakes an illness, they can remain in bed to make everyone believe in them, but when a person simulates an illness, they produce some symptoms of the illness. So, simulation, “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’.” (Baudrillard 3). So, in the digital space, the curated, idealised representations of realities and lifestyles become the “simulacra” sustained by an illusion of agency and choice of representation.

Just as Jaya stands disillusioned and entirely confused between what is real and what is a mere representation on a screen, the modern individual is left disoriented when it comes to the question of their identity. Modern algorithms are designed not only to learn our choices but also to influence them, all while maintaining the illusion of user control. These algorithms are exploited by the people in positions of power to direct our attention towards a specific ideology, thought or consumer choices. This raises the significant question of how the perception of the self can be

altered, modified and even manipulated by algorithms designed to reinforce a particular idea on our “personalised feed” constantly. If the world of virtual reality—a term contradictory in itself, disappears tomorrow, our sense of identity will still be influenced by what we have seen/heard on the internet. Therefore, distorted and manufactured truths have always been a cause of concern for controlling agencies. Technology, henceforth, becomes a medium of not only perpetuating selective ideologies directed by people in positions of power but also sustaining these ideological standpoints while still maintaining the illusion of autonomy of the individuals responsible for making their respective choices. Virgil's dominance, as observed by critics, resulted from his ability to manipulate the symbols of power— technology, being one of the most important among others.

Donna Haraway calls the idea of the blurring of boundaries between the human and the machine—the cyborg. She argues that the body of the cyborg can transgress the boundaries placed by society, particularly the binary distinction between genders. She argues,

“Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway 67)

However, this utopian vision of a cyborg, which portrays technology as a liberating force, is far from reality. This is because although it is true that the body of the machine is born genderless but, it is situated in a society which inherently operates on dualisms and hierarchies. Ginni, in *Harvest*, is designed to cater to the male gaze (of Om and Jeetu). Jeetu is mesmerised by her beauty and is convinced to be taken away by the guards. Similarly, Virgil's image as Jeetu in the last act is to seduce Jaya in order to convince her to give her body for the artificial conception of Virgil's child. Hence, the promise of technology as a socially liberating force stands questioned when we look at how the hierarchies are at play in the social sphere.

In essence, after the close reading of the play *Harvest* by employing the concepts of Noosphere by De Chardin, Hyperreality by Baudrillard and the idea of the cyborg by Haraway, we can say that technological advancements have more significant impacts on our lives than what we perceive of them. The artificial manipulation of the very natural phenomenon of evolution raises ethical questions about power, equality and identity. The distinction between the virtual and the real has become increasingly blurred, and our perception of ourselves may undergo innumerable mutations as we interact and engage daily on social media platforms, where specific ideas are insinuated while still maintaining the illusion of control. In addition to this, the promise of technology as a force helpful in creating an egalitarian society comes out to be a utopian vision. All in all, this exploration makes an effort to open new debates surrounding the influence of technology on human consciousness and its role in shaping the course of evolution of the entire society at large.

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