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Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

Global Technoscapes and the International Trade in Human Body Organs

Helen Gilbert

For developing nations still grappling with the economic and social legacies of European imperialism, the global spread of late capitalist technology poses significant risks even as it promises to improve health, alleviate poverty and raise general standards of living. The play I will discuss here, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, locates these risks as intensely intimate and yet thoroughly social through a chilling drama about transnational flows in two distinct but related areas: biomedical technology and digital technology, including virtual reality.

These particular technologies are chosen to reveal some of the corporeal and cognitive dimensions of globalisation and to ask questions about the ways in which it affects race and ethnicity as they are currently conceived, and performed, in increasingly transnational spaces. On one level, *Harvest* demonstrates what critics of globalisation such as Arif Dirlik have identified as its insidious power to 'admit different cultures into the realm of capital only to break them down and remake them in accordance with the requirements of production and consumption, and even to reconstitute subjectivities across national boundaries to create producers and consumers more responsive to the operations of capital'.¹ At the same time, Padmanabhan takes pains to develop a 'critical localism'² that situates the differential effects of globalisation on specific (sub)cultures within a dialectic of complicity *and* resistance. This approach illuminates the contradictory operations of transnational capital and technology at the local interface and suggests that globalisation inevitably produces its own 'discontents'.

The play itself has a complex relation to local and global marketplaces. Written in 1996 for a world-wide competition organised by the Onassis foundation in Greece, it presents an Indian perspective on the international trade in human body organs as a way of addressing the

¹ Arif Dirlik, 'The Global in the Local', in Wimal Dissanayake and Rob Wilson (eds), *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 22-45 (p. 32).

² Dirlik's term, 'The Global in the Local', p. 22.

set theme: ‘challenges facing humanity in the next century’. The action unfolds in 2010 in Bombay/Mumbai, where the transplant donors are cast as Indian and the receivers as North American, though Padmanabhan, clearly anticipating an international audience, stresses that this very specific dynamic should be localised to suit production circumstances. After winning the prestigious competition in 1997, *Harvest* had its professional premiere in Greek at Karoulous Koun Theatre in Athens directed by Mimis Kouyiouintzis (1999), with subsequent readings and/or performances (mostly amateur) in India, the UK, Australia, Canada, and the USA.³ It has also been broadcast as a radio play on the BBC, translated into German and anthologised in two major collections of ‘world drama’.⁴ To my knowledge, few of the international renditions of the text have taken up the author’s invitation to transform the context and characters in ways that reflect the power relations obtaining in other cultural milieux. In 2001, *Harvest* was adapted for film (with dialogue in English and Hindi) by Mumbai director Govind Nihalani and released under the title, *Deham*, meaning ‘body’. The film has screened at international festivals in London, Cannes, Göteborg, New York, and Venice as well as across major venues in India. This cinematic venture seems likely to fix the narrative’s real-world referents firmly in India, at least for the moment, though of course it does not preclude an allegorical reading of the text. Padmanabhan’s script may have been explicitly written to capture issues relevant to ‘humanity’ as understood in global terms, but its curriculum vitae to date suggests the currency (among Western audiences particularly) of the original Indian location as a ready index to the abject horrors of the illegal organ trade.

Harvest’s futuristic plot stresses the potential of global capital to strengthen already profound divisions between first and third world subjects. A young, unemployed Indian man, Om Prakash, makes a Faustian pact with a multinational biotechnology company, Interplanta, to trade unspecified parts of his body (at some point in the future) in return for an immediate and substantial rise in living standards. He and his family get the luxuries they have coveted,

³ Brief details are as follows. India: amateur productions in Delhi (1999) by Yatrik and in Bangalore (2003) by the Vedike Foundation; Australia: a staged reading in Brisbane (2002) by the Queensland Theatre Company and an amateur production, also in Brisbane, by University of Queensland drama students (2003); Canada: a staged reading at Belfry Arts Centre, Victoria, British Columbia (2001); USA: staged readings in New York in 2000 by SALAAM (South Asian League of Artists in America) and in Atlanta at Theater Emory (2003); also a student mainstage production at University of California, Berkeley in 2005.

⁴ Helen Gilbert (ed.), *Postcolonial Plays: An Anthology* (London: Routledge, 2001); William B. Worthen (ed.), *The Wadsworth Anthology of World Drama, Fourth Edition* (Boston: Thomas Wadsworth, 2004). *Harvest* was initially published in Delhi by Kali for Women (1997) and also appears in *Black and Asian Plays* (London: Aurora Metro Press, 2000).

but also have to live with the anxiety of not knowing when the debt will be called in. Meantime, they are subject to the whims of the intended recipient of Om's organs, manifest visually in the form of a blonde all-American girl called Ginni, whose image is regularly beamed into their home via a 'contact module' installed to allow interactive communication between donor and receiver worlds (see figure 1). Ginni's dictates quickly come to govern the minutiae of the Indians' lives, specifying what and when they can eat, how they should conduct their personal hygiene and, to some extent, how they can relate to each other. This deterritorialised power, exercised at a distance yet all-invasive in its effects, precipitates the breakdown of the family as a social unit as Om, his mother, his wife Jaya, and his brother Jeetu (Jaya's secret lover) each compromise their humanity and/or betray their kin in their hollow quests for affluence. Om escapes his chosen fate when guards from Interplanta arrive to initiate the transplants and apparently take the wrong brother, a 'mistake' later revealed to be part of a sinister plan to seduce Jaya into making her own body compact – which involves being artificially inseminated – with Virgil, the 'real' (male) receiver hitherto disguised as the digitalised character, Ginni. With this bizarre final twist to the story, Padmanabhan puts organ transplantation and reproductive science (and, by implication, the transnational adoption trade in third-world babies) on a continuum that suggests ways in which interested capital penetrates the very corpus of its multiple and diverse subjects. The play's virtual reality elements implicate modern communication technologies in this process in so far as they facilitate a traffic in bodies that is both material and symbolic, as well as potentially global in its reach.

In this brief case-study, I am unable to specify the many ways in which *Harvest* engages with the established facts concerning the contemporary organ trade, along with the myths that surround it, some newly generated, others refashioned from age-old stories of body snatching, dismemberment and cannibalism.⁵ The broad significance of Padmanabhan's cautionary tale is suggested by documented research that identifies major cities in India, Egypt, Turkey and Eastern Europe as centres for a multimillion-dollar international trade in human organs, particularly kidneys and corneas, purchased from living donors among the local poor and/or those in neighbouring countries. The Chinese government currently stands accused of regularly selling the organs of executed prisoners to patients in Hong Kong,

⁵ For a detailed account of the ways in which organ-stealing rumours relate to anxieties about the cheapness of life in impoverished non-Western societies, see Claudia Castaneda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 110-141.

Taiwan and Singapore, while allegations of illegal organ harvesting persist in Brazil, Chile and Argentina, despite the demise of military regimes that apparently supported a covert traffic in bodies, organs and tissues taken from despised social and political classes during the 1970s and 1980s. Meanwhile organ transplantation in South Africa is seen by some black communities as reproducing apartheid atrocities because a loophole in the 1983 Human Tissue Act allows cadaver organs to be removed (mostly from poor, black bodies) without consent, provided reasonable efforts have been made to contact relatives.⁶ Constantly in flux but ever expanding, sometimes along unexpected ‘routes of capital dependence’,⁷ the organ trade has been largely unaffected by specific bans and recommendations (including parliamentary acts in the USA 1984, UK 1989, and India 1994; and resolutions by the World Medical Association 1985 and the World Health Organisation 1989), or by other regulatory measures such as the presumed donor consent laws introduced to make more cadaver transplants available within various European countries (eg. Spain, Belgium and Austria). As a result, the ethics of organ commerce has become a hotly debated topic, with proponents of paid donation urging that tissues and organs be generally accepted as tradeable commodities. One proposal in the United States, for example, outlines the benefits of setting up a ‘futures market’ in cadaver organs that would operate through advance contracts offered to the general public, with substantial sums of money to go to the deceased person’s designee.⁸

In *Harvest’s* surreal world, the forces of global capital have apparently neutralised current objections to the organ trade and driven their attendant ethical debates from the public realm. Technological advances have also reduced the surgical risks to both donors and receivers, making live transplants a routine procedure at the biomedical level. These given circumstances allow for a tight focus on the ways in which the various characters, all differently empowered as social and cultural subjects, experience, utilise and even change the technologies they confront as willing participants in a commercial transplant program. While we are never allowed to forget that the Indian donors’ (re)actions are constrained by their

⁶ These details are drawn from Nancy Scheper-Hughes, ‘The Global Traffic in Human Organs’, *Current Anthropology*, 41:1 (April 2000), pp. 191-224; John Frow, ‘Bodies in Pieces’, in Leigh Dale and Simon Ryan (eds), *The Body in the Library* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 35-51; and reports written by members of the Bellagio Task Force, a working group set up by Columbia University in 1995 to examine the commercialisation of organ transplantation. See <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/biotech/organswatch>.

⁷ Frow, ‘Bodies in Pieces’, p. 51.

⁸ See Lloyd R. Cohen, ‘A Futures Market in Cadaveric Organs: Would it Work?’, *Transplantation Proceedings*, 25 (1993), pp. 60-61.

limited access to capital and knowledge whereas the American receivers position themselves all too easily as the ‘natural’ beneficiaries of the world’s human and material resources, the play suggests that moral choices are still possible, even imperative. In this respect, Padmanabhan’s trenchant satire is levelled less at Western technology than at the rampant consumerism that facilitates its transfer – on both sides of the intercultural fence – with such uneven consequences.

One way of thinking about the play’s engagement with globalisation is through Arjun Appadurai’s concept of the technoscape, a term he uses to describe global configurations that involve high-speed movement of technology, ‘both mechanical and informational’, across ‘previously impervious boundaries’.⁹ These technoscapes are not conceived as objectively given relations but ones that vary according to the situations and perspectives of those involved in, or affected by, technology flow, be they nation-states, multinational corporations, sub-national groupings, or local communities. Appadurai’s formulation positions individuals as active players in technology transfer – they ‘both *experience* and *constitute* larger formations’¹⁰ – thereby modelling a system which allows some degree of personal agency. By contrast, the more pervasive (Western) narrative of globalisation presents technology itself as the faceless beast driving an inevitable, transnational process of economic, political and cultural integration.¹¹ This totalising discourse typically neglects to consider ways in which the applications and effects of technology intersect with established patterns of inequality and injustice, particularly across ethnic and class boundaries. At the same time, a sense of technological determinism explains social apathy and provides a convenient alibi for corporations and governments unwilling to take responsibility for the negative effects of globalisation on specific communities or groups. An example of this in the Indian context is the 1984 Union Carbide industrial catastrophe, the politics of which Rahul Varma investigates in his 2001 play, *Bhopal*.¹²

The biomedical technoscape presented in *Harvest* encompasses the radical reordering of relations – between whole bodies and body parts, between self and other, between the body-

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 34.

¹⁰ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 33 (emphasis added).

¹¹ See Giles Mohan, ‘Dislocating Globalisation: Power, Politics and Global Change’, *Geography*, 85.2 (2000), pp. 121-133 (p. 121).

¹² *Bhopal*, directed by Jack Langedijk for Teesri Duniya Theatre, premiered at MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) on 15 November 2001. In 2003, it toured India in a Hindi translation directed by Habib Tanvir.

subject and the representational body, and between the social and political body – that medical anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes sees as a potential effect of transplant surgery.¹³ At one level, the play’s critique of this reordering process is conveyed through a language of body parts. Jaya’s initial reaction to the news that Om has been contracted as a donor stresses the crisis in personal and social identity his potential dismemberment will precipitate for both of them:

He’s sold the rights to his organs! His skin. His eyes. His arse. ... (To OM) 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 by piece? Should I shave half my head? Break my bangles one at a time.¹⁴

When Om protests that ‘one third of [Interplanta’s] donors are left absolutely intact’, she retorts: ‘And where does that leave you? Two thirds a man? Half a wit?’¹⁵

These images of the body in pieces are explicitly linked to cannibalism, a corporeal trope that tends to be invoked ‘when a *limit* is approached’.¹⁶ For Jaya, the anatomising of the human body into saleable parts amounts to being served up like a chicken for dinner.¹⁷ Although Om parodies this view in his taunt that Jeetu has been sold to a human game sanctuary ‘where the rich have licences to hunt socially disadvantaged types’,¹⁸ we are constantly reminded that the donors recruited for Interplanta’s macabre business *are* positioned as human prey. Confined to a room to avoid the contamination of a third world environment, fed pellets like battery hens and closely monitored for peak physical condition, the Prakash family become a repository of spare parts to be consumed at will by those who can afford to attend the ‘gourmet’ feast.¹⁹ Here, Padmanabhan neatly refigures the

¹³ Scheper-Hughes, ‘Global Traffic’, p. 193.

¹⁴ Manjula Padmanabhan, *Harvest*, in Gilbert (ed.), *Postcolonial Plays*, pp. 217-249 (p. 223).

¹⁵ Padmanabhan, *Harvest*, p. 233.

¹⁶ Crystal Bartolovich, ‘Consumerism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Cannibalism’, in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson (eds), *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 204-237 (p. 208).

¹⁷ Padmanabhan, *Harvest*, p. 232.

¹⁸ Padmanabhan, *Harvest*, p. 237-238.

¹⁹ I use the term ‘gourmet’ to suggest a link between ritualistic cannibalism that involved only special body parts (eg. organs) and the contemporary organ trade, itself catering to a gourmet appetite of sorts.

connotative reach of cannibalism so that it points to characteristics of developed rather than ‘primitive’ societies. The Indian characters are complicit in the creation of a cannibal economy by dint of their appetite for Western-style consumer goods and their willingness to trade parts of their bodies for material profit, but they are not equally culpable for the injustices of the system. It is capitalism that creates more wants than it can supply, as Crystal Bartolovich observes, not only in developed regions but also more globally, with the result that ‘the production and satisfaction of appetite’ is ‘negotiated in grotesquely uneven fields’.²⁰

Whereas the donors’ perspectives of the biomedical technoscape encompassing transplant surgery cluster around the concept of a body dispersed in pieces, the receivers in *Harvest* envisage a return to ontological wholeness with the replacement of their diseased or dysfunctional parts. This fits with John Frow’s contention that the organ trade is driven, ironically, by a myth of the ‘integrity of the body: a myth of resurrection’.²¹ To the extent that such a myth can be successfully marketed among those with excess capital, it creates an invented need, and thus an artificial scarcity of body parts.²² The play suggests some of these market forces in its characterisation of Virgil as a ‘habitual’ receiver who has already used up three transplant bodies by the time he targets Jeetu as a donor. Never rendered visible on stage except through a simulation of the body he has cannibalised, Virgil also becomes a potent reminder that, in Frow’s terms, the ‘restored body [of the transplant recipient] is prostheticized: no longer an organic unity, but constructed out of a supplement, an alien part’.²³ In this respect, Virgil cannot be fully distinguished from Jeetu, who comes to function as a grotesque double for the American and a potent sign of his incompleteness. Nowhere is such doubling more suggestive of the prosthetic dimensions of Western biomedicine than when Jeetu reappears after the first stage of the transplant program with immense goggles for eyes. His functional vision now dependent on the machinery implanted in his body, he has become a cybernetic organism, a human-machine hybrid. Symbolically and performatively, this hybrid character can be seen to approximate Homi Bhabha’s unsettling ‘mimic man’: as

²⁰ Bartolovich, ‘Consumerism’, 236-237.

²¹ Frow, ‘Bodies in Pieces’, p. 49.

²² Scheper-Hugues, ‘Global Traffic’, p. 198

²³ Frow, ‘Bodies in Pieces’, p. 49.

a liminal figure, he constantly turns ‘from mimicry – a difference that is almost nothing but not quite – to menace – a difference that is almost total but not quite’.²⁴

Jeetu’s transformation also focuses attention on the intersections between the human and the technological as they are inflected by cultural power. According to Dianne Currier,

The figure of the cyborg functions as a trope for that strand of post-humanism which attempts to examine more closely the encounters between technologies and material bodies – not in terms of disembodiment, where a technological excision of the flesh takes place, nor in virtual reality, where a digitalised, informatised version of the body is agent in space, but in the instances where technologies and flesh meet.²⁵

Various theorists, notably Donna Haraway, have heralded the cyborg as a potentially revolutionary figure because it breaches boundaries, destabilises identities and redefines the relations of the body to the cultural,²⁶ a strand of thinking that has strongly influenced contemporary performance artists such as Stelarc, Mike Parr and Orlan, among others. In *Harvest*, the cyborg bears no such liberationist subtext. Instead, it signals the full horrors of dehumanisation – the real price of embracing technology without the power to control the ways in which it is implemented.

The figure of Jeetu-as-cyborg also marks the convergence of the play’s two technoscapes. Before the first transplant operation, the digital technology (the contact module) mounted in the Prakash’s single-room tenement operates as both a means of communication between donors and receivers and a panopticon through which Ginni/Virgil can maintain surveillance of the family. At this stage, however, the machine is not directly connected to the physical bodies it surveys. On his return from Interplanta, Jeetu’s prosthetic eyes can access a digital image beamed straight into his brain, allowing him to see/meet Ginni in her apparently real, full-bodied form, not as a face mediated through the screens of the contact module. This technology gives him a sense of restored agency because he is duped into thinking the normal practices of social (and sexual) interaction can operate in this virtual world. Knowing no other way of decoding the digitalised image, he is seduced by an apparition to consent to the

²⁴ Homi Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, *October* 28 (1984), pp. 125-33 (p. 132)

²⁵ Dianne Currier, ‘Absent, Mutated, Digitalised, Desexed – Posthuman Bodies in Cyberspace’, *Writing Dance* 17 (1997/1998), pp. 46-60 (p. 54).

²⁶ See Donna Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’, *Socialist Review*, 80 (1985), pp. 65-108.

next stages of what will eventually be a total body transplant. This scenario illustrates ways in which ‘digital technology has enabled capital power to “retreat” into cyberspace’ where it roams nomadically, invisible yet always present.²⁷ As staged here, virtual reality is not shaped by a commitment to maintaining a transparent relationship between virtual and ‘real life’ physical bodies; nor does it provide a level playing field where the material of the flesh can be reshaped at will, as commonly claimed by Western cultural theorists.²⁸ Instead, Padmanabhan exposes the myth of democratic utopian space often associated with virtual reality, which, far from dispensing with the crude materiality of the body, the flesh, only emphasises its complexity.

The seductions of the new digital technologies featured in *Harvest* mask their potential to produce docile subjects in thrall to a novel kind of magic. Like Jeetu, Ma is mystified to the point of disempowerment by the technology she so eagerly embraces. As she settles into her SuperDeluxe VideoCouch equipped with full body-processing functions, including a neuro-stimulator and bio-feedback transmitters, the composite unit of woman and machine constitutes another cyborg figure with none of the transformative capacities post-humanism celebrates. In this sense, Ma’s retreat from biosocial space into the media-saturated oblivion of 750 video channels from around the world represents only a slightly more palatable future than her sons’ eventual disappearance into the abyss of the organ bazaar. Only Jaya manages to map a viable path (in the play’s terms) through the technologised landscape she has unwittingly entered. Refusing to be cast as a body in parts, a cyborg, an artificially inseminated baby machine, or a willing partner in virtual-reality simulated sex, she reminds us that the modern technoscape is not a monolithic barrier to moral or meaningful action but rather a set of challenges to be negotiated.

At the performative level, the play’s scenography would seem to endorse the notion, suggested by Jaya’s strategy of fleshly resistance, that technological mediation of the body can be stalled by a retreat into full corporeal presence. Within the diegetic space of the stage, it is the Western characters who appear as disembodied – anatomised as talking heads or

²⁷ See Rebecca Schneider, ‘Nomadmedia: On Critical Art Ensemble’, *The Drama Review* 44:4 (2000), pp. 120-131 (p. 123).

²⁸ See, for instance, Currier, ‘Posthuman Bodies’, pp. 46-60; and Mark Poster, ‘Postmodern Virtualities’, in Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (eds), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk* (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 79-95. Lance Gharavi takes a more critical look at the democratic claims of virtual technology as it has been incorporated into ‘cybertheatre’ in ‘Backwards and Forwards: Regression and Progression in the Production Work of i.e. VR’, *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 10 (2002), pp. 73-85.

offstage voices, digitalised as the virtual phantasms of an increasingly sterile world – whereas the Indian characters, despite being maimed or constantly at risk, are palpably present, manifest to the audience in the flesh through the live performers. That said, I do not wish to fetishise a metaphysics of presence or suggest that the primary purpose of *Harvest* is to stage what might be seen in Brechtian terms as a technological *gestus* – an attempt to reveal and reverse the social relations instantiated by technology flows. Padmanabhan is far too astute an observer of international politics to present simple solutions to the problems arising from the global march of Western imperialism and she is only too aware of the ontological shifts that the forces of nomadic capital have caused in many parts of the contemporary world. The play shows in a highly condensed form the particular mutations brought about by repeated exposure to simulated images and the almost invisible penetration of our daily lives by technical gadgets. And it suggests, very powerfully, the crises of identity such mutations can precipitate.

In staging what Matthew Causey terms the ‘slippage of subjectivity into the space of technology’,²⁹ *Harvest* alerts us to the potentially profound effects of globalisation on the ways in which identity can be structured. The play points specifically to the impact of global capital on identity-forming practices concerning eating, death, mourning, and sexuality, all of which are embedded in the deep structures of corporeal sociality. As part of a larger, speculative canvass, Padmanabhan simultaneously asks a number of urgent questions that relate to identity politics within (and beyond) ‘resource’ societies relegated to the margins of Western postmodernity. Where can ethnicity be located in a world in which surfaces and interiors of the physical body may be reshaped by biomedical science to the extent that they affect social relationships and cultural practices? If parts of some bodies can be sold across racial boundaries to prostheticise other bodies, what does that mean for the politics of race, the construction of difference and the fear of miscegenation that has so animated cultural conflict through the ages? How can the lived, physical self with its specific ethnic identifications be represented in sites where modern technologies frame, distort, displace and even replace the projected image? In such contexts, can theatre provide a privileged space of representation or is live performance now always already mediatised as Philip Auslander has argued?³⁰

²⁹ Matthew Causey, ‘The Aesthetics of Disappearance and the Politics of Visibility in the Performance of Technology’, *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 10 (2002), pp. 59-71 (p. 61).

³⁰ Philip Auslander, ‘Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation’, in Elin Diamond (ed.), *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 196-213 (p. 198).

By asking these questions through a parable about hegemony and compliance, *Harvest* rejects an apolitical reading of globalisation, as manifest by the organ trade, and turns to matters of distributive justice: the economic, social and cultural inequalities imbricated in such circuits of capital exchange. In this respect, the play suggests the particular issues at stake for the large numbers of people not ideally placed to reap the benefits of the latest technological revolution. Ironically, or perhaps aptly, the production demands of the text as written, if they are interpreted literally, crystallise the unevenness of this global technoscape since staging digitalised images requires amounts of capital and/or expertise beyond the capacity of theatre practitioners in most developing regions.³¹ To find creative local solutions to this problem – using the ‘virtual’ power of theatricality itself – is part of the challenge Manjula Padmanabhan’s ambitious and haunting play presents.

³¹ These technical demands seem to have limited the Indian screen adaptation as well, with some critics lamenting that the special effects of Govind Nihilani’s low budget production were less than optimal.