

Economic ‘Dependencies’ and its Discontents: A Reverse Discourse in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest*

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ABSTRACT

With the mission of ‘only connect’ across the world, globalisation in fact emerged out to be the ‘enormous corporate power grab’ that has catastrophic impact on vital laws protecting public health, democratic sovereignty, environment and labour rights. The international trade agreements and neo-colonial policies operate as ideologies that justify exploitation of the Third world countries without direct intervention of the advanced. Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* (2003) anticipates the complexities of global debt crisis that has emerged more recently. The economic policies driven from inequities in the global trading system place the ‘peripheries’ at a risk zone. The play imagines a dystopic world that engages in human organ transplants. The healthy body parts are purchased from the impoverished, poor residents of the Third world countries as they are compelled to participate in this perverse economy only to eke out their existence. The ‘dependency’ situation of the developing countries is a direct result of the economic exploitation by the advanced First world countries. That such a global economy should be legally justified and ethically approved should be given a second thought as it robs human beings of their right to live and drowns the world further into the crisis of economic dependencies.

Keywords: dependencies, economy, global, poverty, policies

The recent preoccupations with justifying capitalism are rooted in the critical nexus between politics and economy. After the Cold War the Third World countries that gradually asserted their

political independence in this system promoted a tendency to interrogate the policies of global economic dependencies. Globalisation created new institutions that combined with the older ones to work across borders. The economic aspects of globalisation raise controversies as it gradually mandates liberalisation of capital markets. The international financial policies are closely aligned with the interests of the advanced countries. The situation of the developing countries is a direct result of the economic exploitation by the advanced countries. Immanuel Wallerstein, in his *Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (1974), while examining the evolution of the capitalist system, differentiates among 'core', 'semi-periphery' and 'periphery'. Both the 'core' and the 'periphery' are part of the global political economic system. Globalisation produces its discontents. The international trade agreements and neo-colonial policies that have been imposed on the developing countries in the process of globalisation justify the exploitation of the Third world countries without direct intervention of the advanced. The primary victims of this process are the poverty-stricken majority of labourers and urban workers of the 'peripheries'. That such a global economy should be justified legally and approved ethically should be given a second thought as it robs human beings of their right to live and drowns the world further into the vicious cycle of economic crisis. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (2003) anticipates the complexities of global dependency crisis that has emerged recently. Providing a glimpse of a surreal world, the drama offers a reverse discourse that dares to challenge and unmask the ideologies of justified exploitation of the Third World countries by the First World countries.

Transporting the audience to a future hyperreal world of 2010 Bombay, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (2003), prefigures "the challenges facing humanity in the next 21st century" (Padmanabhan 4). The play provides a grim picture of a dystopic world in which a North American transnational corporation

called the Inter Planta Services engages in human organ transplants of affluent, aging and ailing clients. In the introductory note to *Harvest*, Padmanabhan states: “The inspiration for harvest was the flourishing illegal trade in human organs in India. The buyers are Indians as well as non-Indians while the donors are poor villagers for whom Rs 20000 they are typically paid for a kidney represents an unimaginable fortune” (4). The healthy body parts or whole bodies are purchased from impoverished, poor residents of the Third World countries who are offered no other option but to commodify themselves in this perverse economy only to quench their thirst for survival. In this drama, *Harvest*, Om Prakash is the helpless donor who contractually sells off his organs to the US based transnational company whose wealthy clients desire to purchase everlasting lives by successive, multiple body transplants. What is most shocking is the fact that along with the commodification of body parts women are the special targets as they are compelled to provide affective and reproductive labour to carry forward the future generation of the affluent North American receivers. Due to extreme poverty Om and his family become easy victims of organ trade. The technological gadgets like the contact module installed in their house conducts surveillance over the Prakash family so that they maintain healthy habits and in turn ensure harvesting of healthy body organs. The entire family is subjected to disciplinary, dictatorial regimes that compel them to eat, drink and sleep as instructed by Gini, the wealthy and glamorous North American customer. Jeetu, Om’s brother, labels the home as a “fancy prison” (Padmanabhan 56). The family is provided with the options of either starvation and have organs or selling of organs to feed oneself. Thus there is restriction of choice in both ways. Choosing from the same category offers no choice at all. The conditions under which Om is given the job by the American company forces him to undertake the risk of sacrificing himself in return of limited luxury. This “conditionality refers to more forceful conditions, ones that often

turn the loan [here job offer] into a policy tool" (Stiglitz 44). 'Conditionality' is the imposition of myriad of conditions as precondition for assistance that can never lead to better outcomes. The ghost of imperialism persists through the neo-colonial policies of institutions like the World Bank and IMF. The hypocritical mission of these institutions is to attenuate poverty, but the cost of combating poverty is repaid with the interest of deliberate self-sacrifice. These structural violence and adjustment policies are assumed to 'support' the so-called developing world, but in reality trap them within the gyres of subtle exploitation. In *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), Kwame Nkrumah asserts:

The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus political policy is directed from outside. Neo-colonialism is the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress.

(qtd. in Ghosh 190)

Neo-colonialism promotes setting up economic dependencies and satellites.

The microcosmic world of the Prakash family lays bare the economic dependencies that operate between the core and the periphery as illustrated by the World System Theorists. The World System theorists chalk out the structure of unequal relationship between the dominant and backward countries. Being the product of an historical process, dependency regulates the structure of the world economy in such a manner that it hinders the possibilities of development of subordinate economies while conferring excess wealth to the favoured countries. Trapped within such a vicious cycle, underdeveloped countries have their economy structured and regulated by the expansion of the First World countries. As a result the dependent countries are placed in a backward position and exploited by the

dominant countries. The social scientists focus primarily on the external factors like international banks, foreign control of technology and an international bourgeoisie as well as internal constraints like social structures that strengthen foreign domination as the causes of dependency. Rooted in Lenin's *Imperialism – The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Immanuel Wallenstein and Johan Galtung theorized the complex workings of capitalist economy. The dominant structure of the 'core', 'semi-periphery' and 'periphery' situates the country in the world economy and determines the relation of domination and dependence between them. Both the centre and periphery are part of the world political economic system and neither would exist without the other. In his seminal article "A Structural Theory of Imperialism" (1971), Galtung's proposition that imperialism is based on structural rather than direct violence gains significance in the neo-colonial policies. Underdevelopment is not the 'original state,' or something characteristic of a so called 'traditional society'. It comes into existence within a pre-capitalist society when it gets connected to one or more capitalist societies economically or politically. Underdevelopment does not result from any fixed internal lacuna. It does not result from any sort of deficiency, but from abrupt flow of money.

The root cause of underdevelopment in the dependency perspective is economic dependency. Economic dependency exists when one society falls under the sway of some foreign society's economic system, and when the first society's economy is organised by persons in the foreign society so as to benefit primarily the foreign economy. Economic dependency implies that there are relations of economic domination and subordination between two or more societies.

(Jeffrey 55)

According to Andre Gunder Frank the world economy is divided into metropolis and satellite. Andre Gunder Frank states that "...historical research demonstrates that contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of past

and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries'. Furthermore, these relations are an essential part of the capitalist system on a world scale as a whole" (Frank 72). The world economy has been arranged in such a way that economic surplus flows from the satellite (periphery) to the metropolis (core). The underdeveloped will remain underdeveloped so long as they will be under the shackles of economic domination. This is what Frank terms as the 'development of the underdeveloped'. Thus the development of the First World countries and the underdevelopment of the Third World countries are in fact bound in cause and effect relationship. The Third World countries are miserable victims of economic crisis. The impoverished people like Om Prakash and Jeetu are bound to 'risk' their existence for their existence. Om confirms his allegiance to the digitilised Ginni: "I live only for your benefit. You know that" (Padmanabhan 40). This confession of Om strengthens Ginni's authority through her virtual presence. She requires this allegiance in order to intervene, judge, punish, console and control with dreams of fulfilment and liberation. The Marxian concept that labour is the source of the creation of value can alternatively suggest a complex subtext for this drama. Marx's assertion that "these newly freed men became sellers of themselves, only after they had been robbed off their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence afforded by old feudal arrangement" (875). It is indeed nightmarish to think that people can sell their biological selves to be free. The dream of a comfortable life alienates each member of the family thereby shattering all sorts of family bonding. The mother breaks up all umbilical ties to take refuge in the comfortable Deluxe Couch forever. She no longer hesitates to hand over his son to the agents of Inter Planta Services. When the Guard demands the Donor as resistance is useless, Ma (suddenly, pointing to Jeetu) says "Go on! Take him before he runs!" (57). Ginni succeeds in

establishing the robotic 'special bond' that dominates her cultural ethos.

GINNI: ... what I meant, people in my country, at my age, they just don't have any worthwhile friends, you know? Nothing to hold onto – nothing precious. Nothing like... this... I get to give you things you'd never get in your lifetime and you get to give me... well... maybe my life. You know? That's a special bond. Don't think I don't appreciate it. (41)

The developing countries being aware of their crisis fail to overcome the influences of the international financial institutions that control them.

The play takes a different turn when the real identity of Ginni is revealed to Jaya. Offering resistance to the conventions of 'dependencies', she questions the asymmetries of power relations. Power relations "invest the body, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault, *Discipline* 25). The pedagogical principles of Ginni are disseminated through certain disciplines that silence subversive voices. In Act One, power and knowledge are circulated through the family by Ginni. According to Foucault power is not a conventional scheme of domination-repression; its associations with pleasure are also to be taken into consideration. The individual is both an effect of power and the element of its orientation. The play also shows the "polymorphous techniques of power" (Foucault, *Sexuality* 11). Power percolates everywhere creating not only obstruction, denial and invalidation; but also encouragement and intensification. The regime on power-knowledge and pleasure upholds all discourses of repressive hypothesis. The virtual images of Ginni on the screen are symbolic substitutes of their bodies. Such virtual images not only monitor but also seduce, tempt and interpellate. Ginni is considered to be the angel of the house by Om and his mother. Jaya offers resistance to such a life of imprisonment and slavery. When Om confirms that Ginni cares for them, Jaya asserts: "Oh yes, she cares – just as much as

she cares about the chicken she eats for dinner” (Padmanabhan 47). Gradually power of conducting surveillance, in turn, creates its own resistance, the possibility of a ‘reverse discourse.’ The final twist comes in the play when it is revealed that Ginni is only “a computer-animated wet dream” (84) – a falsified image. In reality it is Virgil, an aged man who has undergone four body transplants in fifty years. Though Om was initially selected as the donor, it is Jeetu who finally donates his body. This has been schemed purposefully as Virgil desired to seduce Jaya, Jeetu’s beloved. Virgil says: “We look for young men’s bodies to live in and young women’s bodies in which to sow their children--” (86). He too confesses that they have lost the art of reproducing and nurturing children.

VIRGIL: We began to love longer and longer. And healthier each generation. And more demanding. Soon there was competition between one generation and the next – old against young, parent against child. We older ones had the advantage of experience. We prevailed. But our victory was bitter. We secured Paradise at the cost of birds and flowers, bees and snakes. So we designed this programme. We support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves. (86)

As a contrast, Jaya desires to bear the sweet burden of motherhood. Her arms cry out to hold the baby in her arms and enjoy the bliss of motherhood that has been denied to her. Virgil tempts and seduces her with the dreams of motherhood: “I’m real and warm and willing – this body which once belonged to Jitoo now contains a red-blooded all-American man!” (87). He finally asks Jaya for artificial insemination. Jaya resists this proposal as this is virtually impossible. She hankers after the pain of childbirth, the pain of pulsating with life. “Here, Padmanabhan is shedding critical light on an ‘international womb boom’ in which racialised women, particularly in India, are increasingly being hired as gestational surrogates for infertile white couples. In this process, the surrogate is radically instrumentalised as a Womb for Rent” (Kim 225). She

vehemently opposes to be a gestational surrogate and provide her womb in return of material comfort. She insists Virgil to come to her physically as a real living being. Jaya asserts:

Look, I've understood you now. I know you're stronger than me, you're richer than me. But if you want me, you must risk your skin to get me. Even though its really Jeetu's skin – I want you to risk it! (89)

Virgil cannot risk his life and come to Jaya for love. He fails to interpellate Jaya though he was successful with Om. By compelling Virgil to undertake the 'risk' that was so long imposed on them, Jaya attempts to reverse the dominant economy where the impoverished are only to bear risks. Alternatively Virgil, the representative of the affluent First World countries, too must pay his debt and undertake some risk. Jaya harps on the chord that the underdeveloped countries, like India, will no longer acquiesce in the aids and grants and become the 'sisters of charity' of the First World countries. The call for a reverse discourse has been voiced by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World....The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples" (81). The flow of wealth to America and Europe has been possible by the violent exploitation and expropriation of resources and commodified human bodies. Europe too owes a large debt to the world that created them. The play is a critique of the very notion that an equitable exchange relation can exist between the First and Third World countries. Globalisation needs to be reshaped. When all countries will have a voice in policy making, a new global economy will emanate – an economy that will not only make growth sustainable but also will make the sharing of benefits of this growth more equitable.

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