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TECHNOLOGICAL EMBRACE AND THE EROSION OF EMPATHY: A DEEP DIVE INTO MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *HARVEST*

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Abstract

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* presents a compelling exploration of the profound impact of technology on human empathy and autonomy. The very title, "Harvest" alludes to the commodification of human lives in a world dominated by Western-driven flesh markets. Padmanabhan artfully weaves a narrative where the mechanized world supersedes human agency, and electronic devices metamorphose into active characters, becoming instruments of control and manipulation. The play's narrative unfolds as machines and their human proxies assert dominance over the lives of the characters. Padmanabhan's work serves as an allegory for the looming conflict between humanity and technology for control over lives and autonomy. The play projects a dystopian future where machines progressively replace and alienate human beings, amplifying the disconnection between individuals. Through the character of Jaya, the play voices a cautionary message about the necessity to master technology, rather than becoming subservient to it. *Harvest* underscores the inherent struggle between human values and mechanized control, while also suggesting that ultimate victory will reside in human ingenuity and resilience. Padmanabhan's play serves as a mirror to contemporary society's burgeoning reliance on technology, resonating with the viewer's fears and hopes for the future. By masterfully transforming electronic devices into characters with significant roles, the playwright underscores the pervasive influence of technology and its potential to erode empathy and self-determination. In the age of rapid technological advancement, *Harvest* stands as a timely cautionary tale, reminding us to critically assess our relationship with technology and assert our human agency to prevent the loss of empathy and autonomy in an increasingly mechanized world.

Keywords

Richard Wright, Women, Character, Passivity, Power, Representations, Objects, Sexuality, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Feminism, African American Literature.

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In the contemporary landscape of the 21st century, the intricate web of human existence is increasingly woven with the threads of technology and gadgets. These modern marvels have seamlessly integrated into our daily lives, shaping our routines from the moment we awaken to the reverberation of a mobile alarm. Our world revolves around the fluid interplay between technology and human activity, symbolizing a convergence of convenience and dependency. In this era of relentless innovation, human ingenuity has orchestrated the creation of tools that have revolutionized existence. John Smith also postulates in this context, "In the dawn of the technological age, we find our souls tethered not to nature, but to silicon and screens" (47). Societal progression pivots upon these technological advancements, reflective of a collective aspiration to enhance human capabilities. From online education to digital banking, from virtual shopping to complex investments, technology has instigated a metamorphosis in the very essence of human engagement with the world.

The positive ramifications of these innovations are manifold, branching across multifaceted domains. Education has transcended traditional confines, embracing digital platforms that cultivate interactive learning environments. Businesses have surged forward, fueled by the surge in technological efficiencies. Connectivity has become an overarching narrative, as friendships and familial bonds bridge geographical distances through digital threads. However, the coin of technological advancement bears an underside, one that imposes its own set of challenges and dilemmas. Amidst the screens and bytes, there lies the disquieting reality of diminishing attention spans. Psychological ramifications, a confluence of online pressures and constant stimulation, surface as unintended consequences. The very gadgets that are designed to simplify existence have contributed to a paradoxical surge in health concerns. A myriad of issues encompassing thrombosis, eye fatigue, migraines, sleep disturbances, backaches, and personal hygiene neglect emerge as modern-day ailments.

Over the past two years, the world has witnessed an accelerated assimilation of technology across sectors, propelled by necessity and innovation alike. This pervasive digitalization has redefined how education is imparted, money is managed, transactions are

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executed, and even leisure is pursued. The dependence on gadgets has forged an undeniable bond between human and technology, rendering the former almost inseparable from the latter. Yet, this symbiotic relationship comes with a caveat. The allure of technology can transgress the boundary of moderation, spiraling into a realm of excessive use. Ultimately, the narrative of technology's influence on human life is nuanced, characterized by both the blessing of advancement and the shadow of challenge. Literature, ever the mirror of society, casts a spotlight on these complexities. The interplay between man and machine, an unfolding saga penned across literary works, urges humanity to wield its creations wisely and responsibly. As we navigate this brave new world, the guiding principle remains: to wield technology as a tool, not as a master, and to nurture our connection to the world around us while fostering empathy, understanding, and mindful coexistence. Many writers have used technology in their works and Manjula Padmanabhan is also one of them.

Born in Delhi, Manjula Padmanabhan emerges as a literary polymath, a 20th-century counterpart to the multifaceted Rabindranath Tagore. Her artistic endeavors span a captivating spectrum of creative expression, mirroring Tagore's versatility across various forms of literature. Renowned for her proficiency in diverse genres, Padmanabhan has masterfully crafted plays, comic strips, travelogues, short stories, and children's books, along with showcasing her talents as an accomplished illustrator.

Early in her career, Padmanabhan ventured into the world of journalism, joining the editorial team of a small publication called Parsian, where she left an indelible mark as a gifted cartoonist. Her artistic sensibilities and keen eye for visual storytelling laid the foundation for her future literary ventures. Defying familial expectations, Padmanabhan's trajectory took a dramatic turn as she discarded the notion of following in her Indian Foreign Service (IFS) father's footsteps. Overcoming personal struggles, including a contemplated suicide at 30 which she had contemplated at 17, she channeled her energies towards the realm of writing.

Padmanabhan's professional journey unfolds with a remarkable array of accomplishments. Her contributions to the literary landscape encompass a series of plays, including notable works like *Harvest* (1997), *Lights Out* (1984), and *Hidden Fire* (1991). Not confined to the realm of theatre, her literary canvas also embraces a collection of short stories titled *The Artist's Model Sextet* and *The Gujarati Monologue* (1996), travel memoirs such as *Getting There*, children's books like *Muse Attack* (2008), and poignant short stories like *Death and Old Soup* and *Kleptomania*.

Padmanabhan's artistic prowess extends to the world of illustration, where she contributes both independently and collaboratively. Her illustrated works include *I Am Different! Can You Find Me?* (2011), *Unprincess* (2005), and *A Visit to City Market* (1986). Collaboratively, she has worked on projects such as *Indrani and the Enchanted Jungle* (1979) with Tara Ali Baij and *Dropsy Drago* (1984) with Maithily Jagannath. Further attesting to her creative dynamism, Padmanabhan scripted the comic strip *Double Talk* (2007) and serialized the character "Suki," a compelling female figure, in the Sunday Observer. Beyond her literary pursuits, Padmanabhan's contributions as a cartoonist are equally commendable, a testament to her unceasing commitment to diverse modes of artistic expression. With a distinctive portfolio that echoes Tagore's multidisciplinary legacy, Manjula Padmanabhan stands as a luminary in the realm of Indian literature, crafting a legacy that resonates with innovation, creativity, and a resolute pursuit of self-expression. E. Selvi writes about the playwright, "Manjula Padmanabhan shows the cyber cultural influence of our life" (7879).

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Manjula Padmanabhan, a visionary of the 21st century, stands as an exemplar of literary innovation through her groundbreaking foray into science fiction on the theatrical stage in India. In her seminal work, *Harvest* (1996), Padmanabhan harnesses her profound affinity for technology to craft a narrative that transcends traditional boundaries and confronts futuristic realities. While *Harvest* wasn't Padmanabhan's inaugural play, it undeniably catapulted her to prominence as a playwright. The play's acclaim reached international heights as it secured the prestigious Onassis award for theatre in Athens, Greece, emerging victorious from a pool of over a hundred contenders. Remarkably, a decade later, the themes elucidated in the play continue to resonate, offering a prophetic insight into the trajectory of our contemporary existence. Set in the year 2010 in Mumbai, *Harvest* delves into the nexus of economics and life.

Helen Gilbert writes in the "Introduction" to her book *Anthology of the Postcolonial Plays*:

Harvest can be read not only as a cautionary tale about the possible (mis)use of modern medical and reproductive science but also a reflection on economic and social legacies of Western imperialism, particularly as they coverage with new technologies (216)

It underscores the omnipotent influence of financial pressures in shaping human actions and destinies. The protagonist, Om, grapples with unemployment, leading him to enter into a contract as an organ donor for an American recipient named Ginny. This transaction propels the narrative into a realm where the boundary between human agency and technological intrusion blurs. Shital Pravinchandra talks about the ailing bodies in the first world (1). Padmanabhan ingeniously employs electronic devices, like the electronic contact module, as more than mere props. These devices evolve into characters themselves, embodying the pervasive role of technology in the lives of the characters. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that Om, Ma, and Jeetu have all been ensnared by the influence of these electronic mechanisms, a manifestation of the tensions between technological advances and human relationships. Om, Ma and Jeetu except Jaya, Om's wife who, as Durgesh Ravande says, represent the conflict between technological adventures and human relationship in life. (163).

Jaya, Om's wife, emerges as a beacon of emotional resilience amidst this technologically driven landscape. She encapsulates the hope for authentic human connections in a world increasingly dominated by commodification and global capitalism. The play deftly navigates through moral, legal, and bioethical dilemmas surrounding organ sales and transplants, shedding light on the moral compromises borne out of economic exigencies. *Harvest* resonates as a multidimensional work, not confined to a cautionary tale about the ethical implications of medical advancements. It extends to encompass a profound commentary on the residual impacts of Western imperialism, intricately interwoven with emerging technologies. The setting of the play in a Mumbai grappling with financial crises and computerization encapsulates the universal struggle of the middle-class against rampant joblessness. Abin Sojan aptly remarks about this play:

Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) is a complexly meditated play which attempts to address the problems and the worries of the Third World....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. (879)

In *Harvest* Manjula Padmanabhan's artistic vision materializes as a tapestry woven with complex characters and palpable social realities. As the characters navigate a world dictated by machines and electronic devices, the play emerges as an indelible testament to the harmonious

coexistence of technology and literature, narrating stories that traverse the dimensions of time and provoke contemplation on the intersections of humanity and progress. In the opening scene of the play, the characters Ma and Jaya wait for Om, who is returning from a job search. Amidst the customary banter and conflicts between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, their shared concern for Om's employment becomes evident. In this context, technology's influence becomes discernible as Ma, the sixty-year-old mother, exhibits an addiction to television, a contrasting electronic domestic device. Her preoccupation with the world of celluloid appears to overshadow her concern for the struggles of her family in the real world.

The dialogue between Ma and Jaya encapsulates this dynamic:

MA: Alone, alone! Have you seen your neighbors? Ten in that room; twenty in the other! And harmonious as a TV show! But you? An empty room would be too crowded for you. (Padmanabhan 218)

As Om returns, the play delves deeper into the impact of technology on human lives. His narration of the job selection procedure illustrates the intrusion of machines and their instructions into his life. The commanding influence of technology becomes palpable as he describes his experience:

OM: We were standing all together in that line. And the line went on and on - not just on one floor, but slanting up, forever. All in iron bars and grills. It was like being in a cage shaped like a tunnel. All around, up, turn, sideways, there were men slowly moving. All the time, I couldn't understand it. Somewhere there must be a place to stop, to write a form? Another question? But no. Just forward, forward. One person fainted but the others pushed him along. And at the corners, a sort of pipe was kept. You had to be quick. Other men would squeeze past behind. The fellow who was doing his business. Sometimes there was no place, and he'd have to move on before he finished still dripping. (219)

Om's account further underscores that the instructions guiding these men are issued by faceless machines:

OM: I don't know for how long we moved. Then there was a door. Inside it was dark like being in heaven! So cool, so fresh! I too fainted then with pleasure, I don't know. I wake up to find how the ground is moving under me. The floor is moving then there's a sign. REMOVE CLOTHING, so we do that still moving. Then each man gets a bag. To put the clothes inside. (219)

The machines and machine-like individuals, represented by the Guards from Interplaza Services, assume prominence as the play progresses. Their actions reflect a commanding and controlling influence over human lives, turning ordinary objects into instruments of control. The dialogue among the Guards during their visit to Om's residence exemplifies this dynamic:

GUARD 1: Interplaza services wishes to confirm that this is the residence of Om Prakash? (Meanwhile, Guard 2 and 3 set up equipment and a power-generating device.)

GUARD 1: Sir, you are directed to open the kit and make it operational just after our departure. Instructions are provided within. We will set up the contact module. It will start functioning in approximately two hours. About the contact module, all details will be found in the starter kit. At the time of first contact, you and your receiver will exchange personal information. Your physical data has been sent for matching, and we are confident that you will both be well satisfied. When we have confirmed that the contact module is functioning, you will not be responsible for anything but the maintenance of your personal resources. (221-222)

The play unfolds as a cautionary tale, illustrating how the technological era ushers in a world where machines and electronic devices not only shape human actions but also govern human existence. The characters become pawns in the hands of machines, and the narrative serves as a potent reminder of the subtle ways in which technology influences and controls our lives. Upon the installation of the contact module, its operation springs to life, guided by the playwright's meticulous descriptions. The guards orchestrate its movements, as Guard 2 deftly wields a remote, accompanied by musical notes and clicks. The contact module itself becomes an embodiment of the narrative's essence as it ascends and descends, its display transitioning from a screen saver pattern to dormancy.

With the activation of the contact module, the governance of Om Prakash's family is irrevocably transformed. Their daily routines, including meals, bathing, and even restroom visits, fall under the watchful gaze of the contact module. The module's entrancing hold is punctuated by a resonant tone, signaling its presence. An interface springs to life, revealing the visage of a youthful woman named Virginia Ginni. Ginni, representative of the first-world glamour, issues commands that reverberate through the lives of Om and his kin.

Ginni's ascendancy sees her inscribing her dominion over the family, transcending even their reflexive sneezes. She asserts her authority to ensure Om's well-being, employing phrases imbued with both command and ownership. The essence of the play's title is unveiled as Ginni assumes the role of a metaphorical farmer, tending to the soil that is Om's body. This symbolism extends to Om's family, nurtured like crops, with every aspect of their existence meticulously regulated and managed. Their kitchen transforms, prescribed diets replace culinary choices, and even the spatial layout evolves to accommodate Ginni's regimen. The all-encompassing control of Ginni overpowers personal desires and autonomy, rendering their world one dominated by her edicts. Ginni's vigilance extends to restricting external contact to thwart infections, highlighting her determination to oversee every aspect of their lives.

Juxtaposed with Ginni's governance is Jaya's attempt to subvert control through feigned sneezes, a subtle act of resistance. Ginni's unwavering vigilance detects this deceit, underlining the play's exploration of power dynamics and manipulation. The dialogues unfurl with an undeniable authority, exemplifying Ginni's coercive influence over the family. Ginni's concern for Om's health is not only a manifestation of her control but also an ironic commentary on the commodification of bodies and the paradoxes of medical advancement.

The intricate dance between control and resistance, as choreographed by Padmanabhan's narrative, thrusts *Harvest* into the realm of profound philosophical exploration. The characters become pawns in a dynamic interplay of power, revealing the complex tapestry of human relationships amid a technologically dominated world. The play unfolds as a thought-provoking drama, prompting a contemplative engagement with the complexities of modern existence.

In the intricate web woven by the play *Harvest* deftly employs contracts and electronic interfaces to both dictate and disrupt the lives of its characters. The story delves into the intricate contract signed by Om, a pivotal character. This contract not only compels him to portray his wife Jaya as his sister and his brother Jeetu as his brother-in-law but ensnares the characters in a web of unforeseen consequences. Jeetu's inadvertent failure to fulfill his contractual obligations leads to his derecognition by the electronic contact module, rendering him an outsider to his own family. The contract's influence reverberates beyond its financial implications, eroding familial bonds and testing interpersonal connections.

Jaya, a voice of skepticism, imparts a profound truth regarding the influence of external agents in their lives, saying, “They don’t care about any of us not as people, not as human beings” (233). Her poignant comparison between Ginny’s concern for her own well-being and that of her livestock encapsulates the chilling reality of a mechanized world driven by self-interest and exploitation (231). This very mechanization is mirrored in the Interplaza services guards, who wield authority in a robotic and relentless manner, enforcing compliance regardless of human emotions (256).

The play confronts the commodification of human lives and the infiltration of Western culture into the minds of the vulnerable. The guards’ manipulation of Jeetu through the installation of Ginni’s image underscores the invasive nature of technology in shaping human behavior. Ginni’s control over Jeetu’s emotions, highlighted through their dialogue, mirrors the manipulation of cultures and individuals, a testament to the far-reaching impact of technological penetration.

This intricate dance between contracts, technology, and human behavior underscores Padmanabhan’s exploration of the dual-edged sword of modernity. Harvestresonates as a cautionary tale, peeling back the layers of human interactions to reveal the interplay between individual agency and external manipulation. Through the characters’ struggles, the play presents a powerful narrative about the conquest of technology over humanity and prompts contemplation on the nuanced dynamics between the two.

Ginni wields complete dominion over Jeetu using the contact module, enabling her image to reside vividly in his thoughts. This visualization grants him direct perception of her that transcends his usual faculties. Even her unclothed form becomes perceptible to him, and encountering her transforms into an intense fixation. His exhilaration becomes an emblem of both his ardor and his subservience to her will. When Jaya asserts that Ginni is a mere illusion, he counters that she is real. In a matter of moments, security personnel appear, spiriting Jeetu away without elucidating their intentions.

After some time, some agents appear with a videocoach which Ma has ordered online. The videocoach is a reminiscent of Tutan Khamen’s sarcophagus, encrusted with electronic dials and circuitry in the place of jewels. The Agents maneuver it into the center of the room, move the dining table aside and install the device in its place. The other two agents open the case, revealing an equally ornate interior filled with tubes, switches, and circuitry. Inside are a number of containers. (244)

The moment other two agents attach a power line to the unit and at this moment activates the system. It twinkles with small LEDs. It looks like a tiny space-module. Agent 2 delinks the power connection and the lights continue to twinkle. Ma detaches the cable from the coach, it begins to speak.

COACH. (A fruity voice issues from which the video coach) Welcome to video paradiso! You will not regret your choice! Please ask our authorized representative to settle the in your customized, contour gel, fully automated Video-chamber. (243)

Then the two Agents help Ma to lie into the chamber. She lies down and the agents handle around her connecting her up to various particles and tubes. They do this very quickly and she gasps or grunts once or twice. There is a breathing mask on her face. Soon they are ready to close the lid. The agents shut the lid, seal the edges, and lock then. They work extremely fast. The muted sound of the Couch’s voice continues but becomes a constant unintelligible background hum. When Jaya asks them how Ma will breathe, feed, relieve, and close functions, the agent replies:

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AGENT: Mam—it's a total comfort unit. We have a full recycling and bio-feed-in-process. Your relative will have no further need of the outside world from now till she chooses to delink. Everything is now in the customer's operation. The unit is holy self-sufficient, total self-sufficient. There is nothing to be done. (244)

In fact, Ma is enveloped within the video couch, severed from the world outside. She seems to be on a celestial voyage, a realm that defies the ordinary. Her chosen seclusion resembles an escape, a deliberate entry into the clutches of the machine. First Om, then Jeetu, and now Ma; each has succumbed to the dominion of the machine, relinquishing their human sensibilities and emotions. Within their being, the machine reigns supreme. Amidst this surreal scenario, only Jaya grasps the gravity of the situation when the true recipient of Jeetu's bodily organs, Virgil, materializes before her. She comes to the jarring realization that the elusive Ginni, with whom they had been in correspondence, was naught but a manifestation of computer-generated illusions. The veil of deception unravels, exposing the elaborate hoax orchestrated by Western buyers utilizing sophisticated technology. Jaya comes to know about the potential danger of Om's affluent job. That's why she says:

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)

The selling of human organs shows how helpless the poor people become. In this titanic clash between machines and humanity, Jaya emerges triumphant. Her resolve to reclaim her agency underscores the battle waged within *Harvest*. The play encapsulates a war for possession, a struggle that the human race must inevitably wage against the encroaching dominance of machines. While initial victories may tilt in favour of the machines, the ultimate triumph rests with humanity, particularly the resolute woman. The play peers into a prophetic tapestry of a future wherein machines progressively supplant and estrange human presence. Through Jaya's character, the play resonates as a cautionary parable. It issues a stern warning, urging the need for humans to govern technology rather than surrendering to its dominion. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* reverberates as a potent commentary on the relentless march of technology and its potential to overshadow human essence. It stands as a testament to the strength of the human spirit in the face of encroaching mechanization, advocating for the preservation of authentic connections and the resilience to assert dominance over the very tools that seek to subsume us.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* delineates how technology, often seen as a panacea for modern problems, can inadvertently erode fundamental human values. *Harvest* stands as a poignant testament to the dangers of an uncritical acceptance of technological advancement, particularly as it relates to its potential impacts on human empathy. As society becomes increasingly enmeshed with technology, there is a risk of dehumanizing individuals and seeing them merely as commodities or data points. This paper underscores the imperative for a conscious balance: embracing technological advancements while actively preserving our intrinsic human capacity for empathy and connection. It beckons readers and society at large to be wary of the costs of technological progress and to continually re-evaluate and reaffirm our ethical stances in this rapidly changing landscape. Abin Sojan comments about this play:

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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. (881)

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