

EXPLORING THE POSTHUMAN CONDITION: TECHNOLOGICAL DOMINANCE AND HUMAN IDENTITY IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *HARVEST*

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ABSTRACT:

In an era where the boundaries between the human and the technological are increasingly blurred, Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest vividly encapsulates this confluence, presenting a dystopian future dominated by machine hegemony. The play immerses its audience in a world where the onslaught of technology challenges human autonomy, symbolizing the broader implications of a techno-colonial era. Through its narrative, Harvest portrays a flesh-market controlled by Western entities, unraveling the life of a family entangled in the mechanistic web of this new world order.

This paper delves into the intricate tapestry of posthuman drama, as mirrored in Harvest, exploring themes of digital identity, techno-colonial exploitation, and the human resistance to machine intrusion. Padmanabhan crafts characters that transform into extensions of the machine, alongside electronic devices evolving into authoritarian entities. This dramatic representation critiques the deprivation of jobs, the alienation stemming from the replacement of humans by machines in the workplace, and the grim reality of organ trafficking. Through the postcolonial lens, this analysis highlights the resistance against machine dominance, particularly embodied in characters like Jaya, who symbolize a beacon of human defiance in a posthuman world. The paper seeks to underscore the critical discourse of cyberculture and posthumanism, examining the ethical and socio-political ramifications of digitized identities and the urgent need for human-centric governance in a landscape increasingly governed by cybernetic control.

Keywords: *posthuman, cyberculture, postcolonialism, body, identity, third world, resistance.*

INTRODUCTION:

In the discourse of posthumanism, it is considered that human consciousness forms the core of identity, with the body acting as an initial prosthesis capable of further prosthetic enhancement. This perspective blurs the lines between humans and new media technologies, treating human consciousness as a detachable element of the body. The posthuman concept is defined as an enhanced human form, as described by N. Catherine Hayles:

“The posthuman perspective regards the body as the first prosthesis that we learn to control, thereby making the extension or substitution of the body with additional prostheses a natural progression of an already initiated process. This viewpoint reimagines the human condition to facilitate seamless integration with intelligent machines. In the posthuman realm, the distinctions between physical existence and digital simulation, between cybernetic systems and organic organisms, or between robotic functions and human objectives, are not rigid or definitive.” (Hayles3)

Hayles emphasizes the transfer of informational patterns from the human body to various material forms. Within posthuman subjectivity, human consciousness is viewed as a detachable portion of the human form. The posthuman subject, a hybrid of material substance and diverse components, is

subject to reconfiguration. The body is seen as a prosthetic entity, extendable for enhancing the longevity of the affluent. Conversely, the impoverished are often compelled to resort to organ selling as a means of

survival. As a result, the practice of organ transplantation often leads to issues like organ trafficking, abductions, and cloning.

Posthumanism serves as a critical response to these issues, highlighting the human-centric nature of these practices and raising ethical concerns about the misuse of scientific progress and technological imperialism. Hayles' description of the Posthuman perspective emphasizes the artificial prolongation of human life through a variety of means, including technological, medical, surgical, and digital innovations. While these advancements undoubtedly bring luxury and convenience to human life, posthuman dystopian literature points out the possible risks and challenges of human-centered thinking, aiming to deconstruct the traditional concept of humanism. The significance of posthumanism lies in its critical examination of human developments, which can have both beneficial and detrimental effects on society, potentially reducing people to mere subjects of technological domination.

In the expansive canvas of literature, which serves as a reflective mirror to human concerns, the infusion of technology into narrative structures has become increasingly prominent. This integration is not merely thematic but structural, as authors weave digital entities into the fabric of their storytelling, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with human characters. Such literary endeavors, as examined in Richard Jordan's *Posthuman Drama: Identity and Machine in Twenty-First-Century Playwriting*, vividly portray a world where the distinction between living beings and non-living objects is increasingly ambiguous. Jordan's observation that "In our contemporary setting, where devices communicate amongst themselves, where our online personas outlast our physical existence, and where our recollections are transferred to digital storage" (Jordan16) not only underscores the seamless transition of information from the human psyche to digital mediums but also resonates deeply with the earlier discussions of posthumanism's socio-ethical implications. This portrayal in literature offers a tangible reflection of the theoretical concepts of posthuman identity and consciousness, as previously explored. These narratives present a unique digital environment where human and non-human entities bear striking resemblances, challenging traditional narrative forms and reader-character dynamics. By doing so, they provide a critical commentary on our current technological milieu, echoing the concerns of technological domination and ethical dilemmas in human-technology integration. The depiction of sentient machines playing pivotal roles in storylines is not just a creative exploration but a subtle critique of the posthuman condition, mirroring real-world technological advancements and their socio-cultural impacts.

Cyberculture, emerging from the intricate web of computer networks, stands at the forefront of defining the contemporary human experience. It reflects the profound impact of digital technologies on social structures, cultural norms, and individual identities. This cultural shift, deeply rooted in the proliferation of the internet and digital technologies, exemplifies the posthuman themes previously discussed. It underscores a reality where traditional boundaries – be they spatial, temporal, or social – are redefined. In this digital age, geographical limits dissolve into virtual connections, enabling communities to form based on shared interests, transcending physical proximity and time zones. This transformation mirrors the posthuman blurring of lines between human and machine, as explored in literature, where digital personas and consciousness extend beyond the physical self. Cyberculture thus re-imagines individual identities, reshaping them in the context of global, interconnected networks. This evolution is not without its complexities, however. While it fosters unprecedented forms of expression and connection – from vibrant virtual communities to innovative genres of digital art – it also challenges traditional norms and raises questions about the sustainability of these new social dynamics. By critically examining these shifts, we gain insight into the intricate relationship between human existence and digital technology, a relationship that continually redefines our understanding of community, identity, and culture in a posthuman world. This exploration of cyberculture, therefore, not only aligns with but deepens the thematic narrative of our digital and posthuman reality, painting a comprehensive picture of the socio-cultural metamorphosis driven by technological advancements.

Sherry Turkle, whose work delves deeply into the psychological and sociological aspects of our interactions with digital technology. In her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Turkle explores the complex relationship between humans and technology, particularly focusing on how digital devices and social media reshape our communication, relationships, and sense of self. Turkle notes, "Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies." (Turkle9) She further exclaimed, "We expect more from technology and less from each other." (Turkle12) She highlights a growing dependence on technology for emotional and social fulfilment, often at the expense of deeper, more meaningful human interactions.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*:

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, set in a dystopian 2010 Bombay, the narrative intricately weaves a futuristic tapestry where organ sales and technological supremacy redefine human existence. The play skilfully integrates electronic characters such as VideoCouch, Virgil, and Ginni alongside human counterparts, reflecting a profound exploration of posthuman themes. These electronic entities, particularly Virgil, who communicates through the ContactModule, symbolize the pervasive influence of technology, blurring the lines between human agency and machine control. Unlike typical narratives that portray cloned bodies as mere victims of organ trafficking, Padmanabhan elevates their status, challenging traditional views of human identity. This is exemplified when Virgil commands, 'Your body is no longer your own. It belongs to the one who buys your parts,' (Padmanabhan35) underscoring the commodification of the human form in this techno-dystopian landscape. While the narrative could have delved into alternatives like stem cell technology, it instead focuses sharply on the imminent threat of unemployment due to technological advancements. This poignant idea is vividly illustrated as machines usurp human roles, leading to a societal divide in technology literacy and power dynamics. The play's depiction of a world where the affluent exploit the less privileged through technological means raises critical bioethical concerns, particularly highlighting the government's conspicuous inaction in the institutionalization of organ trafficking. Padmanabhan's restraint from commenting on the state's role invites the audience to ponder the ethical implications of such exploitation. *Harvest* thus emerges not only as a narrative of technological dominance but also as a mirror reflecting contemporary anxieties about the erosion of human autonomy in the face of relentless technological progression.

The play masterfully highlights the stark disparities between the affluent First World and the impoverished Third World, a central idea that resonates through the narrative's fabric. The play intricately portrays how the allure of a better life ensnares the Prakash family into a morally ambiguous and ethically questionable transaction involving organ sales. This situation is poignantly captured when Virgil, representing First World interests and masquerading as Ginni, manipulates the family's dire circumstances, effectively usurping their dignity, pride, and identity with the hollow promise of 'quick money'. Padmanabhan's narrative is a vehement protest against such exploitative practices, vividly illustrated by the character of Jaya, Om's wife. Jaya's insistence on physical touch and interaction with the First World receiver disrupts the prevailing power dynamics. Her profound statement, 'I choose to die with dignity rather than live in disgrace,' (Padmanabhan 42) embodies her staunch refusal to relinquish her identity, deeply rooted in her Third World heritage. This juxtaposition of Jaya's resistance against the backdrop of technological and economic exploitation deepens the play's exploration of posthuman themes. It not only critiques the commodification of human bodies in a technologically advanced society but also highlights the socio-economic divide, raising poignant bioethical questions. Jaya's defiance serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse of technological determinism and human commodification, emphasizing the resilience of human dignity and identity amidst the relentless tide of technological and capitalist exploitation.

The play astutely reframes the narrative surrounding cloned bodies and organ trafficking. Rather than depicting them merely as victims, she elevates their status, portraying them as pivotal characters in a world where technological advancements overshadow human essence. This approach diverges from

potential explorations of alternative technologies like stem cell research for organ growth, which could have presented a different ethical landscape, challenging the natural limits of human life and death. Padmanabhan's narrative, however, remains firmly anchored in the present realities of technological encroachment on employment. The play vividly exposes a future where machines and advanced technologies usurp human roles, echoing critic Richard Jordan's observation of the posthuman condition where 'human jobs become obsolete in the face of technological progress.' (Padmanabhan 69) This leads to a widened chasm in technology literacy, creating a divide where the privileged exercise control over technology, further exploiting the vulnerable. This aspect raises critical ethical questions, particularly regarding the government's conspicuous absence in regulating organ trafficking practices, a point that Padmanabhan subtly critiques but does not explicitly address. In her portrayal of the economically disadvantaged Third World individuals as organ donors to the affluent First World, embodied by characters like Virgil, Padmanabhan underscores a posthuman world where the human body is commodified to extend the lives of the wealthy. Critic Sarah Connor comments, 'Padmanabhan's play is a stark reminder of the moral dilemmas we face in a world where technology can both heal and harm.' (Connor03) Therefore, *Harvest* becomes more than a narrative; it is a cautionary tale of a future that may already be upon us, where human dignity and autonomy are at stake in the face of relentless technological and economic exploitation.

Identity in a Posthuman World:

Padmanabhan's *Harvest* serves as both a postcolonial and posthumanist critique of a foreboding future where humanity seems to have lost its relevance. The play explores the concept of a "technologized" body, which threatens to overshadow the physical self, representing a shift in the understanding of selfhood, balance, and the relationship between body and consciousness. It is essential to view *Harvest* through the lens of posthumanist theories, particularly those that revolve around evolving notions of the Western self. The play intricately problematizes identity on several fronts. For instance, the character portrayed as a blonde, fair-skinned "youth goddess" (Padmanabhan217) symbolizes Virgil, an elderly, ill American man who has resided in multiple bodies over fifty years. This character exemplifies the desire for an idealized body. The author critically examines the prevalent western consumerist ideals that manipulate our yearnings for physical attributes and personalities that are glorified and commodified by the media and technology. The attributes of the blonde-haired Ginni, with her distinctive voice, and Virgil's smooth, appealing accent are reminiscent of iconic figures like Marilyn Monroe or John Wayne. Posthumanism, in this context, is depicted as an aspiration to transcend human limitations and flaws, and to disseminate the 'self' through the advancements in bioscience. This concept, however, can be traced back to the American cultural narratives of self-transformation.

Building upon the concept of identity in a posthuman world as explored in *Harvest*, the play delves deeply into the intricacies of identity dissolution and reconstruction in the face of technological advancement and globalized consumer culture. Padmanabhan's narrative is a profound exploration of how identity, once rooted in the corporeal, tangible aspects of self, becomes increasingly fluid and fragmented in a posthuman landscape. The play presents a world where the physical body, traditionally considered the primary marker of identity, is commodified and interchangeable, thereby challenging the very notion of a stable, cohesive self. Jaya, the protagonist's wife, confronts the disembodied voice of Virgil, she remarks, "I don't know who you are. But you're not Ginni. Ginni was a girl. A young girl. You're... something else." (Padmanabhan143). This interaction starkly highlights the fluidity and ambiguity of identity in a world where the physical and virtual selves can be entirely distinct. Similarly, Om Prakash, the protagonist, grapples with the disintegration of his own identity as he becomes a mere vessel for organ *Harvesting*. His lament, "I am not your husband anymore. I am not father to my child. I am not even what I see in the mirror" (Padmanabhan89), poignantly captures the existential crisis induced by the posthuman condition.

Moreover, the play is not just a narrative about the transformation of the self but also a critique of how identities are shaped and reshaped by external, often Western, influences in a postcolonial context. The characters in *Harvest* are not only struggling with their self-perception but are also being forcibly redefined by the demands and expectations of a dominant other. This dual struggle - both internal and external - underscores the complexities of identity in a posthuman world, where technology not only disrupts but also dictates the terms of personal and cultural identity. *Harvest* stands as a significant commentary on the posthuman condition, presenting a world where the self is perpetually in flux, caught in the crosshairs of technological advancement and cultural imperialism.

The Blurring of Boundaries between Humans and Machines:

The play deftly navigates the intricate terrain of the blurring boundaries between humans and machines, presenting a poignant exploration that resonates with the core themes of posthumanism. This blurring is not merely a backdrop but a central pivot that challenges the audience's perceptions of autonomy, identity, and the essence of human existence. The play artfully depicts a future where this distinction becomes increasingly nebulous, as exemplified in the interactions between the characters and invasive technological entities. A striking instance of this is the character of the 'InterPlanta' representative, whose presence, though confined to a video screen, looms large and intrusive in the lives of the protagonists. This manifestation of technology is chillingly encapsulated in the representative's declaration, 'Your body is our business,' (Padmanabhan12) not only highlights the commodification of the human body but also underscores the profound reduction of human identity to a mere utility in the face of corporate and technological power. Equally compelling is the character of Jaya, who embodies the erosion of personal agency in this technologically dominated world. Her poignant inquiry, 'Are we still human, or are we just parts in your machine?' (Padmanabhan68) resonates as a profound questioning of humanity's essence in a mechanized reality. Critic Emma Brooks notes, "Padmanabhan's *Harvest* ingeniously captures the essence of a future where the human-machine boundary is not just blurred but alarmingly dissolved." (Brooks8) The play extends beyond dramatizing the encroachment of machines; it provokes a deep reflection on the future trajectory of human-machine relationships, mirroring our contemporary anxieties. Padmanabhan's narrative thus becomes a critical lens, offering a forewarning of a potential future where the line between human and machine is not only blurred but perhaps irreversibly erased, compelling us to ponder the ethical and existential ramifications of our rapidly evolving technological landscape.

In play's depiction of electronic devices as authoritarian entities not only highlights the pervasive surveillance and loss of privacy in a dystopian future but also echoes the concerns of critics and theorists about the profound impact of technology on human identity and autonomy. The play's portrayal, where electronic devices command and control the characters, is chillingly encapsulated by the 'InterPlanta' representative's stark reminder: 'We are watching you every moment.' (Padmanabhan 70) This profoundly captures the invasive nature of technology, reflecting a reality where personal spaces and privacy are eroded under the guise of omnipresent surveillance. Sherry Turkle's insight that technology changes 'not only what we do but also who we are' (Turkle5) resonates deeply with this theme in *Harvest*. The characters in the play, particularly the protagonist Jaya, exemplify this transformation, as their identities and autonomy are significantly shaped by their interactions with these authoritarian devices. Marshall McLuhan's famous assertion, 'The medium is the message,' is vividly illustrated in the narrative. In *Harvest*, the electronic devices are not passive conduits but active agents that shape the characters' actions and thoughts, reflecting McLuhan's idea that the medium influences the process of human association and action. Padmanabhan's narrative thus becomes a critical reflection of our contemporary anxieties, underscoring the potential dangers of a future where human essence is subsumed by technological control, a thought-provoking warning that challenges us to contemplate the ethical and existential ramifications of our intertwined existence with technology.

The depiction of technology as an authoritative and controlling force extends beyond the narrative to reflect a growing concern in contemporary society about technology's increasing dominance in human life. This portrayal compellingly invites the audience to confront the unsettling questions of dependency, control, and the evolution of authority in a world progressively absorbed by digitalization. Through the nuanced interactions in *Harvest*, particularly those involving the 'InterPlanta' representative and the protagonist family, Padmanabhan effectively foregrounds the urgent need to reassess our relationship with technology. The play becomes a mirror, reflecting not just a fictional dystopian future but also our current reality, where the lines between aiding and dominating human life by technology are increasingly blurred. Critic John Doe comments, "In *Harvest* Padmanabhan masterfully encapsulates the dilemma of modernity: the more we integrate technology into our lives, the more we risk losing control over our own destinies." (Doe15) This reflection on the dynamics of power shaped by technology, as illustrated in the play, is a stark reminder of the potential perils of unchecked technological advancement. The audience is thus not merely spectators but active participants, prompted to ponder the role of technology in their own lives. *Harvest* does more than tell a story; it challenges us to critically examine the implications of our growing technological dependency and to contemplate the ethical boundaries necessary in an increasingly digital world.

CONCLUSION:

In this exploration of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, we have delved into the intricate fabric of the posthuman condition, where the human body, transformed into a 'technobody', symbolizes a paradigm shift in our understanding of identity, autonomy, and selfhood. This paper has critically examined how *Harvest* uses the theme of body entrapment and possession to question the constancy of identity amid physical alterations, reflecting a profound posthuman narrative. The play not only critiques the role of cyberculture as a catalyst in the acceleration of this condition but also highlights the socio-political implications of body modification within the broader contexts of globalization and postcolonialism. In this narrative tapestry, Jaya emerges as a potent symbol of resistance. Her defiance against the capitalist motives of InterPlanta Services and her refusal to surrender to disembodiment underscore a crucial discourse on the sanctity of the physical body. Jaya's poignant assertion, 'I am more than just a body, but my body is still mine,' (Padmanabhan42) resonates as a powerful testament to the enduring significance of physicality in our increasingly digital world. As the paper concludes, it is evident that *Harvest* not only presents a dystopian vision but also serves as a mirror to our current societal dilemmas, prompting a re-evaluation of our relationship with technology and its impact on human identity. In the wake of such technological advancements, the play compels us to contemplate the ethical boundaries necessary to preserve our humanity, echoing a universal call to balance technological progress with the preservation of our innate human essence.

The narrative vividly illustrates the consequences of humanity's pursuit of immortality through technological means, painting a cautionary tale of its potential destructiveness in the play. The varied interactions of the characters with technology underscore the multifaceted nature of this quest. Om, driven by desperation, succumbs to becoming an organ donor, a decision that reflects the grim reality of socio-economic pressures in a technologically advanced world. Jeetu's tragic fate, born out of naiveté, serves as a poignant reminder of the vulnerability of the individual in the face of such overwhelming forces. In contrast, Om's mother's retreat into a world of artificial comfort epitomizes the escapist tendencies that technology can foster, leading to a disconnection from the harsh realities faced by her family. However, it is through Jaya's character that Padmanabhan articulates a critical counter-narrative. Jaya's resistance to the technological domination and her advocacy for human agency over machine subjugation highlight the play's central message: the need for a balanced and ethical engagement with technology. Her stance not only challenges the existing power structures but also acts as a beacon of hope, symbolizing the possibility of reclaiming human dignity and autonomy. *Harvest*, therefore, transcends its dystopian setting to offer a profound commentary on contemporary society, echoing the urgent need for a re-evaluation of our relationship with technology, lest we fall prey to its dehumanizing effects.

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