



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.3, September, 2018

Editor : Saikat Banerjee

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St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018

Making of a New Hero(ine): A Critical Study of Manjula Padmanabhan's Play *Harvest*

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Received 10 August 2018

Revised 14 August 2018

Accepted 31 August 2018

Abstract: Heroism is largely romanticized and portrayed as masculine. According to Joanne Thompson, women as a heroine have not been portrayed as superior in strength, wisdom and power but as a “morally superior” being (397). However, from Pamela, Elizabeth Bennet to Nora and Candida, the development and change in their character-portrayals cannot be ignored. Jaya (‘Victory,’ as the name suggests), one of the central figure in the play *Harvest*, does not adhere to the given frame. Neither is she a virtuous woman in the pre-defined sense nor an ideal wife nor an exceptionally beautiful muse. Precisely, Jaya is a new hero/heroine who is deeply flawed, but brave. Heroism lies in action. The character of Jaya, as portrayed by the playwright, is not defined by her moral nature but her vitality and courage that define her true nature. The present research paper is a descriptive and analytical study of Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* within the context of heroism as an approach of study.

Keywords: Heroism, Women, Body, Virtual reality.

Heroism has always been a central theme in English literary works, starting from *Beowulf* in the Old English period and its expansion in the hands of University Wits, especially Christopher Marlowe and later by William Shakespeare, till the modern times. The notion of ‘heroism’ has been



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developed, redefined and celebrated in various ways through the ages. Modern hero is different from classical hero in the sense that neither he possesses supernatural power which makes him uncommon among the commoners nor does he fight with demons or a gruesome villain. A modern hero is a common man, an individual with the 'quest' and 'will' and the one who overcomes fear and shortcomings to challenge the oppressive socio-political systems (as Bernard Shaw described). Heroism is largely romanticized and portrayed as masculine which has been questioned by the feminist scholars. According to Joanne Thompson, women as a heroine have not been portrayed superior in strength, wisdom and power but as a "morally superior" being, in English fiction which is largely a fact of literature in general (397). However, from Pamela, Elizabeth Bennet to Nora and Candida, the variety and development in their character-portrayals cannot be ignored.

Jaya ('Victory,' as the name suggests), one of the central figure in the play *Harvest*, does not adhere to the given frame. Jaya's role develops from a being submissive to an assertive woman who was the only one to get victory (psychological) over Virgil (in the battle of pride) towards the end of the play. Heroism lies in action. Neither is she a virtuous woman in the pre-defined sense nor an ideal wife nor an exceptionally beautiful muse. Precisely, she is a new hero/heroine who is deeply flawed, but brave. Though Jaya lives a spatially immobile life within the four walls yet she maintains her individuality throughout. Her silence, in the beginning, does not suggest her acceptance but disapproval of the situation. The character of Jaya, as portrayed by the playwright, is not defined by her moral nature but her vitality and courage.

Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* was awarded the Onassis International Prize for Theatrical Plays in 1997. The play deals with the harm of the emerging organ transplant industry, resulting in the commoditization and exploitation of third world bodies. The play is set in a single room apartment of a lower-middle class locality of urban area. Forty families are living in the same building and all share a single toilet which clearly suggests the miserable condition of people in the area who struggle hard for their basic requirements every day. In the same building, one of the



rooms is inhabited by Om Prakash and his family, his mother Mrs Indumati Prakash, wife Jaya and brother Jeetu.

Shirley Ardener rightly stated that behaviour and space are mutually dependent (2). The entry of three guards from Inter Planta Services changes the atmosphere of Jaya's single room apartment. In the post-contract scene (since Om has signed the contract and became an Organ donor) the room is clean and the family is well-fed and wealthy but Ma, opposite to her nature, becomes a silent spectator, busy with her TV programmes; Jaya who is passive and drained earlier became anxious and restless and Om appears helpless since he has already signed the contract. After the contract, the presence of Ginni, a young white female animated figure, brought the drastic changes in the setting of the room and in the characters, their self-expression and their relationship to one another. Their food habits, dress culture, traditions and even relationships are changed and replaced by Ginni according to the first world standards without considering the difference of geography and location between the two. Ginni/Virgil could not comprehend their habits and find their lifestyle inappropriate while judging the people of the third world according to her/his American standards.

Harvest deals with the unhealthy relationship between developing and developed countries in the futuristic sense. It indicates toward the increasing centralization of global economy and the gap between East and West along with the medical and technological advancements. The play creates an argument against the flourishing organ industry which results in the commoditization of the third world human body, considering them as sub-humans, reduced to the body or mere body parts. The play describes the world of organ industry where not human labour (replaced by machines) but human body/parts are available, marketable, having exchange value. Sujatha Moni wrote, "Unlike human labor, organs and bodies or body parts cannot be reproduced once they have been extracted" (3). Shital Pravinchandra critically analysed the play and wrote, "The organ is not a product of the *labouring* third-world body" and it cannot be reproduced by labour (1, 5). It presents a dystopian world where the rich from the developed world purchases health organs from the poor



of the third world country for their own survival and development. The play suggestively deals with the issue of increasing polarisation between developed and developing countries, the increasing gap between rich and poor, use of technology in a disadvantaged section of the society and its results.

In the play, the character of Jaya is in the centre, a person with reasoning mind who is in the socio-cultural role of a wife and daughter-in-law. She stands apart from the other characters. From the beginning of the play, she behaves according to her roles but always marking her discontent with the practices which subordinates her. Jaya's relationship with her brother-in-law Jeetu suggests her discontent and "refusal to be confined within the traditional roles of wife and daughter-in-law" (Moni 7). To qualify as a donor, Om lied to InterPlanta Services that he is single and Jaya is his sister and Jeetu's wife. It is only Jaya who understands the situation and questions to Om for taking up the decision of selling his body organs. She asked Om when he was signing the agreement in front of the guards of InterPlanta, "You don't need any confirmation from us?" (Padmanabhan 19). She argued that he has made a wrong decision for comfort and wealth.

Ironically, even in the ultra-modern world of technology, the woman is demanded to perform her socially assigned and biologically non-obligatory role of child bearing to create the future generation of donors in the third world. Virgil said to Jaya,

VIRGIL. We look for young men's bodies to live in and young women's bodies in which to sow their children –

JAYA. Why! Don't you have your own?

VIRGIL. We . . . lost the art of having children. (Padmanabhan 96)

A male virtual figure Virgil told to Jaya that it is her destiny as a woman (Padmanabhan 97). Although, as part of the third world, males and females both were exploited by Virgil the exploitation was discriminatory and gendered in nature. He narrates a make-believe world to



convince Jaya to sign the contract and give birth to his child through artificial insemination. Jaya resists against having any kind of virtual/contractual relation with Virgil, a rich man from the First World. Jaya reacts that she was not interested in *versions* of people, “I don’t want to know a ghost. I want real hands touching me!” (99). She fights to protect her ‘self’ and not to sell her body for mechanical comforts. She asserted that neither she will sell her body parts nor give rights to anybody else on her body as Om and Jeetu did nor she will ‘get into a box’ in pursuit of virtual fantasies like the mother (91). Jaya insisted Virgil come to her in person and *risk* his skin to get her consent.

VIRGIL. Zhaya –listen to me –you can’t hope to win this one!

JAYA. I’ve discovered a new definition for winning. Winning by losing. I win if you lose. . . . It’s your fault. If you want to play games with people, you should be careful not to push them off the board. You pushed me too far. Now there’s nothing left for me to lose – (100-101)

Virgil said, “The world you live in is too dangerous for me, Zhaya” (99). He said that it is useless to show pride as ‘pride’ is nothing but “a poor man’s fancy dress” (101). The humiliation and rejection did not weaken Jaya’s sense of self-respect; she even responded more confidently and assertively by making Virgil pronounce her name correctly as “Jaya” and not “Zhaya” (102). Jaya refused to talk any further until Virgil correctly pronounced her name and he was compelled to do so. She negotiated with Virgil and asked him to accept the new set of rules and come to meet her in person. After losing everyone she lost the fear of losing and she did not leave herself unheard at the end whereas none of the other characters could raise their voice or even realised the nature of oppression over them since the very beginning of the play. When Virgil said that she cannot win, Jaya asserted, “I’ve discovered a new definition for winning. Winning by losing. I win if you lose” (100). Jaya turned her marginal space as the very space of empowerment (Moni 11). The very exploitation gave her voice, empowered her to take a stand for her and resist against the oppressive



authority of Virgil by turning her body which was a site of oppression into an agency. She chooses death as a hero and refused to compromise with her body. She refuses to perform the orders given by Virgil, rather she makes him follow her ways for a while.

When the play opened, Jaya was seen looking outside and expressionless. But it ends with Jaya as “happy and relaxed” who was sure of her close death and also her victory over the tyranny of Virgil. A cluttered small room filled with noises as described in the beginning turned into rich and filled with joyous music at the end of the play. The room was filled with the presence of outspoken Jaya unlike the beginning “a room in which two people think the other two don’t exist” as Jaya expressed in the first scene (Padmanabhan 8). It was Jaya finally who took the decision for herself. She declined to become the harvester of human body for Virgil for consumption as she argued, “I’m not willing to caretake *my* body for *your* sake!” (101). She gives preference to her physical realities than escaping and being cheated by virtual fantasies. Hence, she challenges science and technology to have power over her body. At the end of the play, Jaya masters herself asserts her space and maintains dignity by voicing her right over her own body like a hero. The play concludes open-ended and unresolved.

In the play, it is Virgil, a virtual body is a tyrant. Whether he exists in reality as he projected himself is uncertain. He is not only monitoring and targeting Jaya’s body but also controlling Om and Jeetu and taken over the rights of their body. Virgil has ended their familial and social life and made them alienated from their own body. The play presents the technological power in a masculine figure through the image of Virgil and the same was suggested by Judy Wajcman who argued, “the very language of technology, its symbolism, is masculine” (qtd. in Wolmark 217). Virgil took over Jeetu’s body to defeat ageing and death and tried to control Jaya’s body as he mentioned his interest in “childbearing women” (Padmanabhan 95). Virgil, a wealthy man from the first world country targets and controls Om, Jeetu and Jaya hence, three human bodies among four of the family members, leaving Ma’s old body as incapable to serve. The relationship of dominant-



oppressed between developed country as buyer/receiver and developing nation as donor represents the power as masculinized and poverty as feminised.

Against the popular image of romantic, fancy, beautified and easy going world, Manjula Padmanabhan allegorises and presents a frightening vision of a futuristic, technologically advanced world. New technologies have generated multiple utopian and dystopian fantasies but such fantasies are, as Constance Penley and Andrew Ross argued, “an expression of real popular needs and desires” (qtd. in Wolmark 215). Here, in the play, a virtual body (Ginni, a female figure) from Virginia in America, a first world country is controlling real, thinking and breathing bodies of the disadvantaged section of India, the third world country. The virtual figure provides Virgil with a tool to have *power over* the others and without even crossing the boundary of his home space in his actual body he crosses the boundary of nation and controls and manipulates the lives of the people who were living in the other part of the world. Ginni/Virgil who belongs to the first world country is in the role of receiver, buyer and hence, privileged. In exchange for the *life support* that he offers to the poor sections of the third world, he purchases a body, health, youth and long life for him. The contact module, a device which looks like a globe, hanging from the ceiling, was the decision maker which controls Om and his family. Ginni commands Om to smile always for the good health of his body organs. Ginni who is a computer-animated image of a beautiful young white woman made Om and Jeetu follow her commands blindly and mesmerised Ma to appreciate her beauty by calling her an angel.

Virgil told to Jaya that Ginni is not real only after successfully completing body transplant. He plays game with Om and Jeetu to lure them as he says to Jaya, “For every fish, a dish” (Padmanabhan 95). Virgil chose a gender (as Ginni, a female) for performance in front of Om and his family which was a strategically made choice. Virgil never comes in his real body but always in desirable form, manipulated other’s gaze to serve his purpose. It is not any woman in real who persuades Om and Jeetu to make them agree for transplants but a man with white male gaze behind



Ginni's face, a beautified image of a woman. Ginni's presence makes Jaya uneasy. Laura Mulvey wrote, "Women are constantly confronted with their image in one form or another ... Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man ..." (qtd. in Pollock 180). Virgil chose to become Ginni for Om and Jeetu and he changes into Jeetu's body and came in his skin through the Contact Module to persuade Jaya though he fails in Jaya's case because of her strong determination and self-respect.

The control of Ginni over the family members compels them to live lifeless lives as Jaya mentions that "we're just spare parts in someone else's garage –" (34). The restricted, machinery life makes Om and Ma insensitive and mechanical. They obey Ginni blindly, for example, Om mentions, "Ginni says – the curse of the Donor World is sentimentality" to explain Jaya about Jeetu's condition (49). He forbids Jaya to risk her own skin by taking care of Jeetu who came back sick after spending a few days on the streets. The donor's family was not treated as human beings but as body parts which needs to be protected to make use of it. I was only Jaya who understood and argued that Ginni spends money on them and cares for them "just as much as she cares about the chicken she eats for dinner" only in desire of the best when it gets to her table finally (50).

Jeetu expresses his disgust for the changed interior of the room by calling it a "fancy prison" (59). When Jeetu's eyes are transplanted his condition becomes pathetic as he is not able to see, to sleep, dream or even to cry. Jeetu loses his eyes and he could see only those images that were projected into his mind directly by Ginni/Virgil. He not only lost his eyes but his vision towards life, his pride and his sense of freedom. When Jaya accuse Virgil of the death of Jeetu whose body organs are transplanted into the old body of Virgil, he contemptuously defined death in two ways: *body-death* and *self-death* (93). Jeetu has lost both as he lost his self, his freedom to take his decisions and he also lost his body (transplanted) due to Virgil's greed for youth, health and long life. Sujatha Moni wrote that plucking out of Jeetu's eyes symbolises the "removal of the



indigenous gaze” and replacing it with unfamiliar images according to Virgil’s wish (7). Hence, there was no escape and no choice for the third world underprivileged bodies, not even death.

The play represents the world of advanced technology and science with the cultural and gendered practices same as existing through in different and more hideous manner. It makes Virgil a Mephistophelian figure in the play that not only controls other’s body and self but also takes control over their death. He said to Jaya that she cannot choose death for herself since the food he has provided contains anti-suicide drugs. Even then he failed to break Jaya’s determination to defeat him and not to submit herself.

VIRGIL. Zh . . . Jaya. Jaya. Jaya – listen to me –

JAYA. No! You listen to me! I want to be left alone – truly alone. I don’t want to hear any sounds, I don’t want any disturbances. I’m going to take pills, watch TV, have a dozen baths a day. . . . For the first time in my life and maybe the last time of my life, I’m going to enjoy myself, all by myself. I suggest you take some rest. You have a long journey ahead of you and it’s sure to be hard one. (102)

Jaya appeared happy and relaxed towards the end of the play after challenging the tyrant Virgil who destroyed her family life and all relations. Jaya, towards the end of the play, emerges as a hero, proving Hemingway’s belief in the human power that a man (human) can be destroyed but cannot be defeated. Jaya’s indomitable spirit redefines the idea of ‘hero’.

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www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018

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