



# Cyber-dystopia as projected in Harvest and the adapted movie '*Deham*'

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Received: 10 Jun 2025; Received in revised form: 05 Jul 2025; Accepted: 10 Jul 2025; Available online: 14 Jul 2025

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**Abstract**— Cyber dystopia or algorithmic dystopia is the depiction of an imaginary society in which digitized technology and the algorithms associated with it determine the present and future of the inmates who are more or less trapped in its wireless authority. These texts have a technology-based narrative which influences the social, economic, political, and psychological domains of the characters involved in it. Major disruption is caused in these realms due to a set of algorithmic components like virtual reality, artificial intelligence, panoptic surveillance and ubiquitous connectivity which disperses human individuality and identity. The movie *Deham* (The body) which was made in English is adapted from the play *Harvest*. It was released in 2001 and directed by Govind Nihalani



**Keywords**— commodification, gadgets, invasive, panopticism, surveillance, transplant, virtual.

The play *Harvest* won the inaugural Onassis prize in 1997, and the movie *Deham* (The body) won the Netpac (Network for Promotion of Asian Cinema) award for the best Asian film at the 25<sup>th</sup> Goteborg Film festival, held at Sweden. Both the movie and the play depict a futuristic story dealing with multiple themes, prominent of which is the illegal organ trade rampant in developing countries like India. Govind Nihalani, director of the movie says that it is a “serious social sci-fi film”.

*Harvest*, first published in 1997 was a futuristic play set to be dated in Mumbai of 2010. The paper presents an analysis of its relevance in the modern times when organ transplantations and organ trade mafias are headlines of our daily news and cyber security and AI has become a cliché in our daily lives. Manjula Padmanabhan’s imaginative work has turned out to be a bleak prophesy of the impact of cyber culture on modern man and society.

Both the play and the movie present a set of relations tensed with coercion, control and commodification of the human body and mind. Organ transplant is undoubtedly a path breaking advancement in the field of medicine and promises another chance of life for a terminally sick person. Like every technology which can be misinterpreted and misused, the organ transplantation also

has a dark side. Illegal organ trade and its psychological, economic, social and emotional implications are also subsidiary themes addressed by Manjula Padmanabhan.

Social isolation and complete subjugation of free will to the rules stated by Interplanta and corporate agents becomes another salient feature of cyber dystopia. Starvation and poverty forced Om to enlist as a donor at Interplanta services. By doing this he also agrees to abide by their rules and regulations. Om describes his interview at Interplanta where he found that the office resembled a ‘machine’ (Padmanabhan,191) and “a cage shaped like a tunnel” (Padmanabhan,192). Upon entry, every person had to remove their clothes, get injected and sterilised. Following this was a physical data verification where the donor of organs and the receiver are matched and filed. After this process the donor becomes a ‘resource’ of the Interplanta Agency and they will provide all the maintenance needed. The Interplanta agents ensure that their resources are well-fed and kept ready to be harvested any time as per the will of the receiver. Thus, the receiver hopes to live for ever through the bodies of the poor donor in exchange of material comforts and gadgets which the latter could never access otherwise. An individual with all his dreams, ambitions and relationships are now reduced to

a set of organs which can lease another person live in/through his body.

The family is almost entirely devoid of friends or visitors, except Ma's friend from the chawl, Bidyut Bai, who comes to use the bathroom. Ma lets her because she wants her friends to still be her friends. But with the rules set by Ginni and her fear of contamination by outsiders, the family becomes isolated from those around them. The precarity of this affluence, their isolation, and the impending threat of death makes the play all the more poignant.

The exploitative nature of capitalist economy and commodification of human bodies of third world countries is evident when Om says he did not choose but 'they have chosen him'. They do not have a choice and their future is now dictated by some virtual corporations. He thinks that he is the luckiest person to whom the job is offered but later when Indumati enquires about the nature of his job, she is astonished to know that he is paid not for his merit or calibre but for his body and organs. In her despair Jaya says to Ma. "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? (Padmanabhan,23)

Faceless transnational corporations and their agents that invade modern man's private space through virtual platforms and new social medias are no more farfetched as was in 1997. The male and female body, aged and young body, rich man's and poor man's body, ailing and healthy body are all involved in the exploitative organ trade as commodities that can be transacted in monetary terms. Virgil justifies to Jaya that "We support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves" (Padmanabhan,267)

The names 'Interplanta service' and 'Harvest' suggest the human body projected as metaphorical private farms exploited by the opulent first world. Men's bodies are commodified for their organs and women's bodies are targeted for their fertility and impregnation so that they can perpetuate their class and race in exchange of material wealth and facilities.

Sexuality of Jeetu, Om and Jaya are also manipulated through the cyber connectivity installed at their single room tenement. As the body and its sexuality is inseparable, Jeetu, who is a gigolo himself, claims of complete control on his body even when he sleeps with

someone who is ready to pay him enough. Though he says that his body is not "owned" by anyone (Padmanabhan,213) it is transacted on a daily basis for someone else's gratification. Blind Jeetu returns with a futuristic optic device which projects a semi-pornographic image of Ginni direct to his brain and he is still enticed to donate his entire body to her. The virtual image of Ginni is capable of manipulating Jeetu's sexual desires and totally hijacks his consciousness. Ginni says "... it's me you're seeing 'coz I'm beaming my video image straight into your mind! So you can see me right in front of you, all of me, for once, not just my face" (Padmanabhan,69)

Sexual desire for the virtual image of Ginni prompts him to continue living even after his eyes were harvested. The Interplanta Corporation still have targets to be attained as Jeetu is a potential donor in this state too. The movie *Deham* has been successful in presenting a dystopian concoction of desire, greed and technology though its unique characterisation with an urban backdrop of Mumbai.

In a dystopian society women are valued for her capacity for reproduction and ability to impart sexual pleasures. This feature is explicit in the portrayal of Jaya and her desire for Jeetu is as much for satiety as it is to conceive a child. Her marriage to Om has been strained due to his contract with Interplanta Corporation. Oppressive surveillance mechanism is installed in Prakash's home and through this Ginni keeps constant surveillance on the family. Though Jaya tried to dissuade him from the contract, he insisted on signing it and she continues to remind him that Ginni is an illusion. Om's attempts to please Ginni is a mixture of the fear of losing their newly acquired affluence and his sexual desire for her, although he is aware that her body will never be accessible to him. His servility become a long shadow of the colonialism as Jaya calls him the 'chicken' that will soon be dinner for Ginni.

Constant fear of the outside world is another feature of the dystopian literature. Om is rendered catatonic at the guard's arrival to take him for donation. The whole family as a unit responds tremblingly to their knock and they take Jeetu instead of Om. Jaya calls him a 'cabbage' (Padmanabhan,236). His vegetative existence devoid of any human concern for himself and those associated with him makes him the epitome of a dystopian protagonist.

The dehumanised state in which the family lives is evident when they are given food supplies by the Interplanta Corporation. Food is now administered pellet - like and is referred to as fuel for "maintenance of personal resources" (Padmanabhan,196). Denial of free thought and the subsequent insecurity of the characters involved is another distinct feature of dystopian literature and it is discernible throughout the movie and play. Virgil , though

very condescend while dealing with the family is symbolic of the sinister panoptic surveillance on the members which makes their existence invasive and suffocating. Ginni and her patronising attitude make things difficult for the Prakash family. Though she refers to them as honey, she considers them as vulnerable as 'human gold fish bowls' under her complete control.

Ginni knows each member and their deepest desires and tries to manipulate them for the interest of the corporation. She clearly knew that Jeetu was not taken in Om's place by mistake, rather it was well-planned. Ginni also knows Jaya's fertility cycle and her ideal time for being pregnant. There is no individuality or privacy of thought or choice of action within the tenement.

The Interplanta services and their digitised technologies introduce a video coach and a contact module in to the Prakash family which invades the domestic peace and warmth replacing it with a desolate ambience. Though distant, Ginni/Virgil maintains a deliberate voyeuristic relationship with the family members through the contact module. The global impact of the technical advancement in the field of surveillance is presented in both the play and movie as a typical dystopian feature and it becomes a recurring motif associated with the theme. "Surveillance is a fundamental social and political activity. It involves control, influence and management through the medium of information, and as such is a combination of knowledge and intervention" (Barnard-Wills, 2).

It is through " a white, faceted globe" (Padmanabhan, 221) the contact module installed by Interplanta services at Prakash's home that Virgil who is an American organ receiver makes a controlling presence in Prakash's family. Virgil poses as Ginni and seduces Prakash with her stunning but digital image. The emotional contact and physical identity of individuals become questioned and gadgets take control of people as their identities become algorithmic. From a single room tenement which barely had any furniture, their house becomes flooded with gadgets like AC, TV and treadmill. Running water and bathroom, though basic amenities, are introduced as a luxury in the house. The gross inequality in material comfort and possession of the first and third world countries brought out for further discourse is another feature of dystopic literature. These gadgets invade their private space by making them insecure overshadowed by the fear of losing them once they fall out of favour with Ginni and her corporation. Ginni's technological invasion into the domestic space of the family is in close similarity with Foucault's concept of the superiority and power which "was exercised over bodies through a system of surveillance and via a grid or network of material coercions which effected an efficient and

controlled increase (minimum expenditure, maximum return) in the utility of the subjected body" (Smart,74)

Ma's communication and personal contact with family members and friends are decreased due to her indulgence in the entertainment made available through digital technology .Her presence, interaction and contribution in vital aspects of the family is considerably reduced and she conveniently forgets her role in the family. Ma is totally absorbed in the visuals on her 750 channels offered by Super Deluxe Video Paradiso which entertains and engages her with a virtual world and feeds her time to time with an in- built processor. She finds refuge by cutting herself off from the family mentally and physically. The video coach is a sarcophagus for Ma who is simultaneously a victim and a tyrant of the patriarchal social set up and the dehumanisation of technology. Her sycophancy towards Om who is the only earning member of the family and tyranny towards the dependents like Jaya and Jeetu is evident in her abusive words thrown around. She calls Jaya "ho-you", "barren dog", and Jeetu a "pimping rascal", and "soul's disgrace". Her maternal instincts are dried up and she retreats to total silence and is not bothered even when Jeetu is mistakenly taken by the Interplanta agents in place of Om. Over indulgence in technically projected visuals and ideas make Ma insensitive and indifferent to the family to which she belongs and her family as a social institution becomes of a loose structure.

Prakash loses interest in his wife Jaya and falls for the looks of the virtual version of Ginni .Wireless technology, communication and money of the first world disrupts the peace and sanity of a third world family. Exploitation becomes digital and the victims are overpowered by the massive loss of slow deterioration leading to death. Their body, emotions and relations become pawned to the unlimited money and predatory consumerism of the first world citizens.

Helen Gilbert in her introduction to the Anthology of the Postcolonial Plays opines that "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." (Gilbert,216) The play can also be a nightmarish extension of the panic-stricken city- dwellers across the globe who are trapped in the hectic and insecure competition of a capitalistic society. They are forced to barter their personal joys and individuality to the transnational corporations in pursuit of transient material gains.

Internet and cyber connectivity provide Virgil a virtual entry in Prakash's family through 'cybernetic

circuits'. Appearing as a beautiful American blonde, Ginni invades and controls the Prakash family. Identity of an individual becomes what is projected through the digital algorithm and the gap between this real and the projected reality creates vacuum and havoc in personal relationships. This feature of the play, imaginatively foreseen by Manjula Padmanabhan has turned out to be a shocking reality which baffles interpersonal relationships in modern society.

Human identity is in crisis and the boundaries of individuality and family are blurred with the advent of new technology. Dehumanisation is another feature of dystopic literature and the play is punctuated with it. As per Om's contract with Interplanta, he is a bachelor and Jaya is his sister. Om is now obsessed with Ginni and her looks. Jaya's emotional and domestic space is intruded by the digitization of identity projected by the dictates of the contact module. As the field of cyber technology and internet becomes more advanced it becomes more complex and a woman like Jaya gets overpowered and confused.

As per Virgil and his corporation, Jaya is also a prized asset as, "young women's bodies in which to sow their children" (Padmanabhan,267). Jaya is tempted at this offer but is unable to comprehend the virtuality involved. The irony is that Virgil also knows that Jaya is in her fertility cycle for three days and his guards are ready at her door with an implant through which she can be impregnated without a real human intercourse and he calls it a mere formality. Masculine sexuality and fatherhood is redefined in the context when Om is unable to father Jaya's child, Jeetu is a male prostitute and it is the technology that is available to inseminate Jaya. Paternity becomes a social and technical fantasy when Padmanabhan suggests this radical way to make Jaya pregnant.

Binary opposition created by the duality of the coloniser and the colonised is implied when Virgil says to Jaya, "The body you knew is still alive. He was willing to sell and I was willing to buy" (Padmanabhan,83). This duality is thwarted at the end when Jaya asserts "but I'll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman. And I'll get more pleasure out of that first moment of death than I've had in my entire life so far!" (Padmanabhan,91). Death becomes the only strategy to fight and conquer the diabolic arrogance of Virgil supported by cyber technology and global agencies.

She threatens to kill herself if Virgil does not physically appear at her doorstep or attempt to impregnate her artificially. She asserts female sexuality when she asserts "I want real hands touching me. I want to feel a real weight upon me..." Virgil says to Jaya that pride is a poor man's fancy dress and she should do as he suggests. Jaya takes pride in the tangible physical nature of her body and

her absolute right over her death though she has lost all rightful control on her life. "I'm going to take my pills, watch TV, have a dozen baths a day, eat for three instead of one. For the first time in my life, and maybe the last time in my life, I am going to enjoy myself, all by myself" (Padmanabhan,273). Jaya also attempts to correct Ginni and her pronunciation of the Indian names Omprakash, Jaya and Jeetu which are distorted and rendered meaningless as "Auwm, Praycash, Zhaya, and Jittoo" as well.

It is significant that as her name suggests victory, it is Jaya, a woman alone who revolts against the tyranny of digitalisation and emerges triumphantly by asserting her individuality, though for a short while.

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