Destitute Indians at the Crossroad: Auctioned Body Parts in Padmanabhan's *Harvest* and Doomed Wealth in Sharma's *The Plebian Rag's*

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Sitting under the shadow of the cataclysmic British rule for close to two centuries, during which British or western lifestyle was imposed on almost every fabric of Indian life, many Indian literary authors present characters whose excruciating economic malaise and yearning for western technology pollute and wreck their cultural heritage and identity. The anxious and susceptible characters of Indian authors are prone to western temptations, enticements, which they misconstrued for a bridge to prosperity and tranquility. Besieged by a grim choice of abject poverty and corrosive wealth devoid of cultural dignity, Manjula Padmanabhan's characters in *Harvest* and Sunil Sharma's characters in *The Plebian Rag's* desperately spurn or embrace western lifestyle with its attendant consequences.

Keywords: destitute, materialism, colonialism, temptation, organs, culture, dissention, destruction

Introduction

As graduates or victims of close to two centuries of British or western colonialism, many Indian literary authors present characters whose agonizing economic malady and yearning for western lifestyle stain and shred their cultural heritage and identity. As symbols of deprived contemporary Indians at the crossroad, the anxious and susceptible characters these authors depict are prone to western inducements, which they naively perceive as a gateway to self-fulfillment and to lavished lifestyle of their colonial masters, who had and continue to encroach into their lands to reap with impunity and to impose a "superior culture" that lures Indians to their doom. Because avid hardship often pulls people to destruction, some Indians, as Manjula Padmanabhan, an Indian playwright, journalist, and comic strip artist portrays in his award-winning play, *Harvest* (1996), accept an alluring capitalist lifestyle that hurts and haunts them. Facing a grim choice of abject poverty and materialism devoid of cultural dignity, Jaya, a metaphor for resistance, modern woman, and hope, resists all residuals of colonialism and the emergence of an imperial agenda, which preys on the body parts of impoverished Indians. In consonance with Padmanabhan, Sunil Sharma, an Indian critique, poet, and essayist in his work, *The Plebian Rag's Shorts Collection: The Streets Speak Chasing the Voices...* (2010), presents characters who are alarmed by corrosive capitalism, lured by illusive wealth and bewildered by the loss of their self-worth and venerable culture.

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Anguish, Conversion, and Despoliation of Organs

Padmanabhan presents a destitute Indian family in *Harvest* from which wealthy westerners harvest organs with impunity after the provision of deceptive and minimal “gifts”. Her characters are more like victims of organs trafficking, which “is the recruitment, transport, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of force, fraud, coercion, abduction, positions of vulnerability and exploitation, with the purpose being the removal of their organ(s) for transplantation” (Bowden, 2013, pp. 451-495). In *Harvest*, Om, the breadwinner of the Prakash family, is compelled by the loss of his job as clerk and is tricked to trade his organs to intrusive western buyers/usurpers for basic needs, but his escape from poverty alters his identity, creates a bumpy relationship in his family and with his neighbors. While Padmanabhan’s Om and some family members happily welcome the deal, it must be noticed that beneath this seemingly plush and debonair, brews dissent and frustration as characters’ new way of life becomes a mirage, thus exposing the vacuous nature of western capitalism and lifestyle. The giving away of body parts is tantamount to surrendering one’s identity and culture in a permanent manner to Ginni, a metaphor for capitalism and foreign encroachment in this futuristic play. No doubt,

Ginni’s dictates quickly come to govern the minutiae of the Indians’ lives, specifying what and when they can eat, how they should conduct their personal hygiene and, to some extent, how they can relate to each other. This deterritorialised power, exercised at a distance yet all-invasive in its effects, precipitates the breakdown of the family as a social unit as Om, his mother, his wife Jaya, and his brother Jeetu (Jaya’s secret lover) each compromise their humanity and/or betray their kin in their hollow quests for affluence. (Gilbert, 2006, p. 123-130)

This instant usurpation of the Prakash family suggests a stunning turn as that the play begins with the Prakash family in harmony and at the helm of their Indian culture. Although Jaya who is only 19 looks older, is thin and haggard, and Ma is stooped, scrawny, crabby and wears a threadbare shirt and looks older than her 19 years, they still uphold their culture and bear their identities.

To showcase her culture, Jaya has a red dot on her forehead, and to point to the sense of their common, recognizable identity, all the characters in *Harvest* walk around their home without shoes, welcome their neighbors without perceiving them as beasts of burden, and share the same bathroom with 40 different families without indignation. Glued to abject poverty and hardship, the Prakash family seems happy, kind, tolerant, united, and culturally rooted. The world of members of this family, nevertheless, crashes when Om loses his job and InterPlanta Company seizes on this vulnerability to offer him a “job” as organ donor. “InterPlanta Services will maintain Om and his immediate family in a consumerist lifestyle in exchange for Om living as a spare-parts inventory for a recipient half a world away” (Halpin, 2014, p. 213-223). Ginni, the distant ambassador western interests uses flush toilets, kitchen appliances, television, running water, and contact module to subjugate the Prakash family. “As though the enforced changes were gateway drugs to a radical lifestyle transformation, Om’s family has largely eliminated their contact with their neighbours, replacing it with in-home entertainments” (Halpin, 2014, p. 213-223).

In his piece, “Identifying Identity”, Philip Gleason (1995) holds that “the word identity was ideally adapted to talking about the relationship of the individual to society” (p. 194). In this light, we note that the Prakash Indian family in *Harvest* experiences an unusual and an incessant shift in relation to their standing in its Indian community. While some of the characters are glued to western technology such as a 750-channel television, which Ma spends time flipping through channels, others question their worth when faced with the

reality of the “job” Om has taken on. Jaya, Om’s wife and a metaphor for an opinionated modern woman, resistance, and hope in the play, laments how Om’s decision to donate or say sell his organs to some unknown white lady from the west has radically altered his life, and by extension, their marital relationship: “He’s sold his rights to his organs! His skin. His eyes. His arse. Sold them!” (Padmanabhan, 1996, p. 223). It is a daunting task for Jaya to concede that her husband’s body was worth so little and that someone could buy it piece by piece under the watchful eyes of her husband and mother (Ma). Via humiliating and exploitative practices of this nature, the west “imposed and maintained its codes in its colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, p. 221).

In his discussion about America, Gleason insists that the turmoil of the 1960s was “a challenge to every individual to decide where he or she stood with respect to the traditional values, beliefs, and institutions that were being called into question” (Gleason, 1995, p. 195). In the same vein, each character in *Harvest*, a metaphor for the most westernized Indian town, Mumbai (where the play is set), and contemporary India at large, must decide if the loss of dignity is comparable to the basic living accommodations obtained from such fickle and exploitative cross-cultural relationships. Through InterPlanta Services, characters lose the core of their being to materialism, a hurricane which tears apart a vibrant culture in the economic headquarter of India, which is quickly losing its cultural heritage to western endearments. Reduced to its essence and put as a whole, capitalism which would be described in traditional culture as a materialistic and technological hurricane sweeps through Mumbai, India, leaving on its tracts pieces of a fused and a confused culture and identity. In Chopra Anuj’s “Harvesting Kidneys from the Poor for Rich Patients”, he describes the bitter experience of an Indian organ seller:

Tears well up in Guna Ponraj’s rheumy eyes as he stares at the hideous scar running down his side. A year ago, he consented to a practice he assumed would be the swiftest way to escape his mounting debts: swapping a kidney for cash.... An organ procurer promised Ponraj, 38, an auto-rickshaw driver with a fourth-grade education, the equivalent of \$2,500 for one of his kidneys. “Humans don’t need two kidneys, I was made to believe,” he says, now regretting his decision. “I can sell my extra kidney and become rich, I thought.” But he was swindled and received only half the amount promised. And since the operation, Ponraj often misses work because of excruciating pain around his hip, pushing him more deeply into debt. (Anuj, 2008, pp. 33-34)

Jaya quickly notices the sudden collapse of their culture and identity in the play, and confronts Om whom Ma defends:

JAYA: You said it wouldn’t affect us—but see what it’s done already!

OM: So tell me—what? IN exchange for your
Old kitchen you have a new modern one

JAYA: You call this food? This goat-shit? She
Indicates the pellets they have been eating.

MA: It’s better than what you make

JAYA: And call me your sister—what’s
That? If I’m your sister, what does that
Make you? Sister, huh! My forehead burns
When I say that word “sister”!

MA: Shoo! Are you a street woman? To speak
In such a voice?

OM: You think I did it lightly. But at the cost
of calling you my sister...we’ll be rich!

Very rich! Insanely rich! But you'd rather
 in this one small room, I suppose!
 Think it's such a fine thing—living day in,
 Day out, like monkeys in a hot-case—lulled
 To sleep by our neighbors' rhythm
 Farting! Dancing to the tune
 of the melodious traffic! And starving. Yes, you'd
 prefer this to being called my sister on a
 stupid slip of paper no-one we know will
 ever see! (Padmanabhan, 1996, p. 223)

These exchanges highlight cracks in the family and the struggle between Indian cultural values and those of the west. Ma's split personality and her new hybrid culture are evident, as she is concerned about Jaya's tone. To her, Jaya's high pitch while talking to her husband is not congruent with their cultural values, yet she favors western materialism over the serenity and simple living that has just been traded by her son, Om. Like Ma, Om's focus is on wealth, even when his identity, family, and culture are in erosion. Conversely, Jaya dreads the loss of her dignity and identity as she challenges Virgil toward the end of the play: "Huh, my life? It's not really mine any more. You've shown me that. The only thing I have which is still my own is my death. My death and my pride" (p. 248). While discussing the representation of indigenous people, particularly Aboriginal peoples, in his article "The Myth of Authenticity", Gareth Griffiths touches on "the displacement of their peoples in policy assimilation", and one can safely assert that such displacement is evident in the Prakash family once they instantly start assimilating western lifestyle by altering their eating habits, lifestyle, and above all their belief and value system.

Dissention and the Defense of a Culture

This cultural transformation/alteration does not go without resistance. Jaya is the lone character who actively resists capitalism and exploitation in the play. She risks her life in a bid to save an Indian heritage, which is prone to utter collapse. Threatening to kill herself, she yells to Virgil, "For the first time in my life and maybe the last time in my life, I'm going to enjoy myself, all by myself" (p. 250). Jaya, at this point, has clarity on what she needs to do in order to sustain and keep her identity, even if it means losing her life at a young age of 19. She will not and does not embrace what her husband, brother in law, and mother in law have embraced, which is forced upon them for a fatuous promise of a better life.

In their short essay "Place", Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin discuss place and displacement as "crucial features" of post-colonial discourse and this is particularly poignant in the case of *Harvest* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, p. 345). As can be expected of such a feature, place in "post-colonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. It is characterized first by a sense of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies, or the more widespread sense of displacement from the imported language, of a gap between the 'experienced' environment and descriptions the language provides, and second, by a sense of the immense investment of culture in the construction of place" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, p. 345). The Prakash family loses control over its own home, culture, and way of life, and are owned and constantly watched via a contact module or say surveillance camera installed in their home without their consent or understanding that their private lives will be watched and controlled from across the world.

In “Colonialism and the Desiring Machine”, Robert J. C. Young refers to the “Empire” as a machine, one that even in resistance works effectively; this is more than likely due to the fact that if the machine is working properly, it will prompt resistance. But what is most relevant is that when considering *Harvest*, the machine is in full effect via InterPlanta and desire is one of the deciding factors as to how effective the machine will be. At some degree, every character had a desire that at first seemed worth the trade-off, but in the end, it was only Ma and Jeetu who could not escape their desiring, and so the imperialistic machine mauls down their identity and culture. The effectiveness of the machine, however, relies on the perception and the reality that there are no other options; the exploitation can only be put into place where there is the “other” to take advantage of. These sorts of conditions run rampant in *Harvest*, as seen here:

OM: Wating—not wanting—what meaning
Do these words have? Was it my choice that
I signed up for this program?

JAYA: Who forced you? You went of your
own accord!

OM: I went because I lost my job in the
Company...

JAYA: You’re wrong, there are choices—
There must be choices. (Padmanabhan, 1996, p. 238)

In fact, “occult economies are thus riddled with antinomies: they prey on vulnerable populations, yet they involve only willing participants; they place lives at risk, yet they also save lives” (Shital, 2013, pp. 38-60). To point the lies, selfishness, and moral decadence that lace western culture in, we learn from the play as follows:

Having seized upon Jeetu rather than Om, InterPlanta briefly returns Jeetu to the family, wearing virtual reality goggles to replace his transplanted eyes. (This is the play’s only staged representation of bodily transplantation not mediated by the Contact Module.) The appearance of Ginni .her whole body, not just the face previously shown in the Contact Module transmitted .straight to [Jeetu’s] mind is all it takes to produce Jeetu’s assent to trade the rest of his body for a virtual life. (p. 240)

After all, “what Virgil wanted was a whole, new, young, male body, so that he can use its sperm to get himself children” (Halpin, 2014, pp. 13-23) at very minimal cost and with little inconveniences, but the wealth itself, as Sunil Sharma demonstrates in his collection of short stories, is transient and comes at the cost of revered values.

Disaster-Prone Affluence

In Sharma’s “A Stranger in the City”, set in Mumbai, too, his character, referred to as the guy, declares, “suddenly I found myself a total stranger in my own city” because transformation “was both dramatic and lightening fast”, and the “stunning reversal left [him] dumb and shaken to the core!” (Sharma, 2010, p. 5). The unnamed man is a metaphor for the faceless Indians stripped of their culture by Western capitalism. The sudden alteration of his usual way of life or culture rattles him. He is submerged in what Selva Roja (2015) calls “The sharp contrast between the two ways of living and thinking [which] causes awkward and unseemly situations” (pp. 321-330). The Guy is confronted with a life style, which is at variance with what he is used to. In the phase of western influences, his vibrant culture rooted in centuries of venerable tradition and moral propriety has transformed instantly and he is caught in its glamor: “The costly liquor, the late-night bashes, the one-night stands in cheap motels, they all keep you from cracking up in a vast city teeming with silent lost souls, out to

live their version of the American Dream” (Sharma, 2010, p. 6). He parties hard in a newly found life style and is mugged in the process, suggesting the ephemeral nature of western extravagance. After all, a “superficial understanding of the world through somebody’s language or culture will only guide one towards misunderstanding” (Padmaja, 1996, pp. 25-34) of the fickle nature of capitalism in a culture-redden society.

Indeed, capitalism has brought insensitivity to Indians to the extent that a mugged victim is ignored by his peers, “a man gets robbed. Noboby [sic], in the subway, bothers to stop the criminals or chase them or help the shocked victim get up on his shaken feet, a helpless innocent victim, their mirror image” (Sharma, 2010, p. 7). He has suddenly earned wealth as a result of his acquaintance with the Western world, but is robbed of materialism to which he has held fast. Money, which he has been told is a “sacred commodity. This non-living object [which] socially defines an active human subject in our mad age [and] provides security, power and prestige, in a divided world of the kings and the paupers” (Sharma, 2010, p. 7) does not rescue him, as he states, “now, suddenly, I have got no money on me. I feel powerless in a system that recognizes only the money power” (Sharma, 2010, p. 8). He becomes a stranger in his own home, for his newly found identity is lost in a whim and he cannot return to his roots, which now adores only materialism. Having been mauled down by illusive western capitalism, he ends up as a beast of no culture and no status:

The realization of the grave loss is frightening! By a strange feat of magic, I have been converted into my hated opposite: a ridiculous and socially-useless tramp, an ineffective figure anyway in the hierarchy, operating on the social margins, a human caricature who invites derision and contempt from the rich. (Sharma, 2010, p. 8)

In Sharma’s “Beware! Migrants are Coming”, another nameless Indian character refers to the materialistic transformation of his culture as “the twisted urban symbols of progress” at the backdrop of “hissing blasts of hot wind [which] rattled off the dead leaves that flew some meters in the air and then settled down again—only to levitate again in the air and then come back on the hot earth—in a repetitive series of futile gestures” (Sharma, 2010, p. 22). The “hissing blasts of hot wind” is a metaphor for western capitalism, which has reduced a vibrant Indian way of life to dead leaves that are tossed around. The new culture is a dead one, a futile one that cannot be revived and cannot be left alone by the brutal and persistent western influences. After being surprised at the pace of change in his culture, “I never knew things have changed so fast. New rules have come” (Sharma, 2010, p. 24), he sums his life as follows: “The dispossessed. I am Mr. Nobody. A human, yet not human. A native, yet an alien among my own. A man without any dignity. A soft target everyway. An unseen man. A zero man. Phantom” (Sharma, 2010, p. 26).

On the heels of the preceding lamentation, a different nameless Indian character in Sharma’s “The Modern Pilgrimage” talks of his transformed world, which has “arrived and changed our way of shopping, eating, going out” (Sharma, 2010, p. 75). The character is inundated by “Fabulous Italians, French, British, and Americans—a high-brow mélange of imports that can burn a hole in your middle-class pocket” (Sharma, 2010, p. 77) around the GM (General Mall), which is the “new-age rendezvous for the suburban middle-class conservative youth” and where people have suddenly become “more American than Indians” (Sharma, 2010, p. 78). Indians are placed at the crossroad of groping for western wealth and upholding a culture at the backdrop of enticing materialistic world. The usurpation of the Indian culture is complete, as they seem utterly stripped of their Indian heritage or way of life and now wear an illusive western culture as a badge of ignore thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean. In “Globalization and the Identity Remix Among Urban Adolescents in India”, Rao, Mrinalini et al. (2013) infer that,

As people moved toward the economic opportunities available in cities, the system of joint families and traditional occupations began to disintegrate. These changes accelerated with the....The Indian public was then increasingly exposed to new social, economic, and cultural ways of life through the influx of foreign capital, goods, and media, advances in technology and telecommunications, and an increase in travel. (pp. 9-24)

Thus, one would agree with Madhumita Roy (2014) in his article, "Transnationalism and the Survival of Postcolonialism: A Critique" that "globalization has commenced a new world order, which has contributed in weakening the political—the 'state'" or say indigenous culture and identity (pp. 23-36).

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, one would safely infer that both Manjula Padmanabhan and Sunil Sharma depict destitute Indians at the crossroad, where they face the grim choice of choosing between illusive western wealth and their venerable culture and identity. Capitalistic and imperial encroachments lead to cultural clash and disintegration of a firmly rooted lifestyle in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, in which prosperous and exploitative westerners prey on Indian characters. Sharma's nameless characters, who represent the Indian everyman, are sad and poor in the face of abundance, as they yearn for a culture and an identity that once was. Indeed, the dead leaves tossed by hot air in Sharma's "Beware! Migrants are Coming" symbolize the corpse of the dead Indian culture at the feet of western capitalism. Nevertheless, faced with acute poverty and materialism devoid of cultural dignity, Padmanabhan's Jaya, a metaphor for resistance, modern woman, and hope, resists all forms of exploitation that targets the body parts of poor Indians. She spurns Virgil's argument, which insists, "we secured paradise—at the cost of birds and flowers, bees and snakes.... We support the poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves" (p. 246). As Jaya threatens to take her own life over Virgil's "paradise" and declares that she would be a winner if she were to die in the course of defending her dying culture, Sharma's characters mourn their "Nobody" status (Sharma, 2010, p. 7) in a newly westernized culture, as they grope for a lost culture and identity at the crossroad manned by imperial agenda.

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