

Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* and Global Risk Society

Hari Kunzru'nun *Aktarım* İsimli Eseri ve Küresel Risk Toplumu

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Abstract

The famous German sociologist Ulrich Beck's main argument as outlined in his groundbreaking *Risk Society* (1986) is that modern society as we know it has actually been increasingly structured around and being affected by new qualities of risk that haven't existed before. Modern society has become a risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced (Beck, 2006, p. 332). Drawing on Beck's observations, I argue that Hari Kunzru's novel *Transmission* (2004) is one such contemporary novel that examines some implications of living in a global risk society where we face the unintended consequences of hyper complexity and integration. *Transmission* revolves around the main character Arjun Mehta, an Indian computer programmer who leaves his native country behind to realize his "Amrican" [sic] dream in the so-called land of golden opportunities. Unsettled by a profound experience of uncertainty and insecurity as he shifts between local and global positions, Arjun gradually understands that he is considered to be little more than cheap and disposable foreign labor. When he is eventually made redundant by his employer due to economic downturn, Arjun panics and suffers a nervous breakdown as he cannot even bear the thought of going back to India as a failure. Once he realizes that he will not be getting his job back, he creates a highly effective virus that causes the near-global collapse of networked computers. Ultimately, *Transmission* shows that increasing connectivity has rendered our system fragile mainly because we seem to lack the capacity to manage the growing complexities of a rapidly evolving global system.

Key words: Risk Society, complexity, globalisation, Ulrich Beck, Hari Kunzru

Öz

Ünlü Alman sosyolog Ulrich Beck çığır açan kitabı *Risk Toplumu*'nda (1986) bildiğimiz anlamda modern toplumun giderek artan bir biçimde daha önce varolmayan yeni risk türleri etrafında yapılandığını ve şekillendiğini öne sürer (Beck, 2006, p. 332). Kendi ürettiği riskleri giderek daha fazla münazara eden, önlemeye ve yönetmeye çalışan modern toplum bir risk toplumuna dönüşmüştür. Bu makalede, Beck'in gözlemlerinden yola çıkarak, Hari Kunzru'nun 2004 yılında yayınlanan kitabı *Aktarım*'ın hiper-karmaşıklık ve entegrasyondan kaynaklanan beklenmedik küresel riskleri nasıl ele aldığı incelenecektir. Roman, ülkesi Hindistan'ı terk ederek altın fırsatlar diyarında "Amerikan" [sic] hayalini gerçekleştirmek üzere yola çıkan bilgisayar programcısı Arjun Mehta'nın hikayesini anlatır. Bölgesel ve küresel konumlar arasında yer değiştirirken yaşadığı şiddetli belirsizlik ve güvensizlik sonucu dengesi bozulan Arjun, gitgide ucuz ve harcanabilir yabancı iş gücü olarak algılandığının farkına varır. Çalıştığı şirketin yaşadığı ekonomik sıkıntılar sonucunda işten çıkartılınca, Hindistan'a başarısız biri olarak dönme korkusunun yaşattığı panikle psikolojik bir çöküş yaşar. İşini geri alamayacağını öğrendiğinde ise, neredeyse bütün dünyanın bilgisayar ağını çökerten çok etkili bir virüs geliştirir. Sonuç olarak, *Aktarım* romanı çok hızlı bir şekilde evrilen küresel sistemin giderek artan karmaşıklığını yönetecek kapasitemiz olmadığı için, artan bağlantısallığın sistemimizi nasıl kırılgan bir hale geldiğini ortaya koyar.

Anahtar kelimeler: Risk Toplumu, karmaşıklık, küreselleşme, Ulrich Beck, Hari Kunzru

Introduction

Risk Society is an idea about modern society that was first developed in *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1986) by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck who argued that contemporary society was transitioning from industrial to risk society. The book received great critical acclaim and has been translated into more than 35 languages since its first publication. According to Adam and Van Loon, this groundbreaking work not only included important insights into our present condition but also offered a prophetic perspective on the future:

In Beck's original argument 'risk society' refers to a particular set of social, economic, political and cultural conditions that are characterized by the increasingly pervasive logic of manufactured uncertainty and entail the transformation of existing social structures, institutions and relationships

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towards an incorporation of more complexity, contingency and fragmentation (Adam, Beck and Van Loon, 2000, p.5).

Manufactured uncertainty in an increasingly interconnected and interinfluencing world brings about unprecedented challenges that both state and non-state actors have to cope with and adjust to. As Beck (2006) suggests, global risk is highly ambivalent, destabilizes existing order, and “the strategies of action which global risk opens up overthrow the order of power which has formed in the neoliberal capital-state coalition” (p. 343). Ulrich Beck’s main argument is that modern society as we know it has actually been increasingly structured around and being affected by new risks that haven’t existed before. We do not know how to effectively address and deal with these new types of risks for a variety of reasons. Risks cannot be easily identified without the use of science since they are invisible and undetectable. They are also essentially universal stretching and spreading everywhere across the globe and no longer concern particular social classes. Also, risks have several other qualities that are irreversible. Above all, our degree of ignorance of different kinds of risks is higher—and thus, more threatening—than our degree of awareness of them.

It is important to note that for Beck (2006), the emergence of global risk society is intimately related with the crisis of modernity. That is to say, the changing nature of risk is intrinsically connected to the broader process of reflexive modernisation. So modern society has become a risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing, and managing risks that it itself has produced (p. 332). Since the proliferation of new kinds of risk is an inevitable by-product of modernity, humanity is confronted with the increasing difficulty of predicting and managing various kinds of risks on a planetary scale. What accompanies this salient condition is the politics of fear produced and disseminated by the various instruments of mass media which is increasingly preoccupied with anticipated catastrophes that might also pose existential risks.

Within this context, contemporary literature reflects the shift towards new patterns of social interaction in the era of global risk and provides fertile ground for the exploration of global trends as well as of new configurations of human activities. As thought experiments on a variety of current issues, a number of contemporary novels have offered engaging scenerios regarding anticipated catastrophes and their possible consequences. Drawing on Beck’s observations, I argue that Hari Kunzru’s novel *Transmission* (2004) is one such contemporary novel that examines some important implications of living in a global risk society where we face the unintended consequences of hyper complexity and integration.

Transmission revolves around the main character Arjun Mehta, an Indian computer programmer who leaves his native country behind to realize his “Amrican” [sic] dream in the so-called land of golden opportunities. At the beginning of the novel, Arjun is presented as a computer geek in his early twenties who grew up in New Delhi and who currently lives with his parents and sister. Despite the fact that he has a relatively comfortable life in India, Arjun believes he can do much better for himself if he can get out of the country. Like many other youngsters of his generation, he hopes that he will achieve great success and find personal fulfillment if he can somehow secure himself a lucrative position at an American firm. Although he is very close to his middle-class family and has not been so far away from home ever before in his life, the lure of possible success in the most advanced country of the world drowns all his fears and doubts of the unknown. However, Arjun’s naively optimistic visions regarding his possible future(s) in the US are soon crushed and replaced by a much more clear-sighted and realistic appraisal of the conditions awaiting a migrant worker from the developing world.

Unsettled by a profound experience of uncertainty and insecurity as he shifts between local and global positions, Arjun gradually understands that he is considered to be little more than cheap and disposable foreign labor in his host country. In *Transmission*, we are told,

Databodies (the recruitment firm in Delhi) [if this clarification is yours, use brackets instead of parenthesis) charged the companies he worked for twice, even three times what they paid him, and still deducted money from his pay for rent, legal and administrative fees. He had made no money, gained nothing at all since coming to America except a new and harder picture of the world (Kunzru, 2005, p. 67).

Contrary to his expectations before coming to Silicon Valley, Arjun is not allowed to enter the world of the techno-elite once he is there. Instead, he is simply treated as an expendable programmer, one out of many, who constantly faces the possibility of being left without a job. His contractual position as a migrant worker from the developing world means that he is denied social as well as financial benefits accorded to his American peers. Alienated from his environment and feeling increasingly desperate, he soon realizes that “the sense of being diminished by this environment had become a suspicion of actual physical shrinkage” (Kunzru, 2005, p. 56). Neither can Arjun find satisfaction in his professional and private relationships with people in his new and considerably alien environment. The fact that he suffers from meeting his basic human needs—such as meaningful communication, connection, and intimacy—intensifies his disillusionment and makes him feel chronically depressed. To make the matters even worse, his relationship with the only person he can somehow relate to, a co-worker named Chris, collapses after a one-night stand he has with her. While sex with Arjun means close to nothing for Chris, Arjun finds himself deeply attached to her. He is, thus, devastated when he finds out that his feelings are not reciprocated.

What Arjun comes to experience in the US is the global “unhomely” which Bhabha suggests is the “paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition” (1994, p. 13). Arjun’s sense of unhomeliness is also very much in tune with Hari Kunzru’s desire to capture in this novel “the loss of a particular sense of place in a globalized world” (Aldama, 2006, p. 115). From this perspective, the novel strongly suggests that those who choose to or are forced to leave their country of origin are more often than not forced to struggle with profound feelings of loneliness, isolation, and alienation in the more developed countries of the western world. In this respect, *Transmission* draws attention to the plight of ever increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees for whom the sense of home and belonging remain painfully problematic concepts.

When Arjun eventually finds permanent work with Virugenix—an antivirus software company— it does not take that long before he realizes that “He was, as he suspected, on one of those slave visas, being paid a fraction of what it would cost Darryl to hire an American engineer” (Kunzru, 2005, p. 91). Thus, Arjun wakes up to the fact that the workings of the global labor market—thanks to which he was able to find a position in the US—are actually designed to ensure maximum profit for the employer while allowing minimum rights to the employee; he is little more than a modern day indentured laborer to the companies that employ and exploit him. Developing this awareness does not, however, serve to liberate Arjun since he feels trapped in this situation and unable to come up with a better alternative. He can barely make a living with the money he makes, and his efforts at work are far from being truly appreciated or valued by his superiors. Like many “guest” workers, Arjun works terribly long hours and also finds it very difficult to adjust psychologically, emotionally, and culturally to his new social environment. Yet, he remains a cooperative and dutiful employee. Another example which connects contemporary labour practices with those in colonial history comes from a friend of Arjun who—referring to the disdain with which their American supervisor treats her Indian workers—remarks that “she sees us as a bunch of starving coolies” (Kunzru,

2005, p. 44). As Arjun's case exemplifies, global inequalities are reflected in the job market where even a highly skilled migrant worker from the developing world is not granted equal status with his American colleagues. In this context, *Transmission* reveals the multifaceted workings of such contemporary transformations (generally examined under the rubric of 'globalisation') that are shaped by a complex array of economic and social processes.

Given how third world labour is exploited by powerful multinational corporations in parts of the developing world as well as in the advanced countries of the first world, one can argue that unsettling continuities exist between colonialism and globalization. So by foregrounding the persistence of asymmetrical power relations in our increasingly globalized world, *Transmission* offers an encompassing view of the transnational social, societal, and political dynamics which intersect with market power in order to produce the patterns of socio-economic inequality that we see deepened. Thus, the novel makes the point that guest workers, such as Arjun, are exploited colonized aliens who have been indispensable in helping to hold together the host society with their hard work but whose existence continues to be disavowed. Since the current world system is largely manipulated by global market forces, many people - like Arjun and his friends - find themselves uprooted from their traditional connections and hurled into a highly competitive labor market in the remote corners of the world. Lacking the supportive network of friends and family, they often feel isolated and out of place. Moreover, they are also frequently subjected to various forms of discrimination and abuse.

When he is eventually made redundant by his employer due to economic downturn, Arjun gives in to panic and suffers a nervous breakdown as he cannot even bear the thought of going back to India as a failure. Feeling extremely vulnerable and emotionally unstable, he starts avoiding contact with his family and lies to them whenever they speak on the phone. Unable to find a way out of his predicament, he desperately attempts to negotiate with his superiors in order to get his job back. Having failed in his attempts to convince his employers and trying to come up with an idea that would make him "indispensable" in their eyes, Arjun decides to create a highly effective virus that causes the near-global collapse of networked computers. Named after his favorite Bollywood star Leela Zahir, the virus becomes a tool of direct protest and resistance, operating as "the revenge of the uncontrollable world" (Kunzru, 2015, p. 148). It also turns the diasporic subject, Arjun Mehta, into an agent of resistance - a glitch in the global system - whose actions produce large complex effects. In this respect, the novel shows how the evolving world system engenders new models of (political) agency and resistance that threaten its own stability and inherent order.

Ultimately, *Transmission* portrays Arjun Mehta as the "excluded other" whose uncalculated actions pose unprecedented global risk. Refusing to be exploited and then discarded by the system, he takes hasty action - in his desperate state - without calculating the possible consequences. As Ulrich Beck maintains,

The experience of global risks is an occurrence of abrupt and fully conscious confrontation with the apparently excluded other. Global risks tear down national boundaries and jumble together the native with the foreign. The distant other is becoming the inclusive other not through mobility but through risk (2006, p. 331).

In this sense, Arjun's virus functions as a cataclysmic disturbance of third world origin that brings chaos to the order of the first world. As Leonard (2014) suggests, "In its wake fall old certainties about the protection of the individual by personal, commercial, and national measures which would prevent such an attack" (p. 271). The rapid unfolding of events following the unstoppable spread of the Leela virus perfectly illustrates that when a technological catastrophe of this scale happens, the hazards affect everyone. In the face of growing uncertainty regarding the origins and the possible trajectory of the virus, people all

over the world find themselves in a state of escalating panic and confusion: “Was it emanating from a rogue state? Some hostile underground network? Had any government departments been affected?” (Kunzru 2005, p. 203). People continue to speculate and worry about this threat that spreads rapidly like a global epidemic. The intensification of global interconnectedness in the post-millennial era means that threats that materialize in various parts of the world can no longer be contained in their locality. Living in a ‘global village’ also implies that we are going to have to face unprecedented challenges and risks while responding to situations of emergency caused by ‘contagious’ threats such as the Leela virus. As *Transmission* successfully illustrates, a key concern for us in this contemporary moment is to find effective ways of dealing with profound anxiety generated by ever greater degrees of uncertainty in a rapidly shifting environment, particularly in the aftermath of a global crisis.

As I have pointed out, Beck argues that global risks are produced by modern processes thanks to which human life and efficiency have increased exponentially in the last century. So the very processes that we rely on and take for granted also render us vulnerable to different kinds of risks that technology enables. Our growing dependence on digital technologies in particular has become a cause for concern since we have a new social system where one of its greatest achievements - viz., technology - has also created new risks and a new condition of generalized uncertainty. In the words of Lanier (2013), “We bring the great problems of our times on ourselves, and yet we have little choice but to do so. The human condition is an evolving technological puzzle” (p. 40). Indeed, the novel as a whole strongly suggests that modern technology often pairs benefits with frustrations and that technological changes are accelerating much more rapidly than our capabilities to understand or manage them — a point made poignantly clear in the aftermath of the Leela virus:

These machines which had always terrorized them in small ways – by crashing, hanging, demanding meaningless upgrades or simply scolding them in the persona of an annoying cartoon paperclip – were now revealed to harbour something more sinister, something with an agenda. This was it, the enemy within, a technological fifth column in the homes of ordinary Americans. By the time talk-radio got hold of it, a consensus had emerged that the attack should be avenged in blood (Kunzru, 2005, p. 204).

Although our relationship with our machines is far from being problem free, living without them has become not only unimaginable but also practically impossible in our day and age. Computers and the internet have become particularly indispensable tools in our networked society since we depend on them almost completely for the various services they provide. It, thus, makes perfect sense that a disruption of the scale caused by the Leela virus leads to a global crisis the total cost of which remains incalculable. The following quote from the beginning of the novel echoes Beck’s suggestion that it is becoming very difficult to compensate people affected by global risks because these risks are not calculable.

Experts have estimated her damage to global business at almost 50 billion US dollars, mostly in human and machine downtime, but financial calculation doesn’t capture the chaos of those days. During Leela’s brief period of misrule, normality was completely overturned. Lines of idle brokers chewed their nails in front of frozen screens. Network nodes winked out of existence like so many extinguished stars. For a few weeks she danced her way around the world, and disaster, like an overweight suburbanite in front of a workout video, followed every step (Kunzru, 2005, p. 8).

The apocalyptic tone of this paragraph aptly conveys the general sentiment of people worldwide when they experience a disaster of this scale. The sense of impending doom that descends upon the whole world like a black cloud has more to do with the destruction of any semblance of normality in people’s lives than the astronomical cost of the damage caused by the spread of the virus. Chaos creeps in as people’s habitual routines and the social order on which they depend crumble down. The fact that it only takes one computer programmer and a virus to unleash this kind of irreversible damage reveals that the systems on which our infrastructures are based are in fact extremely vulnerable and fragile, making it impossible for

us to take them for granted. What exacerbates the atmosphere of panic that people give in to collectively is the uncertainty regarding the origins as well as the possible trajectory of the virus. Surrounded by so many “unknowns,” it is not only ordinary citizens but also the decision makers who remain dazed and confused. So the whole affair also leads to the erosion of faith and trust in officials who are supposed to prevent or at least respond rapidly and effectively to dangers threatening public security and safety. In brief, virtually no one can escape the devastating effects of the virus and many lives are turned upside down.

From this perspective, it is also important to note that the cascading effects of the Leela virus in the novel show that technology's dangers have outpaced the ability of experts to control them and that the hazards that characterize risk society are not contained by national borders. Since boundaries are no longer firm but rather porous, they have become sites of transmission and interaction. In an elaborately networked space of flows, boundaries morph into sites of exchange and thereby fail to stop flows of commodities, diasporic bodies, or viruses. What's more, our ability to prepare for anticipated catastrophes, like the one described in *Transmission*, is significantly hampered by the fact that we are surrounded by so many unknowns. As Beck points out, another very important marker of global risk society is the looming atmosphere of uncertainty and unpredictability. However, the institutions we have developed to cope with the uncertainty created by modernity are not able to reduce this uncertainty. “We want to abolish the unknown,” writes one Leela researcher:

It is a common enough desire. As humans, we want to know what is lurking outside our perimeter, beyond our flickering circle of firelight We have drenched the world in information in the hope that the unknown will finally and definitively go away. But information is not the same as knowledge. To extract one from the other, you must, as the word suggests, inform. You must transmit. Perfect information is sometimes defined as a signal transmitted from a sender to a receiver without loss, without the introduction of the smallest uncertainty or confusion. In the real world, however, there is always noise (Kunzru, 2005, p. 354).

Throughout their evolutionary history, humans have always manifested and pursued a powerful desire to conquer the “unknown” in order to feel safe and secure as well as to move forward. Ironically, it is in this era of unprecedented scientific achievement and progress that we find ourselves exposed to new risks and challenges that constantly threaten system survival. In other words, the technologies that have enabled us to increase our knowledge and efficiency in several realms of life have also engendered many other kinds of problems and uncertainties that we find difficult to grasp and deal with. As the quotation above suggests, we want to reduce complexity and make the world easier and more seamless to navigate allowing us to potentially gain command of various epidemics, criminal acts, environmental disasters and terrorist attacks through the accumulation of data. Yet, unfortunately, to quote Lanier (2013), “The mere existence of big data doesn't mean that people will agree about what it means” (p. 84), and thus, a lack of information coherence and ambiguity will remain “typical of how problems present themselves in our modern world of big data” (p. 84).

The prevalence of noise and ambiguity in addition to the increasing complexity of globalizing processes and networks render our world dangerously susceptible to a variety of unpredictable risks. What is perhaps even more interesting in the case of the Leela virus is that it was not even designed to destroy globally interconnected networks. Yet, the accidental and unexpected nature of the ensuing catastrophe only serves to heighten the general sense of doom and gloom. By his own admission, all Arjun aimed to cause was “a little disruption, just a small problem, because then I could step in and solve it and be the hero” (Kunzru, 2005, p. 320). However, the enormous scale of the damage wrought by the virus engenders a global avalanche of fury against him. We are told,

Arjun Mehta, the ‘evil scientist’ (New York Post) whose ‘twisted genius’ (London Evening Standard) threatened the world with ‘techno meltdown’ (Sydney Daily Telegraph), has rarely been out of the

headlines since the last confirmed sighting of him at the Riverside Motel in San Ysidro. Despite an immense investment of police time and resources, Mehta, whose image is now one of the most widely circulated in the world, has never been apprehended (Kunzru, 2005, p. 372).

As has been pointed out, Mehta's aim was to protest and not to terrorize; yet, he becomes the most wanted man on the planet as things spiral out of control. So, his rather misguided attempt to get his job back ends up costing much more, both to himself as well as to billions of people worldwide. Although all Arjun wanted was to work and be happy in "magic America," what he does is universally regarded as an act of cyber-terrorism, rendering him - in effect - a terrorist with malicious intent. Demonized by many as an agent of destruction, a fatal threat to global and domestic security, Arjun is doomed to live the rest of his life on the run from authorities. Although several law enforcement agencies continue the global manhunt for him, Arjun successfully manages to elude his chasers and simply vanishes into thin air. The aura of mystery surrounding him and his whereabouts does not dissipate, as he gradually becomes a mythic figure of global protest and resistance, a poster boy for anti-globalists and hackers. Towards the end of the novel, we learn,

Despite being labelled a terrorist by governments and media agencies around the world, Arjun Mehta has admirers. According to Julia Schaffer of the Symantec Corporation, who has written extensively on Mehta's programming techniques, the viruses he unleashed represent 'a revolution in code'. The range of the innovations in the Leela variant viruses is, she says, 'simply breathtaking' (Kunzru, 2005, p. 375).

Arjun is certainly no political activist with a clear ideological programme, but his actions still pose a challenge to structures of power and privilege in which the global economic system and employment markets are rooted. Most significantly, in creating the Leela virus, Arjun becomes instrumental in subverting the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism from the inside. Thus, although he himself apparently lacks an ideological agenda, Arjun is soon appropriated by a wide range of revolutionaries who are inspired by his example.

Through the portrayal of Arjun, *Transmission* reveals how contemporary subjectivities are formed in a world that has become a dynamic field of complex flows (of information, noise, people, goods etc.). In doing that, the book also shows how individual agencies and identities are reconfigured in the emerging global order of transnational corporations. As Childs and Green (2013) remark "*Transmission* explores the mediation of identity in the contemporary context of global capitalism, which is sustained by considerably more mobile flows of commodities, images and diasporic bodies across the globe" (p. 80). Ultimately, the novel foregrounds this culture of connectivity engendered by globalization, transnationalism, and digital communicative technologies while showing that we are living in an interdependent risk producing world. This is undoubtedly a world of incalculable risks, a world in which nation states can no longer guarantee the security of their citizens.

Since ours is no longer a world of fixed identities and exclusionary boundaries, we are challenged by new and more complex kinds of risks that require us to mobilize on a planetary level. In *Cosmopolitan Vision*, Ulrich Beck (2004) suggests,

People have long been joined together between Moscow and Paris, Rio and Tokyo in a relationship of actual interdependence, which they help to intensify by their production and consumption, in the same way that the ensuing risks to civilization penetrate their everyday lives (p. 136).

As the collapse of global networks following the widespread transmission of the Leela virus illustrates, the risks we are facing today are no longer traditional but are rather those of living in a humanly interdependent, globalised, and technologically advancing universe where the scale, the scope, and the intensity of change is much greater. Consequently, interactions in an increasing dense, global, and interdependent web of trade, finance, and infrastructure may generate unstoppable cascading threats to system survival.

Conclusion

Transmission offers a narrative response to the phenomena of globalisation which it portrays as a constellation of multifaceted, multidimensional, and interactive processes. The novel also makes the point that the networked quality of contemporary relations means that local and global phenomena are linked in ever more complicated ways against the backdrop of rapid technological change. In *Runaway World*, Anthony Giddens (2002) argues that “Our age is not more dangerous – not more risky – than those of earlier generations, but the balance of risks and dangers have shifted. We live in a world where hazards created by ourselves are as, or more, threatening than those that come from the outside” (p. 57). So an increasingly pressing question we face as humanity is the following: How can we deal more effectively with risks and dangers against the backdrop of looming uncertainty?

The system is inherently unstable because there are these emergent dimensions which are the result of globalisation. Thus, globalisation creates systemic risks which cascade over sectoral boundaries and national borders. And significantly, systemic risks increase as inequality grows. Drawing on contemporary debates engendered by these issues,

[Transmission] highlights economic and cultural inequalities or even polarization in the globalizing world and views globalization as a phenomenon fraught with pitfalls and dangers rather than promises. The novel makes it clear that a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability is a common condition in the times of liquid modernity generating fears of different nature, and that stability and security may be still desired but illusory commodities (Filipczak, 2014, p. 75).

The story of Arjun Mehta perfectly illustrates that we live in a world where individuals have become a source of systemic risk as a new global mode of citizenship is taking shape. As has been shown throughout, Arjun’s actions have systemic consequences he himself is unable to foresee in advance and fails to understand afterward. Yet, the novel also suggests that we cannot understand Arjun’s individual agentic activity in isolation, divorced from the wider socio-historical context within which he is situated since he is a unique emergent property of an interconnected whole. In this increasingly interconnected world, “Individual and local choices have global impacts and vice versa: what happens outside our borders has direct daily consequences for each of us every day” (Goldin & Mariathan, 2014, p. 38).

Transmission shows that increasing connectivity has rendered our system fragile mainly because we seem to lack the capacity to manage the growing complexities of a rapidly evolving global system. In doing that, the novel also reveals our increasing failure to account for the spillover or systemic consequences of our individual atomized actions. The global reach of the Leela virus shows that there is a growing likelihood that events in one place will have cascading effects in other areas, jumping across national borders and sectors as well as the traditional divisions of different types of risks. Ultimately, *Transmission* leaves us with extremely timely and pressing questions: How do we manage systemic risks that are endemic to globalisation? And how do we deal more effectively with the consequences of living in a more connected, complex, and uncertain world?

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