

Luxury Corroding Nothingness Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*.

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Abstract

This article investigates the issues of identity politics and dehumanization in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997). The drama investigates the sociological and political consequences of identity, while also recognizing the transforming effects of late capitalism on physical landscapes. The drama investigates the conflict between personal desire, economic inequality, society expectations and the commodity of human life. Padmanabhan discusses the intersections of global capitalism. This paper contends that the play *Harvest* reveals the ideology of current capitalism by presenting pre-constituted people whose roles in society are preset. By investigating the dynamics of social identity, the study situates analysis within the politics of space in connection to power relations that reconstruct dominant hierarchical organization and its implications for subordinate governance.

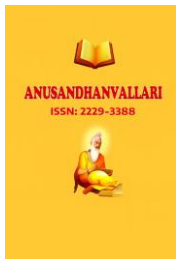
Keywords: donors, receives, infertility, losing identities, organ transplant, contact module

Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan, who was born in Delhi, could be considered an appropriate counterpart for Rabindranath Tagore in the twentieth century. Padmanabhan, like Tagore, has effectively experimented with various genres of literature. It comprises plays, comic strips, travelogues, short stories, children's books and she also works as an illustrator. Before pursuing a career in literature, she worked for a little magazine called Parsian, where she established herself as a cartoonist. After abandoning the idea of stepping into the shoes of her IFS father and attempting suicide at 30, as she had decided at 17, she began writing.

Manjula Padmanabhan has written plays such as *Harvest* (1997), *Lights Out* (1984) and *Hidden Fire* (1991), the *Artists' Model Sextet* and the *Gujrathi Monologue*, a collection of short stories (1996), *Suki*, a travel memoir like *Getting There*, a collection of short stories such as *Death and Old Soup* and *Kleptomania*, *Escape*, a children's book and *Muse Attack* (2008). Even after creating plays, Padmanabhan continued to work as an illustrator, both individually and collaboratively.

Harvest, which investigates the dehumanizing impacts of societal expectations and capitalistic exploitation on both personal and collective identity. Padmanabhan investigates the commodification of human beings in a global economic context. *Harvest* challenges established gender, class and power conventions. Padmanabhan's narrative frameworks reveal the challenges of navigating selfhood in exploitation-driven systems,



emphasizing the segmentation of the human psyche into different and frequently competing sections that characterize the dehumanizing condition.

The tension between social usefulness and individual agency emerges as a key topic in both plays, highlighting the ethical implications of prioritizing the collective good over individual well-being, particularly in the context of exploitation and commercialization. In this light, Om serves as critiques of systems that deprive people of their autonomy. This investigation of identity challenges the center-margin binary, proposing a vision for a more democratic and inclusive future.

Review of the Literature

According to Sujatha Moni, *Harvest* dramatizes the power imbalance that characterises this (in)human commerce between wealthy receivers from an advanced capitalist society and poor donors who “willingly” give their organs and body/parts in exchange for money. Transplant tourism, like other global economic transactions, involves the complicated movement of capital and people within and across national borders, resulting in the formation of liminal or interstitial places. The article examines the racial and gender implications of transplant tourism, as well as the potential for subaltern recuperation in such ambiguous or liminal areas. The primary questions guiding this discussion are whether it is feasible to overcome patriarchal structures and restructure power dynamics within this international trade.

R. T. Bedre points out that the play *Harvest*, which has a very appropriate title, shows how one such family falls victim to the Western world’s flesh-market. An attempt is made here to show how the machine world dominates the human world and how the dramatist ingeniously exploits electronic gadgets to transform them into characters. The drama begins with machines and machine-like individuals (representatives of the machine world) instructing, controlling, interfering and seizing human lives. The arrival of the Guards from the Interplaza services marks the beginning of the machine age and the end of the human age.

L. Jeevitha and Dr. G. Subramanian observe: Manjula Padmanabhan is known as a social critic in all of her plays; she portrays the reality of society in a new light and *Harvest* is a step ahead of all of her other plays because it is not only an assessment of social reality but also delves into the relationships of people from different countries. On the one hand, this play depicts the deterioration of societal and familial relationships as a result of increased consumer product consumption and human beings’ endless materialistic pursuits; on the other hand, it also depicts the operation of developed countries in developing countries to propagate the concept of consumerism for mercenary purposes.

Objective

To expose neocolonial power relations in which the wealthy exploit the vulnerable poor for their own survival and pleasure.

To demonstrate how poverty restricts moral choices and degrades human dignity and relationships.

To maintain identity and autonomy in the face of widespread materialism and technological domination.

To investigate topics of identity crisis, as the individuals’ bodies are no longer completely their own. Jaya, in particular, represents resistance to exploitation and commodification by choosing death over absolute servitude.



Victim versus Victimizer

The characters in the play symbolize the issues of economic exploitation, reification (commodification) and acculturation, which are conveyed through both a mercantile and surgical metaphor of body-part transplantation. The Donors and Receivers in the play symbolize natives from the Third and First Worlds, respectively. Jaya is Virgil's main draw because she is the only person in that house who can procreate and express genuine feeling. There is a short mention of a seer's prediction that she would never become a mother. Because prophesies are frequently ambiguous, Jaya's curse could be a manifestation of her husband's infertility. The unlawful relationship with her brother-in-law must be interpreted as a symptom of her insatiable desire to become a mother. Though her mother-in-law consistently criticizes her sexual misdeeds, she is the only character in the drama who is loyal to herself. She vehemently opposes the intrusion of colonial coercion and urban mechanization in the shape of Guards and Agents.

Her pitying brother-in-law's phoney finger-play does nothing to satiate her need for motherhood. She is the only person who holds firm in the face of Virgil's deceptive arguments and warnings. And she is the only one who is completely aware of the current situation: "It's not truly a life anymore. "We are just spare parts in someone else's garage." Ma, Indumati Prakash, the mother of Om and Jeetu, represents the older generation, obsessed with the trivialities of their small world. Her self-centeredness reflects that of Virgil, both being old and preying upon the young in order to seek pleasure at the personal level.

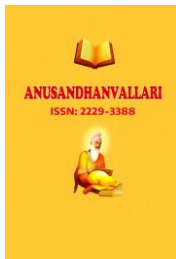
The drama *Harvest*, with its apropos title, depicts how one such Indian poor family falls victim to the Western-controlled meat market. The play is an attempt to depict how the machine world, which refers to World-I countries, notably the United Nations North America, which have adopted advanced technologies, rules the human world. They dominate the people of the third world, sometimes known as developing countries.

Here, the play teaches the readers about the future that the readers will adopt and live in, as well as how electronic devices will become their life characters. Ginni and Virgil are the machine world's representatives. They begin instructing, commanding, meddling with and snatching human lives. The arrival of Guards from the 'Inter planta services' is referred to as the second world (USSR) countries, who seize the opportunity to advance in command of developing countries. All of these changes represent the start of the machine era and the end of the human era.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* depicts a conflict between machine and man for possession, which humans will have to combat in the future unless they learn to manage robots beforehand. Rather a machine will succeed at first, a (wo)man will win in the end. The drama also depicts a futuristic depiction of present times, in which machines gradually replace and distance humans. The drama warns, through the figure of Jaya, that one must rule the machines rather than be governed. Ravande points out: "represent the conflict between technological adventures and human relationship in life" (163).

The drama takes place in the future, when multinational corporations have travelled to the Third World not for software, minerals, or fabric, but to harvest organs for their wealthy consumers in America. It focusses on India and the harsh realities of the Third World. *Harvest*, set in the near future, depicts a heinous agreement between the first and third worlds in which desperate individuals sell their body parts to wealthy clients in exchange for food, water, shelter and riches for themselves and their family. As such, it is a play about how the "first" world cannibalises the "third" world to meet its own needs.

The drama depicts a futuristic Bombay in the year 2010. Om Prakash, an unemployed Indian, offers to sell unspecified organs through Inter-Planta Services, to a wealthy first-world for a tiny fortune. Inter-Planta and the receivers are preoccupied with Om's health and exert invasive control over Om, his mother Ma and his wife



Jaya in their one-room flat. Ginni, the recipient, frequently checks on them through videophone (globe/video sofa) and treats them condescendingly. Om's ill brother Jeetu is chosen to donate organs instead of Om. Durgesh.

In the drama, Om is the family's breadwinner who is just laid off from his clerical job. He is living without a sufficient wage, striving to support his family. They live in a tiny tenement building in Mumbai. Om looks for job. He eventually decides to sell his organs to a shady company named Inter-planta in the hopes of improving his financial situation. When he receives an appointment, the company enquires about his entire household and family. It entirely secures the family to modern technology by addressing all of their household demands first, followed by their normal dietary charts. After installing a camera gadget to link to the rest of the world, Om's family is constantly observed, with frequent video phone enquiries and directions from the alleged organ recipient, an icy young blonde named Ginni. Om's mother goes into a stupor, engrossed in Interplanta's television programming. The family's lives continue to unravel.

Although the play is set in the future, it also addresses current issues. India is one-third the size of the United States, has three times the population and about 30% of its employable labour force is unemployed. The country's main challenges are overpopulation and poor education. It is evident as:

... This leads to a lack of regular income, making it difficult for individuals to meet their basic needs and sustain a decent standard of living... It decreases personal purchasing power, as individuals have limited or no income to spend on goods and services.... It can result in social stigma and a sense of social exclusion. Individuals may face criticism, low self-esteem, and psychological stress due to the inability to find work. (unemployment)

The play raises awareness to the disadvantaged community members who take any work to meet their hunger and ambitions. When Om finds a job with the agency, the receiver advises the agency on how to maintain the family happy and opulent. As the family's lifestyle becomes more comfortable, their relationships become more strained than before. They have always been poor and the entire family is in danger of losing not only bodily parts but also souls and identities. The corporation, represented by three anonymous, masked guards clothed entirely in white, progressively takes over all aspects of their existence.

Their drab chamber undergoes a significant transformation, assuming a more sophisticated appearance. Guards arrive to make his home a germ-free environment. Ginny describes Om's flat as a "human goldfish bowl." The most significant installation, however, is the contact module located in the center of the room to promote communication between the receiver and the donor. Ginni pays him to live a "clean" and "healthy" lifestyle so that she can harvest healthy organs when she wants them. Ginni gives commanding instructions because she owns Om's body. Gini instructs them as:

.... You see, it's important to smile all through the day. After all, if you are not smiling, it means you are not happy. And if you're not happy, you might affect your brother's (Om is presented as Jaya's brother) mind and then where would we be? If I have said it once, I've said it a hundred times. The most important thing is to keep Auwm smiling or if Auwm's smiling. It means his body's smiling; it means his organs are smiling. And that's the kind of organs that'll survive a transplant best, smiling organs. I mean, God forbid that it should ever come to that, right? But after all, we can't let ourselves forget what this program is about. I mean, if I'm going to need a transplant then by God, let's make it the best damn transplant that we can manage. I'm sorry Auwm but I insist you must eat at regular times. (229)

The contact module and the apparent order introduced by Inter-Planta Services seems to cause instability in personal relationships, as Ginni begins to control every aspect of Om's life, from when and what he eats to whom he sees and how he uses the loo. The donor and his family are constantly visible to the receiver since the



module can swivel around to face any direction and flicker to life at any time. By the end of the play, Ginni has gained complete control over the family. This implies that complete deprivation of privacy may be regarded as the ultimate form of surveillance.

Om's younger brother (Jeetu) has abandoned the family homestead and works as a bisexual sex worker. Om's mother has been worn down by years of hunger and poverty, so much so that she finds nothing wrong with her son's trade-off, as long as she receives her long-awaited television set, refrigerator, microwave and everything else money can buy. Om, for his part, is too smitten by the gorgeous blonde woman who is his buyer from over the seven seas and keeps staring down at him from the television screen, making him nauseous with her tantalisingly delivered lectures.

Jeetu returns home suddenly filthy and diseased. Om and Ma repel him. Because they are afraid of Ginni's reaction to this. As a result, they force him to leave his home, but Jaya feels sorry for him. However, when the guards arrive to take the donor, Om becomes terrified and hides himself. They violently abduct Jeetu, thinking him for Om. Jaya is still unsuccessful in convincing the guards that the guy being taken away for organ donation is not Om, the true organ donor, but his brother Jeetu. As a result, they take Jeetu away with them. Jaya has a hidden romance with Jeetu, a gigolo. Jeetu goes home blind. The ordeal will not finish here. Now, Jeetu can only see when Ginni projects images directly into his mind through the contact module. He is now fascinated by Ginni's voice and he begins to experience sexual fulfilment at the prospect of having a vital part of his body transplanted into hers. His experience concludes when he is apprehended for the second time. However, Jeetu is unaware that in the pursuit of sexual fulfilment, he is gradually robbed of his body parts.

The guards implant a video image of Ginni in Jeetu's consciousness. He is enamored and completely dominated. He's willing to die for Ginni now. It exemplifies the Western trick of instilling their culture in the minds of the Third World and then monitoring them like drug dealers. Rajkumar enlightens: "... is an ironic examination of the relations between developing and developed countries. The play is set in the imminent future, it imagines a grisly pact between the first and third world desperate (sic) people who can sell their body parts to wealthy clients in return for food, water, shelter and riches for themselves and their families" (50). Ginni has taken total possession of Jeetu's being with the technology thus:

GINNI. The next phase of the transplant you see, we have to progress rapidly now and I need all your support until we reached this platform of contract, we couldn't be sure. But now that we are sure. We've got to move more readily fast. Are you with us?

JEETU. Yes.

GINNI. Because you have to be willing, for what he wants to do now. You have to be really willing passion.

JEETU. Tell me, Ginni. Tell me what you want. GINNI. Help, you'll have to go back to the clinic and they'll prepare you.

JEETU. You need some more parts of me? GINNI. Well. Yes. I mean that's one way of looking at it but I - I think you should understand that this is kind of that short, Awum and we really have to get a move on.

JEETU. (He moves his body seductively). Just tell me what you want of me Ginni.

GINNI The guards will come for you and they'll require you to follow them away. JEETU. Anything Ginni, anything. GINNI. The sooner you go, the better it will be for you. Jeetu. Whatever you say Ginni. (241-42)



Ginni has full control over Jeetu through the contact module. Because of her video image in his thoughts, he can see her directly, which other people cannot. He sees her naked image and feels compelled to meet her. His joy demonstrates both his passion and his servitude to her. When Jaya claims Ginni does not exist, he tells her: “She exists. That’s enough for the she’s a goddess and she exists. I would do anything for her anything” (241). Within a few minutes, the guards arrive and take Jeetu away without explaining what they plan to do with him. Ma is very much interested to live happily with all the facilities. So, she has ordered video coach:

After some times, some agents appear with a video coach which Ma has ordered online. The videocoach is a reminiscent of Tutan Khamen’s sarcophagus, encrusted with electronic dials and circuitry in the place of jewels. The Agents maneuver it into the centre of the room, move the dining table aside and install the device in its place. The other two agents open the case, revealing an equally ornate interior filled with tubes, switches and circuitry. Inside are a number of containers. (244)

Om’s mother is busy watching TV on her video sofa and Om has fled the scene, leaving Jaya to face the consequences. Ginni initially fails to realize the truth about the donor exchange and in a final act of defiance, the seeds of rebellion sprout in a “checkmate” man oeuvre by Om’s wife, Jaya. She is left alone. She is persuaded to sell her body parts to wealthy Westerners. She is surprised to learn that Ginni is simply a computer-generated wet dream. It is old Virgil who is the actual recipient of the organs. Virgil is hungry of youth and who is not satisfied with Jeetu’s body. Now the old man, Virgil, with new body organs craves for female. He seduces Jaya the sensitive young wife but she somehow manages to retain her not-for-sale. She dislikes the idea of getting conceived from a computer image and wants her man to be real soul mate despite the overarching gloom. In fact, it is elderly Virgil who will receive the organs. Virgil hungers for youth and is dissatisfied with Jeetu’s body.

However, Virgil refuses to appear as the genuine man since he cannot risk physically visiting a third-world country and contracting infections. Finally, Jaya delivers her speech to the video sofa about living a comfortable life with her family that the world-I has supplied and she destroys the video couch. This represents the end of contact between the two planets (planets I and III). The drama ends with a focus on women’s power through sacrifice and patience. It conveys the idea that no technology can replace human values and the emotions we have. One cannot virtually seed someone unless they are tied to human values.

This drama explores the breakdown of societal and familial relationships as a result of increased use of technological products and the never-ending pursuit of human beings over the planet. Furthermore, it forecasts that metropolitan countries in developing countries will spread the idea of materialism for greed. The dystopian element is present in all of the incidents throughout the play. Madhu Jain has given his comments: “The three-act play is set in some grey, almost anaesthetized near-future. And the future is used as a magnifying lens to look at a greedy and dead-end present - a soulless world without exits” (Book Review). Tom Moylan expresses about the dystopian: “narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century: A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, decess, famine, ecocide, depression, debt and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of the everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination” (41).

Conclusion

The playwright explores that the central theme is the reduction of the human body to a mere commodity or “spare parts” that can be bought and sold in a global market. The title itself, “Harvest,” is a metaphor for the literal gathering of human organs as if they are crops. The play starkly contrasts the immense wealth of the Western (First World) recipients with the extreme poverty of the Indian (Third World) donors. This highlights the



neo-colonial power dynamics, where the rich exploit the vulnerable poor for their own survival and luxury. The characters in the play are driven to desperate measures due to unemployment and financial distress, illustrating how poverty can limit moral choices and degrade human dignity and relationships. The drama *Harvest* also explores themes of identity crisis, as the protagonists' bodies are no longer completely their own. Jaya, in particular, represents resistance to exploitation and commodification by choosing death over absolute servitude. Thus, Manjula Padmanabhan concludes that in a materialistic society people hope that technology will uplift the standard of life of the poor people. Rather it further attempts to ruin their life as it has taken place in the lives of Om's family. Thus, the rich become richer and poorer becomes poorer unleashing the reign of luxury over nothingness.

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