

# Urban Dystopia: Postcolonial Readings of Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest

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**Abstract**—*The proposed paper discusses Manjula Padmanabhan's play Harvest (1997). Though cast in a futuristic mould, the play highlights the heinous self-inflicted suffering of people today who require money to survive in the demanding environment of a modern city. It projects the economic desperation for which the marginalized poor sell their organs in a commercial process which benefits the rich and influential. As a piece of 'science fiction', the play uses the strategy of 'futurization' to speak of present day realities in an oblique fashion. It depicts the condition of helpless people of a third world country. There is a broader social critique. Harvest projects, with mingled admiration and horror, the metropolitan aspirations and the increasing craze for electronic gadgets. The futuristic city space delineates urban India's new life style—an aimless striving for 'equipment', addiction to TV and a complete dependence on modern props. Apart from these issues, Padmanabhan also addresses the problems created by over population in urban spaces as she refers to organ trade, prison-like existence, partiality of parents towards employed children, and the pathetic condition of women. The play Harvest not only depicts the postcolonial scenario but also articulates the re-colonisation process. It focuses on the power of foreign purchasers over third world organ donors, showing a 'cannibalistic' equation in sociological terms. Through this the playwright voices the subaltern existence of the city dwellers who suffer both the poverty and exploitation for survival. The city itself is an entity in this game. It fascinates in the beginning but gradually entraps the individual in its vicious coils.*

## Introduction

This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.

T.S.Eliot "The Hollow Men"

This famous last paragraph of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" is befitting in the context to the plight of the poor urban dwellers who live a miserable life. Even their death does not create any difference to the world. Poverty is one such condition for the urban city dweller that punishes the poor man till his last breath. Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* has a futuristic setting though it highlights the heinous self-inflicted suffering of people who require money to survive in the demanding environment of a modern city today. The play projects the compulsive need for which the

marginalized sell their organs. It depicts a dark future of poor helpless people of third world countries.

The play is set in 2010 AD in Bombay, when the sale of human organs is a common everyday affair. The drama focuses upon the mingled admiration and horror of the suburbanites' life style and their increasing craze for electronic gadgets. The donors, mostly single room dwellers in a crowded Indian city sell their body parts to rich clients through international registered and approved agents. Devoid of basic human amenities of life, they mistake wealth for happiness.

Though Padmanabhan has used a futuristic space to depict the deprivations faced by poor city dwellers in the twenty-first century, it is reported that she herself conceived of the idea for *Harvest* during a visit to her sister in Madras in early 1995 where she was confronted with the brutal reality of the trade in human organs on a morning walk around the town. Padmanabhan shares about the incident that resulted in the inception of writing this play in her essay "The Story of *Harvest*" (1998), during her visit to her sister in Madras in early 1995 she saw several men in dressing gowns and sterile mouth masks. Upon making enquiries, she was told that they were poor villagers of Tamil Nadu state and were recovering from kidney-transplant surgery. Later news articles about this flourishing trade in organ selling compelled her to write on the theme of a frenzied quest for longevity by cannibalizing the bodies of the young and needy.

At a superficial level the play is about Om Prakash who loses his job while living in a one bedroom apartment with his family. He decides to sell unspecified organs through a company called InterPlanta Services to a rich person, Ginni, in the United States so he can gain fortune and comfort for his family. InterPlanta and the recipient are obsessed with maintaining Om's health and therefore control the lives of Om, his mother Ma, and wife Jaya in their one-room apartment. The recipient, Ginni, periodically looks in on them via a videophone and treats them condescendingly. First Om's diseased brother Jeetu is taken to donate organs instead of Om and then Om volunteers to meet Ginni who has been projected as enticing white women ultimately Ginni turns out to be

someone else and not what she was expected to be. Ginni, in actuality, turns out to be a decrepit old man called Virgil. The underlying theme of the play carries deep meaning and substance to the play and makes it a parable of contemporary social scenario of the third world countries and specifically of India as the organ trading is prevalent due to increasing demand for donated organs, high economic profitability, uncontrolled trafficking. Every reported case illegal harvesting and sale of the body parts is motivated by money with little or no security of the of those whose bodies have been systematically sold one piece at a time.

The blasé nature of urban dwellers is very vividly presented by Padmanabhan. In their hollow quest for affluence, the moment inmates started getting the comfort and the false promises of transformation, all have betrayed family members and or lovers, and perhaps more critically, they have compromised their humanity. The mother and the son Om, even ignored their own blood Jeetu. There is close parallel; sketched by the playwright between Om and Jeetu. Om made his body a commodity in the international market by signing a contract with InterPlanta while Jeetu is a prostitute who sells his body for sexual pleasure. So in a way both the boys were involved in the same activity.

At the end of this soul stirring tale, Padmanabhan explores the connection between sexuality and cultural difference to address the oriental image of exotic, sexually available and yet potentially dangerous 'Other' that is still common in the western discourse. Even in search of Utopia by the third world people the play suggests the impossible equality of so called Utopian world where everybody is sharing the same space with equal rights. *Harvest* speculates the unequal prepositions shared by western societies and third world countries as now the social difference like race, class, colour are less important than the similarity and adaptability of physicality. So the body here become a great leveller when it is reduced to its functional organs. The body in the play becomes the space of contestation where the colonial drama unfolds.

If we look at the title *Harvest* we see that the word has a romantic lineage as in all the cultures it is being associated with prosperity, plenty, abundance, the period of growth and yielding. Not only this, there is always some spiritual power associated with it that signifies the blessing of mother nature be it Maa Annapurna of Hindu mythology or Demeter of Greek mythology or Ceres of Roman mythology. But the play has taken a long plunge in the linguistic development which shows the use of the old terms in the new but detrimental ways. Here the harvest is of organs. This is also suggestive of the problem of overpopulation in the third world countries.

The play projects the contestation of the Orient with the West where the West tries to colonize the Orient once again for the selfish purpose of raw material. If we trace the history of colonial India, it was due to gold, spices, cotton and tea that the colonizers were interested. Though India is independent now but the poverty and overpopulation resulted in more

adverse situation attracting the colonizers once again but now the interest lies in the body of the Other which they have used to condemn by calling it sullen, black fat, immaterial, savage, half devil half child, which we read in the Rudyard Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden*. The play reverberates the idea of cannibalising of the body in the uber-medical space where the body organs makes the exertion of power and money. So to hide the nefarious act of neo-cannibalising in the contemporary urban space the cannibalising of the body is replaced with the much more positive word Harvest.

The science fiction elements in *Harvest*, while crucial to the play's tightly plotted narrative, are held largely within the bounds of late twentieth century life, so that the future presented remains on this side of plausibility. The portrayal of InterPlanta as the sinister face of corporate business in the twenty first century also draws from current models of large, transnational corporations staffed by human automatons with little sense of individuality. Padmanabhan's visceral satire is not without some sympathy for the Prakash family. Like many parables, *Harvest* is just as concerned with social structures as it is with the individual's moral choices. In particular, the play highlights the ways in which poverty can limit moral options and degrade human lives, and it also demonstrates that a modern trade in body parts can be understood only within the context of gross material inequities between first and third worlds.

The selection of the global organ trade as a compelling metaphor through which to dramatize the west's exploitation of its cultural Others suits the futuristic bent of the play because it draws on the familiar science-fiction motif of body-snatching; yet this trope is also based in historical fact. A number of media reports, some more factual than others, claim that, along with Cairo, Indian cities such as Calcutta and Bombay are major locations for a multimillion dollar trade in human organs, especially kidneys and corneas. Such reports frequently employ the image of the oriental bazaar to suggest the image of the oriental bazaar to suggest the development of a rapacious commerce that seems to be premised on the general assumption that the bodies of the poor are worth more as spare parts than as living persons. While examples of organ trade between rich and poor nations within Asia and the Middle East show that this kind of commerce sometimes operates along unexpected routes of capital dependence (Frow, 35-53)

Padmanabhan's particular take on the issue suggests the ease with which western nations position themselves as the natural recipients of other cultures' human and material resources. In this respect, the macabre trade dramatized in *Harvest* readily evokes its imperial precursors, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which saw millions of racialised bodies bought, sold and exchanged for the benefit of European mercantile expansionism. By presenting images of the colonized body plundered for its specific parts, the play also recalls such imperial practices as souveniring native heads,

bones and skin in the names of science and anthropology. These resonances between past and present forms of traffic in human bodies and or body parts situate the contemporary trade in organs within a continuum of exploitative cross cultural relationships. That InterPlanta also administers a transnational sexual economy of sorts, encompassing a trade of exotic babies, strengthens the suggestiveness of the historical parallels.

Hence, *Harvest* can be read not only as a cautionary tale about the possible (mis)uses of modern medical and reproductive science, but also as a reflection on the economic and social legacies of western imperialism, particularly as they converge with new technologies. With skillful irony, Padmanabhan employs the always loaded motif of cannibalism to distil some of the moral issues raised by organ trade. Om's taunt that Jeetu has been sent to a human game sanctuary where the rich hunt socially disadvantaged types neatly refigures the connotative reach of cannibalism so that it points to characteristics of developed rather than primitive societies. The western cannibalizing of third world bodies in harvest also has a ritualistic element in so far as it is driven by a myth of resurrection-the restoration of youth and wholeness. When Jeetu's organs are transplanted to Ginni/ Virgil, the transaction is not merely a medical one; symbolic 'capital' also flows for the young, the poor and the beautiful to the old, the rich and the ugly. On another level the cannibalism motif intensifies the play's critique of a dehumanized Indian society, which is depicted in microcosm through the savage conflicts within the Prakash family.

*Harvest's* narrative also harnesses the figurative power of disease to convey the moral ills of a world driven by greed and self-interest to the extent that a lucrative trade in body parts has become the norm. However the disease metaphor operates in complex ways. Suggesting the contaminated realm outside the sanitized Prakash housing unit may be preferable to the sterile environment in which Om, Ma and Jaya are forced to live after their contract with Interplanta comes into effect. When Jeetu enters the unit covered with muck and grime and weeping sores, his presence precipitates a crisis in the fragile relationship between Donors and Receivers: because he embodies the threat of contamination, he disrupts the power and authority of the carefully regulated Receiver world. At this point, Jaya's rebellion against her bullying family and the demands of the system in which they have become enmeshed provides one of the few tender moments of the play, as she gently dresses Jeetu's wounds.

At the end of this chilling tale, Padmanabhan explores the nexus between sexuality and cultural difference to address the myth of the exotic, sexually available, and yet potentially dangerous Other that still circulates in western discourse. Virgil's desire to impregnate Jaya, and his simultaneous fear that she would pollute him if their coupling were to happen anywhere but in the virtual realm, could be read as a modern instance of the ambivalence that infused imperial sexuality,

Jaya refuses point blank to be party to a transaction that effectively puts Virgil in control of her sexuality, just as she has previously refused to suppress her sexual desires by playing the demure wife of Om. Her demand that Virgil meet her in the flesh before she will consider his proposition functions as a more general challenge to Western societies to put aside damaging stereotypes and obsessive fears about contamination in order to interact with other cultures on a more equal and respectful, footing.

### Conclusion

The play presents a strong question on struggle of choice by all the characters from the postcolonial perspective. In this scenario their identities as the poor third world citizens make their survival instincts opt desperate choices. It is imperative to examine the construction of both masculinity and femininity together in the articulation of cultural and national belonging in both public and political discourse. Thus while recent feminist work critics have argued women as a symbol of nation in moments of ethnic conflict- I feel that violence against men in the postcolonial Indian sphere reveals masculinity and men as a gendered subjects and can be read as critical sites for symbolization of nationality and belonging.

Partha Chatterjee, while referring to the nationalist construction of new India discusses that how in the confrontation between colonialist and nationalist discourses, the dichotomies of spiritual/ material, home/world, feminine/masculine, enables the production of nationalist discourse and at the same time nonetheless remains trapped within its false essentialisms. This leads to the questions; what happens to the males, male bodies and conceptions of masculinity in the discursive articulation of nationalism in the postcolonial public sphere? It also needs to be mentioned that how male bodies represented and refashioned with the creation of contestation of postcolonial nationalism.

While we find both the male characters Om and Jeetu in a situation that their maleness is compromised due to their poverty. In a patriarchal society a women is no more than a 'body' for gratification. Similarly in the play the binaries of male and females shifts to third world and the first world where the third world citizens play the role of female whose main identity is restricted to their body. Om sells his body, Jeetu works as a male prostitute so both of them are projecting the role change and are projected as a female substitute. The demeaning of the poor citizens doesn't end here as we find, ironical, that Jaya's identity is reduced to her womb. This diminution of the third world citizens is done by challenging its cultural construct of family, relationship, culture and habitual practices so the play contest between the identity of "East Vs. West" or to be specific between India and West. The play follows a very symmetrical pattern where India's projection is restricted to the body and destitute perspective the west is projected indirectly through the virtual image due to money, power and technology which hinders the reality. This virtual space is the intriguing world which is catering

alluring stereotypical young white woman that attracts the brown male. This dream of achieving or accompanying a typical traditional alluring figure that is always beyond the reach of the colonised brown makes the role of technology based virtual reality a biggest tool of colonization. This also brings the diaphanous status to Ginni. Who is Ginni? As there is a lot of sexual confusion due to this in the play as although Ginni is projected as a (young beautiful) white woman it is only in the last scene that the true identity of Ginni is revealed by the playwright as an old white man. So a fe(male) body works as a place of contestation of achieving power by both the colonizer. Ginni's identity speaks volumes about the projection of first world. We find Ginni playing various roles in this dubious identity. She is both a coloniser and virtual reality of a superior race created by doctored imaging.

Most important thing is that Manjula Padmanabhan has skilfully presented the power equation in which power is shared by both the coloniser and the colonised. Ginni's body defects and richness and Om's bodily perfection and poverty make them equal competitors. Their mutual needs change the whole power equation where we cannot simply consider Om and his family at the oppressed end. Similarly, when Virgil, the real self of Ginni wants Jaya to surrogate his child, Jaya asks him to come in person to get her. Here Jaya is positioned as a most powerful person who prefers and chooses real over the virtual. Women's bodies often bear the symbolic burden of signifying culture, tradition, community and nation. Padmanabhan through the character of Jaya presents the reverse gaze of the colonised world to contest their position.

So Padmanabhan through this play has projected the Dystopian view of the futuristic Indian and had discussed about the apocalyptic future of the third world countries who are nothing more than the harvest.

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